

Seven Keys to Kentridge

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Kentridge's work crosses borders in every sense. It is local and universal, political as well as moral. It crosses traditional boundaries between media and genres - not only between painting and sculpture, but between two and three dimensions; between collage and continuity of surface; between fragmentation and unity; between the easy workability of cardboard and the permanence of bronze. Kentridge shows the body in movement and the body under pressure both in static and moving images. The ease with which he traverses the boundaries of artistic genres is unparalleled. Similar themes and movements are found repeatedly in his work: often they are combined with music and the spoken word. Yet Kentridge is not merely virtuosic. In his explorations across boundaries he subverts, revises and undoes the conventional definitions of categories and redefines their creative possibilities.

One by one the traditional characteristics and limitations of drawing, painting and sculpture fall away. One genre acquires the characteristics of another, and the intrinsic possibilities of each are expanded. Intersections that might have been awkward and difficult to make, now seem effortless. Even when he allows the signs of effort to show, he does so strategically, encouraging viewers to look more attentively in order to see the grace within. They are made aware of the creative possibilities of eye and imagination in bringing together the disjointed and the piecemeal into states of unity and continuity. Kentridge moves with ease from drawing to film, from painting to sculpture, from puppetry to theatre and opera. Yet, as he fully acknowledges, it is in puppetry that many of the sources of his versatile handling of almost every medium lie.

1. Kleist

At the beginning of his short story *On the Marionette Theater* (1810), the brilliant and melancholic German writer Heinrich von Kleist goes for a walk in the park. There he bumps into Mr C., the principal dancer at the Opera. It is the winter of 1801 and Kleist confesses his surprise at having seen him several times at a marionette theatre in the market square.

'I love going to see the puppets,' says Mr C., 'a dancer can often learn a lot from them.'

'How so?' asks Kleist.

'Haven't you noticed,' Mr C. responds, 'how gracefully these puppets move, especially the smaller ones?'

'Of course,' says Kleist, 'a group of four peasants couldn't have been painted with more charm, even by the great Flemish painter Teniers himself.'¹

And so they begin discussing the question of how things as mechanical as marionettes can nevertheless appear so full of grace and elegance. The puppeteer must surely work meticulously and with precision to manipulate the awkward system of sticks and strings that control the puppets. How can such ease and fluency be conveyed by someone feeling self-conscious about getting the movements exactly right and convey not only elegance, but the appropriate emotions through the mechanisms of the marionettes? Will so much thought involved in how best to convey fluency of movement not inevitably spoil the spontaneity of grace? Over-conscientiousness, like excessive self-consciousness, can only hamper the sense of natural movement, which the puppeteer strives to attain. The risk is clear: awkwardness rather than elegance, ungainliness rather than grace.

The two friends then embark on a detailed analysis of how the puppeteer must handle his marionettes. The point, Mr C. says, is that the elliptical hand movements of the puppeteer must actually represent 'the course that the soul of the dancer takes when the dancer moves, and I doubt whether this course can be traced if the puppeteer does not enter the center of gravity of his marionette; in other words, the puppeteer himself must dance'.

Although the marionettes of which Kleist spoke were operated via different mechanisms than the puppets of the Handspring Puppet Company, which inspired much of Kentridge's work, Kleist's story outlines the relationship between innocence, automaticity and grace on the one hand, and self-awareness and loss of innocence on the other. Everything in the story is relevant and applicable to Kentridge's work.

Kleist and his new friend further discuss how even people with artificial limbs can dance gracefully, just as the best-made marionettes can often dance more gracefully than human dancers. The latter are irredeemably self-conscious. The point is that humans know too much and need to revert to a state of pre-Edenic innocence – a now impossible state. We can practice and practice to be perfect, we can refine and refine our techniques, yet we would only appear more artificial and self-conscious. At this point Mr C. recalls the case of a young man who wanted to achieve the grace of the famous classical statue of the *Spinario* (3rd century BCE). He copied every minute inflection of that elegant statue. Repeatedly he looked at himself and the statue in a mirror but, the more diligently he tried to be as graceful

as the statue, the more obviously he failed.

