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## The Abyss of Recipes

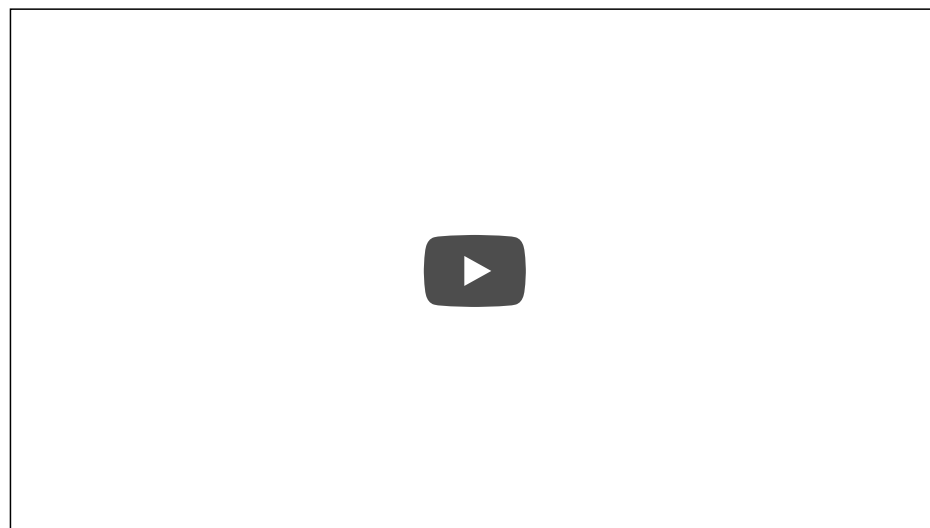


### *Cassell's Cyclopaedia of Mechanics* and William Kentridge's *Second-Hand Reading*

By Xinyi Wen (@HPSWarburgian)

Artist William Kentridge told an anecdote when talking about his video artwork *Second-Hand Reading* (2013). Once Kentridge asked someone what a common friend of theirs was doing and received the answer 'busy making a tree-search'. A confusing term as it is, 'tree-search' triggered Kentridge's imagination – one has a central subject, like the trunk of the tree, and then follows the divergences into the more detailed branches and even jump across them and back to the trunk. At the end of the conversation, Kentridge asked what he was researching/tree-searching on. But the phoned person was

surprised: 'No! I didn't say tree-search. I said he was busy making a T-shirt'.<sup>[1]</sup>



William Kentridge, *Second-Hand Reading* (2013), video, 6:56.

We always try to make sense of words. When we encounter an incomprehensible phrase, a contradictory element of language like 'tree-search', we always try to give it meaning based on what we already have in our minds. What made these interpretative attempts hilarious was the brutal, abrupt, and overly concrete existence of a T-shirt.

*Cassell's Cyclopaedia of Mechanics* is such a T-shirt. It is the book that Kentridge dismantled, reorganised, superimposed his drawings on, and turned into the flip-book film *Second-Hand Reading*. First published in 1900, *Cassell's Cyclopaedia* is almost an encyclopaedia of everything in daily life, containing 18,000 recipes, mechanical processes, and how-to memoranda: Using prismatic compass. Cleaning bugle. Making brass dog collar. Knots. Its language is concise, specific, too boringly concrete to spare any room for further interpretative imagination. 'To thoroughly clean the inside of a bugle, make a bucketful of hot soapsuds,

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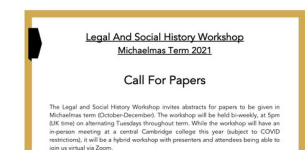
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using rainwater and a soup that lathers freely, and to this add a penny-worth of liquid ammonia'. Similar recipes fill up this enormous cabinet of operations, each and every one tightly coupled with the materialities of everyday life.<sup>[ii]</sup> Dumb, bulky, and spiritless.

Does this book make sense as a usual book does? Wandering through this hybrid of useful yet chaotic recipes, one can hardly find any way to order these knowledges. Its author Paul Hasluck, a popular writer of numerous everyday handbooks, claimed that recipes were not a kind of classifiable, arrangeable knowledge: 'Even a little consideration of this *Cyclopaedia* would show that no possible arrangement of the paragraphs would place them so that the several facts contained in each could be found with ease and certainty'. To assist his readers, Hasluck put together a long alphabetical index in the beginning, while the contents were almost arranged in nonsense. This encyclopaedia ignores boundaries between expertise – 'Making Hot Water Pump' is placed next to 'Enlarging Photographs in Dark Room'. It messes up different scales: 'Building a Railway Tunnel from Both Ends' is followed by 'Making Garden Tripod Stand for Telescope'. Efforts would be wasted in vain if one tries to make sense of these arrangements. When you read 'Woods for Making Fish Rods' on volume IV, page 196, and later 'Making 16-ft Fishing-Rod' on page 252, you may feel a strong obsession that they should have been grouped. The *Cyclopaedia* does not follow even the simplest sequence of thematic relevance, but it is closer to the sequence in which we would encounter things in actual lives. Imagine when you have selected a proper piece of wood and started making a fish rod, the light on the ceiling suddenly went off; you have to pause all work at hand to fix it, under the guidance of an encyclopaedia.

*Cassell's Cyclopaedia* contains a coarse-grained, chaotic ontology that roots in the pile of everyday recipes. As Bernhard Siegert and Friedrich Kittler suggest, all the material, technical, and procedural stuff made this encyclopaedia an abyss of nonsense: from deeply down the strata of recipes, it generates a power that resists the sense-making systems of order, logic, and 'tree-search'.<sup>[iii]</sup> To some extent, it is an even more illogical encyclopaedia than the exotic, mystical Borges's Chinese encyclopaedia that Foucault mentioned in *The Order of Things*. The brutal materialities of things, the mere practicality of operations and procedures, they not only escape the discipline of meaning but also form the condition on which meaning can be made: the meaninglessness of things lures one to make sense of them, as in the case of Kentridge's T-shirt.

For *Cassell's Cyclopaedia*, all meaning-making becomes second-hand reading. On top of the strata of things, we think with our feet, meeting the pages at the corner of a street, and passing birds, trees, and music along the reading process. In Kentridge's words, that is how we meet the world halfway.

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[i] William Kentridge, *Second-Hand Reading*, lecture at University of Rochester, 19 September 2013, video, accessed 12 June, 2021.

[ii] For operations in history of science and current theoretical debates, see J. A. Bennett, 'Practical Geometry and Operative Knowledge', *Configurations* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 1998): 195–222; 'Operative Ontologies', accessed June 14, 2021. For an overview of the plural use of materiality, see 'Material/Materiality', *Keywords of the Chicago School of Media Theory*, accessed June 14, 2021.

[iii] Bernhard Siegert, *Material World: An Interview with Bernhard Siegert*, interviewed by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, accessed June 8, 2021.

Image: 'Knotting and Splicing Cordage', from Paul N. Hasluck, *Cassell's Cyclopaedia of Mechanics*, vol. 1, special edition (London, Paris, New York and Melbourne: Cassell and Company, Limited ca.1910s), 32–33. Book previously owned by engineer Ron Knight. Photo taken by the author.

About the author: Xinyi Wen is a PhD candidate at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge. Twitter: [@HPSWarburgian](#). Facebook: [Xinyi Wen](#).

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