william kentridge
between chance and a programme
South African artist William Kentridge was included in the 2009 Time magazine 100, an annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world, a list on which artists rarely if ever find themselves. Visitors to last year’s Biennale of Sydney flocked to see his two installations on Cockatoo Island. Recently, it was announced that the Belgioirno-Nettis family had purchased one of the, *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, and are having it installed in the post-industrial landscape of that place, providing a model for the continuing use of Cockatoo Island as a place for unlocking complex art.

Despite the artworld hype and the international acclaim, Kentridge’s work remains committed to a sense of the tactile, and to the slow grainy effort of drawing. And, it seems, he also remains committed to those grounds that cannot be completely determined by either purely rational – or purely emotional – explications.

‘Purely in the context of my own work,’ he wrote in a published playscript of his celebrated *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, ‘I would repeat my trust in the contingent, the inauthentic, the whim, the practical, as strategies for finding meaning. I would repeat my mistrust in the worth of Good Ideas. And state a belief that somewhere between relying on pure chance on the one hand, and the execution of a programme on the other, lies the most uncertain but the most fertile ground for the work we do [...] I think I have shown that it is not the clear light of reason or even aesthetic sensibility which determines how one works, but a constellation of factors only some of which we can change at will.’

In an issue that looks at the rational and emotional drives behind artmaking, the work of South African born and based William Kentridge emerges as one of the most highly internationally acclaimed examples of a practice that draws inspiration from both of these fundamental impulses.

I called William on the eve of his departure for a longish stint in France, from a wintry Brisbane at a time when two major films were igniting some discussion: director Warwick Thornton’s Camera d’Or winning *Samson and Delilah*, and Australian director Steve Jacobs’ interpretation of (now-Australian/ formerly South African) JM Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.

Why bother to mention that particular contextual detail? Because both films are, in part, about the ongoing processes of colonialism and their effect on race and values, and possible futures. And because the work of William Kentridge shares some of these concerns. And because, during the phone call, the artist described the processes of modernism and colonialism as ongoing. He talked about how colonialism still persists in describing itself to itself in terms of ‘knowing what’s best for people’ and then applying those decisions by force. He talked about the ongoing use of the colonial project’s commitment to ‘bring[ing] light to the darkness’, and how, after some two hundred and fifty years, the enormous gulf between what is claimed as the ideals and intentions of such projects, and their results, are as deep and apparently incommensurable as they have always been. The monopoly of physical power and the assumption of wisdom, he pondered, are always catastrophic.

In so many of Kentridge’s films the figure of the artist paces and broods, ponders and vacillates. I put this to him, asking him about this apparent reaffirmation of indecision that runs throughout so much of his work. He tells me he’s engaged in the same actions right now, as we continue to talk – walking the room, turning, pacing, thinking. ‘Even as we’re talking now, I’m walking round and round the desk,’ he says, and the conversation becomes suffused by spectres of the visuality of his films.

I talk to him about the way in which the figure of the artist in his films seems at times to be paralysed into a waiting that can only be broken when he is summoned by the materials that seem to leap into his hands, or which seem to suddenly send out their orders by stealth and surprise.

He responds by describing the process differently, and talks about how there is a sense of stalking involved – a kind of waiting until the first marks can be made. Those first marks, he says, often finally emerge in an extremely rapid process. After the stalking and wondering about where they might start and the gathering together of the billions of possible images, some will rush into being.

I tell him that he talks like a draughtsman – a drawer – even though he has worked with a range of media that include film, performance and prints, and he responds simply, ‘Yes, that’s what I am.’

It may well be that it is, to a large extent, the indeterminacy of this process of drawing out ideas and images – tangentially, provisionally, tentatively – that has formed the unmistakable core of so much of what this artist has produced. The ambiguity, contradiction and uncertainty that he has defined in interviews as what interests him most in works of art are there as the ground zero of drawing. For drawing is, in a sense, always unfinished, always capable of being altered, amended, adjusted, erased. And so it is that in Kentridge’s work the possible outcomes of the never-more-than-implied narratives always seem myriad. Just as they seem to be called into being...
via magic and trickery, dissolving in and out of the page or the screen, or vanishing into the dust of the charcoal from which they have momentarily coalesced, so it seems possible that they might yet re-emerge in other forms, even after the film or image has been rendered 'complete.'

When I ask Kentridge about the extent to which his preference for this indeterminacy and his professed allergy for the prescriptiveness of 'Big Ideas' affect the outcomes, he replies that the emotional energy that is there at the beginning of a work is often there at the end, and describes how, when these processes begin, there is usually a kernel of ideas that might disappear during the work's unfolding. This is not a loss, however, for as he says 'without the surprise in art, there's not much there'. It is for this reason that he never prepares scripts or storyboards in preparation for the works.

He's starting on a new film now, he tells me, and although there are a few images there at the moment there are also - thankfully - huge gaps in what might unfold. The artist defines that anxiety of not knowing what might emerge as essential to the processes of art making; as a productive anxiety that has to be embraced with confidence and trust.