Kleist protests that though Mr C. may be clever with his paradoxes, how could he convince anyone that a jointed mechanical doll could be more graceful than a human body? But Mr C. does not give up. He asserts that it is simply impossible for a human being to achieve the grace of the jointed doll – after all the puppets have not discovered the laws of gravity and they have no knowledge or awareness of the inertia of matter. At this level, only a god can duel with matter.

Mr C. concludes with the tale of a bear, which, in its limited but unselfconscious movements, defeats even the best efforts of the most graceful fencer. Animals transcend humans as they are less self-conscious and they think less. They move with more grace because they are more innocent. 'In the natural world just as the power of reflection becomes darker and weakens, so grace comes forward, more radiant and more dominant ... Just in this way, after knowledge and self-awareness have, so to speak, passed through infinity, grace reappears in the greatest purity, a purity that has either no consciousness or infinite consciousness, that is either in the marionette or in God.'

The central artistic and metaphysical question in all of this is how to endow that which seems artificial, that which *is* artificial, with the appearance of fluent and graceful movement. No one who has seen Kentridge's sculptural work can doubt his extraordinary, unselfconscious ability to invest not only humans, but also animals with a convincing sense of movement. He does so not only when his work hews most closely to the natural appearance of things (what we would call 'naturalistic' or 'realistic'), but also when his figures are reduced to seemingly elementary constructions of wood, paper, cardboard, sticks, dowels, wax and so on. Even when they are machines, or his own machinic inventions, they become invested with movement and with life. He turns everyday objects, even apparently clunky and gawky ones like his favourite coffee pot, into almost elegant figures implicit with movement – just as Kleist's bear which, despite its stolidity, is capable of confounding the most graceful fencer by intuiting his every next movement and parrying every thrust with spare and unsuperfluous action.

At the end of his dissertation on Sandro Botticelli, the great art historian Aby Warburg concluded that the most difficult aspect of the visual arts was to convey a sense of life in the static image. Though his comment was inspired by his wonder at how effectively Renaissance artists like Botticelli convey the feeling of expressive movement in their

¹ Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Marionette Theatre', trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *TDR: The Drama Review* 16, No. 3 (1972): 22.

paintings, it applies not only to two-dimensional forms like drawings, paintings, prints or photographs, but also – perhaps even more so – to sculpture. Of course there are sculptures by Kentridge that are intended to be perceived as immobile, sometimes determinedly so, but in every case he poses the question of how even these works can be perceived as moving – both outwardly and inwardly. In his film and video work, movement is explicit and even stillness engenders feeling. Yet, ultimately all of Kentridge's forms, even the most block-like and immobile, are implicit with the movements of the body necessary to communicate emotion.

2. Paragone

Anyone who has walked along the banks of the Tiber in Rome looking at Kentridge's *Triumphs and Laments* (2016), or seen his mosaics at the Toledo subway station in Naples (2012), or his puppets and shadows for *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (2008) at La Fenice in Venice, or his *Processione di Reparazionisti* (2017) pp166-67, 183-86, 270, 316, (installation image) 317 in Turin, will have heard bystanders, onlookers and viewers exclaim '*imparagonabile!*' This is a standard Italian exclamation for 'no comparison', or 'without peer', and it derives from '*paragone*', which in both ancient Greek and Latin means 'comparison' or 'competition'. *Paragone* thus became the standard term, especially in Renaissance art theory, for the comparison between the distinctive qualities of painting and sculpture, and for the debate (often fierce and rivalrous) over which of these two media had the competitive edge. Soon it extended to comparisons between other genres as well: between poetry and painting, painting and drawing, the visual arts and music, and so on. Above all, it highlighted the competition between painting and sculpture, between what constitutes their basic and defining qualities. Often it revolved around the essential differences between two- and three-dimensional forms, though it extended to other factors as well, including portability and the ability to convey transparency.

An entire section of Leonardo da Vinci's vast corpus of theoretical writings is devoted to the *paragone* – and for him, in the end, painting was victorious. Painting is somehow superior to sculpture because it can show volume and depth and allow what is flat to occupy three-dimensional space. It can use perspective to convey recession into space; it can show transparency in a way that sculpture cannot, and it can show light and shadow (*chiaro* and *scuro* in Leonardo's terms) with much greater subtlety than sculpture. All these claims for the superiority

of painting are predicated on an appeal to the more conceptual and imaginative possibilities of art (the *concetto*, as it would have been called in the Renaissance), rather than the brute or plain materiality of things. Yet Michelangelo Buonarroti's insistence on the ways in which sculpture demonstrated how the body can be liberated from its immobile block-like matrix to reveal the very soul that lies within, was an important step in making similar conceptual claims for sculpture.

The *paragone* persists in Kentridge's work, but perhaps with even greater tenacity and scope than these illustrious predecessors. He has explored the boundaries between all the traditional components of the debate more exhaustively than any Renaissance artist or theorist, and has added more to its range and dimensions than they could have imagined. His work is suffused with explicit visual assessments of the qualities distinctive to each medium, as well as exemplifications of the ways in which they are not. On the one hand – in his vivid version of Albrecht Dürer's great treatise on the principles of measurement, the *Underweysung der Messung* (1525) – Kentridge, like Dürer, acknowledges the status of drawing as the basis of all other art. On the other hand, in using stereoscopes to turn those drawings into fully three-dimensional images, he shows how flatness can become wholly volumetric. Then he turns the whole operation into a sculpture itself, as he does also with other unlikely instruments, like the mechanical drum set from *Refuse the Hour* (2012/refabricated 2019) pp126-27, 268, 309 and *Singer Trio* (2018) pp124-25, 268, 311. Here, typically, he plays on the name of the sewing machines he combines with old-fashioned megaphones.

For Kentridge these transformations are always fluid, never decisive, and he constantly subverts them. One has only to recall how he has allowed his drawings, paintings and sculptures to develop out of his work with puppets and their shadows: the very epitome of the elusive flatness from which embodiment grows and to which it is reduced. In his 2009 designs for tapestries, he takes his favourite motif of the horse and draws it on the pages of that very archetype of flatness: the map. He knows full well that he will soon turn these drawings not only into woven textiles, but also sculptures, as if in emulation not just of the small sketches of equestrian monuments by Leonardo, but also of the grand realised monuments of horse and rider by Donatello and Andrea del Verrocchio.

In many of the drawings, as well as the bronze sculptures (for example *Untitled III* (2007)) pp153, 298, he decomposes his equestrian sculptures into their constituent parts and puts them together again,

before demonstrating how they too can be luminous illusions of volume in the extraordinary multimedia sculptures related to the film, *What Will Come* (2007). While in the Renaissance the study of light and shadow became the fulcrum of Leonardo's defence of painting, Kentridge revises all this by taking his sculptures and transforming them into both shadow and light plays. The puppets become three-dimensional sculptures and are then turned into dark silhouettes or brilliantly lighted outlines: the very epitome of flatness. This alone goes against one of the essential and most traditional claims on behalf of sculpture: that it can be seen from more than just one side.

The parallels and the intersections, improbable as they may seem, pervade Kentridge's work. To consider his sculptural forms is to better understand not only the distinction between two-dimensional and three-dimensional work, but also the distinctive manner in which he experiments with the overlap and crossover between the two genres. If John Constable could say that painting is a science of which pictures are but the experiments, Kentridge might claim the same for sculpture, and sculptures, too. Leonardo made *paragone* central to his theory of the arts, and so did Michelangelo, but neither experimented quite so intensely with the many modes of crossover between them.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that, in addition to Michelangelo, the other great protagonist of sculpture in the Renaissance debate was Benvenuto Cellini who, like Kentridge, moved with ease from bronze to a great variety of other materials. In Cellini's case these included the most precious of materials, like gold, silver, gems and shells. Kentridge's materials consist not only of steel and bronze, but of much simpler everyday and more popular materials like paper, glue, corrugated cardboard, scraps of wood, cloth, wax and adhesive tape. These were all materials at hand in the studio which, as Kentridge noted, is the starting point for many of his sculptures: 'A horse can be no more than a door handle, a branch, some offcuts of wood, or a head just a bent piece of cardboard on a stick'.