Kentridge describes his own art-making process as having three components or stages: the first lies in giving the surprise; the second lies in showing how that surprise is produced; and the third (which he defines as vital to him as an artist) is taking pleasure in one's own self-deception. He describes the third stage as that point at which the very simple trickeries of his filmwork are the position at which you may, for example, well understand that you are watching a film running backwards, and that the pieces of broken crockery are in fact not miraculously returning whole to the hands, but that is simultaneously also that moment where you still experience the lies of conjuring as a wondrous thing.

I question him further about what he describes as the second stage, failing to grasp why there is a need to reveal how the surprise is produced, and he explains how his work makes its imperfection fully visible in a way that cannot be done, for example, in digital animation, where the technology elides the ruptures and inconsistencies. The work of the hand - the handwork, on the other hand, is one of mistakes and imperfections and erasures as much as it is of prestidigitation.

So simplicity, it seems, doesn't stand in the way of profundity? In the work of Kentridge: no.

I put it to him that to this point in the conversation the emotional and intuitive aspects of artmaking are what we have talked about most, and so I ask about the extent to which rational impulses might play a role.

Rational understanding, according to this artist, plays a vitally important role in developing an understanding of the world – of apprehending, for example, the details of its historical and political processes. 'But,' he says, 'how one approaches this is not so clear. For example, the strange relationship of the Enlightenment project to the particular experience of colonialism in Africa... you have to rationally understand that we're still in the middle of that project, but the range of possible responses to the situation is far more difficult to determine.'

He describes how the rational as well as the emotional are always brought into play in our everyday decisions about the way in which we go about constructing our world – through completing incomplete images and ideas and bringing them into relationship with each other, through taking clues from the fragments of what is given and attempting to construct a coherent whole. He reminds me that the process of both making and of receiving art are central to the faculties of being human, and that the distinctions between such roles are more often than not indefinite:

'If we hear half a sentence, then we have to become a kind of novelist in order to invent possibilities of completed sentences – of imagining what might have been meant.'

I ask him whether he believes that art, then, 'makes a difference', and he replies that art makes an enormous difference to individual lives. He talks about how a huge amount of what each of us becomes is constructed from what we read, what we watch, what we participate in, and expresses his own lack of interest in the version of the question that asks whether, for example, a particular film or painting might have made people riot in the street. 'That's not the question' he says, and returns again to his love of works of art that open up spaces that seem evocatively incommensurable.

'If I think of the works of art that have interested me over the years, they are always those that hold awkwardnesses, inconsistencies at their core - there's that edge of the Cézanne table that seems to forever slip away, and yet which can support the weight of apples, there's that certain strangeness of a Goya painting - or the impossible squareness of, say,'
leaf in a Matisse. It's the parts that can't be worked out that hold you – Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* cannot be pinned to any specific meaning.

When pressed about what he might aim for in terms of responses to his own work, he replies that he is content for people to make their own minds up; that he works on his films, for example, on a scene-by-scene basis, as something that unfolds of its own volition rather than as a script with an intended outcome. Sometimes, he says, there may be a guiding thought that is behind a project, but once the project is underway the artist must deal with each transformation as it manifests. He gives *Felix in Exile* as an example of a film where memory and history disappear into a landscape that absorbs everything that has happened there – it alludes to the fact that one hundred years after a massacre has occurred, all you have left is a field.

I ask him, then, about how important shared memory might be, and he replies in a way that is initially surprising, describing how shared memory is an important part of how we bind ourselves together as, say, families, where we remember our children when they are growing up and so on, and describes how much of grief at the death of someone close is bound to the loss of the possibility of that sharing. And the artist goes on to describe how there is only really a fairly narrow band of memory that we need to survive – as with temperature, most of our species exists best between 15 degrees and 35 degrees, and we also survive and perform best within an optimum range of memory – if we can't forget some of the accumulated memory of our race we are frozen into complete inaction, and if we forget too much we – and the state – lapse into a kind of social Alzheimer's.

The role of art in all this comes from the imperfection of our memory – of its need to be triggered by, for example, the taste of the madeleine in order to be jettisoned into its course. But Kentridge also warned of the role of the museum in terms of absolving our need to remember together; the fact that every time an object or image is annexed by a museum or institution it seems, in some small way, to shift our own role as custodian of memories onto the responsibilities of other places.

He talks about how he draws so much from his own memory for what is for settlers in South Africa a long family history of some one hundred and fifty years, and then stops momentarily to describe a meeting some time ago with an artist in Melbourne.

He had been talking about family history and memory at the time, and the artist turned to him and gestured to a little culvert where the river flowed down to meet the sea. 'See that land down there?' the artist pointed, 'that's my family's land. They've been living there for the past thirty thousand years.'
William Kentridge Top: William Kentridge's studio showing work in progress for What Will Come (has already come) 2007. Above and top right: Drawing for the film What Will Come (has already come) 2007, charcoal and coloured pencil on paper, diameter 118cm (anamorphic drawing, right, and its reflection in steel cylinder, left)

Right: What Will Come (has already come), 2007, installation photos.