From such simple and elementary resources, he draws movements of melancholy and dances of triumph and joy. This simplicity and ordinariness of materials parallels a humility of finish, even once transformed into canonical bronze. Their plinths and pedestals are usually made from simple plywood, sometimes even from found books. 'Often when a sculpture is assembled the roughness of the finish and materials show the process of making itself. And when they are cast in bronze, an element of that showing of improvisation, the contrast between the different materials, so

clear in the rough constructions, is lost by the uniformity of the bronze material.' But for those who look even a little closely, much less is actually lost, for one can see all the joints of these constructions: from the remnants of the junctions of cardboard and wood to the modelling by Kentridge's own hand and his modelling knife. It is the opposite of a Cellinian finish: the opposite of fine materials seamlessly worked together. It is the apotheosis of the everyday and familiar.

Kentridge upends almost every form of the traditional *paragone*. He does so by showing that sculpture can be as two-dimensional and transparent as painting can be three-dimensional and transparent. Take the successive forms of his processions. They begin with the flat yet permeable shadow plays of his puppets; then the videos; then the transformation of the shadow plays into the long sequences of solid bronzes; then the flat steel sculptures (as much silhouette as sculpture) often pierced to make them as permeated with light and transparency as possible. See the figures in the great *Processione di Riparazione* first shown in Turin in 2017. Kentridge makes sculptures as airy as they are solid and, by projecting their shadows as moving silhouettes on the wall, turns shadow into film. In the cut-outs of steel and cardboard, he subverts the very basis of the original *paragone*, making their solid contours look nothing so much as broad and rough strokes of black ink and paint, resembling work by abstract expressionists like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, or the black paint stick drawings by Richard Serra. No supposedly distinctive feature of any genre remains intact.

Many of these works look like skeletal or exploded forms but, when the latter are realigned, they become whole again - or are made to disintegrate before one's eyes, thus leaving the work of reconstitution open. Even Kentridge's favourite theme of the coffee pot is given this treatment: one minute whole, the next prised apart into its elements, then suddenly whole again when seen from another angle (as in *Coffee Pot* (2011)) p304. Sometimes he places these seemingly randomly assembled forms on turntables so that, even if one stands still, they revolve until they become whole again. There seems to be no rest until unity is rediscovered in the seeming incoherence, until the whole is found to be more than its parts - or until one can finally conclude, not without satisfaction, that the whole has no greater merit than each of its parts, however strange they may seem - precisely because they are essential to that whole.

Kentridge draws many of these forms on the pages of his lexica, as if to emphasise their sheer flatness but, when their volume is released with the rapid turning of the pages, they become fully

dimensional again (as in the great *Lexicon* (2017)) pp230-31, 270, 272, 280, 315. In the process they acquire movement too: however block-like, ethereal or simply disintegrative, they nevertheless dance, stumble, march and carry on with their glorious or melancholic parades. No wonder then that Kentridge should look back not only to the Victorian flip-book, but also to machinic devices like the phenakistoscope to achieve similar ends. The machine is always there to remind us of the possibilities (and what used to be called the 'life-enhancing qualities') of movement and animation.

The genius of Kentridge's newest synesthetic masterpiece of performance and projection, *Ursonate* (2017), is revealed by the many ways in which he animates solid three-dimensional forms simply by flipping through the pages of the lexicon that is its artistic and semantic anchor. In it the *paragone* reaches its height. A sculpture jumps forth from the flat pages of a book on which he has made his drawings, sandwiched as if doomed to the flatness that has always defined them. And then he subverts that very definition, not by making them seem three-dimensional (and thus handing the palm to Leone Battista Alberti's and Leonardo's arguments), but investing them with movement that can make them fly away and disappear, before magically recapturing them again between those flat pages. All this he learned from the popular optical games of the 19th century, like the wheel of life, the flip-book, the zoetrope and the phenakistoscope: pre-film animation machines.

Kentridge is nothing less than the paragon of the *paragone*, the great expander of the potential of every genre of flatness and dimensionality, of both small and large scale. He telescopes and microscopes in one fell swoop, exploring what differences in scale mean and do not mean. Few have expanded the *paragone* as much as he, and few have understood its meaning for representation more clearly.

Kentridge revises the ancient and conventional distinctions between the genres with extraordinary tenacity and brings freshness to these. Even when a sculpture is only a stick figure, or is pierced with holes, or consists of flat planes intersecting at right angles to each other, it seems to be fully volumetric. The bronze nose-rider can be both rudimentarily schematic and substantively fleshy, as in the *Table-top Equestrian Sculpture* (2007) pp 150-51, 298. As if not yet satisfied with these revisions of perception, he then does something even more complicated and subversive. He takes flat pieces of wood or cardboard, on which he often paints features, say of faces, and then inserts further flat forms at right angles to it – rather like a ball made of two intersecting circles in which the flat intersecting elements contain

nothing but imagined volumes that the viewer must fill in; as if to force those volumes into the reality of a filled shape. Works like *World on its Hind Legs* (2010) pp169-71, 243-45, 264, 303, the *1912 Heads* (2016) pp214-18, 314, the bronze equestrian maquettes, *Untitled IV* (2007) p298, *Untitled VI* (2007) pp152, 298 and *Untitled VII* (2007) pp152, 262, 298, of the series *What Will Come*, and many others, depend on the imagination that fills in their empty spaces. No wonder Kentridge is so interested in anamorphosis: the process whereby viewers must adopt a specific vantage point in order to recognise (quite literally to 'put into perspective') what they see.

In these ways, Kentridge makes clear not only how drawing partakes of the effort of the purely conceptual, but how sculpture does too. The volume within his sculptures is anything but real; it is conceptual. It requires the same imaginative effort as even the most transparent and evanescent of painted surfaces do when they constitute the one form of perspective that sculpture itself cannot generate: aerial perspective – in other words the gradual fading of colour towards the depicted horizon. No one was better at this than Leonardo, and no one is better than Kentridge at realising the significance of the conceptual basis or the conceptual necessity of creating substance and volume with the force of our imagination.

Yet still this process may need supplementation and reinforcement. As Kentridge realised for years (as in his now classic film titled *Stereoscope* (1999), about the adventures of Soho Eckstein), flat drawings can be made three-dimensional with the aid of the stereoscope. Later, a number of forms of that old instrument were employed to ensure that the viewer would extract the full potentiality of form from a surface with no volume. As if to make the point even clearer, the drawings with their stereoscopes built above them become nothing less than sculptural and architectonic themselves, as evident in the more efficient and geometric forms of the *Underweysung der Messung* (2007) and *Tummelplatz* (2016) pp191, 269. Also, the spidery constructions of *Double Vision* (2007) pp198-202, 268, where stereoscopic cards are looked at through old wooden stereoscopic viewers, give amazing depth to the perfectly transparent spaces outlined by the neon forms, especially of horses (as superimposed in the *What Will Come* exhibition at Goodman Gallery (Johannesburg, South Africa) in 2007). For Kentridge the stereoscopes become totemic and magical as fetishes, as if they were strange idols capable of wreaking the transformations and substitutions he seeks.

But there is more to Kentridge's interrogation of the ancient

paragone. It is no longer a matter of competing qualities or of the establishment of borders, but rather of interchangeability and the transcending of borders, of integration rather than disintegration, of reconstitution rather than decomposition. When he makes forms explode, disintegrate and arrive near dissolution, he shows the possibility – and actuality – of reconstitution. Forms are exploded only to be put together again, either by his command of metamorphosis and transition, or by the acceleration and deceleration of things as they decompose and then recompose themselves. Many of his sculptural works seem fragmentary at first, but when seen from different angles they reconstitute themselves as new wholes or as figures with flair. This is the case of the magnificent steel silhouettes made for Palazzetto Tito (Venice, Italy) of a conductor and a swirling diva, *Construction for Return (Conductor)* (2008) pp299, 301 and *Construction for Return (Mezzo)* (2008) p300, which begin as loose assemblages but then, when rotated on a turntable or pin, gain total and proud coherence, depending on the angle of viewing. When projected – another *paragone*-defying step – they seem whole and flat, before being reconstituted once more as fully three-dimensional forms, as in the video *Breathe, Dissolve, Return* (2008).

The figure in *Construction for Return (Da Capo)* (2008) p299 looks like completely decomposed elements from one angle, but makes complete sense from another. Indeed, it is the very decomposition of its constituent elements that gives the final form its expression of energy – or its disconsolate defeat – that is so characteristic of Kentridge. It is as if fragmentation always tends towards reconstitution and generates what might seem, at first glance, an impossible unity.

Kentridge's insistent democratisation of both objects and forms should also be seen in this context. Everyday objects find their places both amongst the monuments, and as monuments too. Hybrid forms of great variety, calling forth nothing so much as the bimorphs of Hieronymus Bosch, participate in his processions of ordinary people for they too, like animals and machines, have their distinctive vitalities. Without them we would be living in a world that is not just more boring, but infinitely more limited in its creative possibility. Hybridity and disintegration impose on us the moral imperative of the effort towards reconciliation and the reconstitution of what we see or perceive as separateness and difference. For Kentridge the whole point of the *paragone* is neither competition and rivalry, nor the confirmation of superiority of one mode over another. It is the excellence of even the most everyday individuality over the denigration and diminution of the life within the other.

3. Lexicon

And so to the ordinary, the familiar and the everyday. How manifold and diverse are the objects Kentridge shows! How many scissors, corkscrews and telephones! How rough his surfaces! Or rather, not so much rough as tactile, for they are surfaces one wants to feel and hold. Not perfect and unblemished, but used, patched and worn – even when transformed into bronze. When one looks at the drawn, painted, printed and sculpted series titled *Lexicon*, it is hard not to notice how central these everyday objects are to his work. He metamorphosises them into the extraordinary, testifying not only to the power of the artist, but the transformational power of the spectator. Even the coffee pot, like the corkscrew, can become monumental. In *Cape Silver* (2018) pp227, 239, 318, 320, its ordinariness is emphasised by the unadorned plywood crate plinth on which it rests but, in its giant and glorious geometricity, it seems reminiscent of Constantin Brâncuși – even though the more one looks, the more the geometric forms seem to acquire an extraordinary degree of animacy and become invested with life.

Most of these common and everyday objects seem so familiar, especially when reduced to the small-scale – as if ready to be held in the hand. Not only familiar, but *of the family*. Kentridge recalls how when his children were little, he would make puppet shows for their birthday parties. The puppets had to be made from objects found around the house: 'a coffee pot with a cloth wound round it became a queen; a corkscrew with its levered arms and bottle opener head became a lady-in-waiting'. Later these same forms became small bronzes and acquired new companions. They were enlarged again as shadow plays, and treated to every permutation as they went through their progressions and performances.

'Lexicon' is one of Kentridge's favourite terms. It is also a favourite form, a favourite source and a favourite image vehicle. Not only does he title many of his series *Lexicon*, he uses the pages of actual lexica (dictionaries and encyclopaedias) as the substrate of his animation with the drawings sandwiched between them. Lexica not only offer guides to unknown and specialised knowledge, they also provide definitions of the everyday. Many of the lexica that Kentridge uses are not only classical ones, like Pierre Henri Larcher's edition of Benjamin Hederich's *Greek Lexicon Manual*, but those published by the great purveyors of popular knowledge: Larousse in France, Hoepli in Italy, Chambers in Britain and the Britannica in the United States. They foreground the everyday and familiarise the little-known.

It is all the more anomalous, then, but therefore all the more striking, that so many of Kentridge's small bronzes (in the various processions and elsewhere in his oeuvre) should seem at first sight to be nothing so much as small ancient idols – some even as simplified as Cycladic figurines or Luristan bronzes. Indeed, the *Lexicon* is also suggestively and suitably entitled *Glyphs*, from the ancient Greek word for 'carvings', usually of stone, and generally conveying something of both the primitive and the sacred (as in hieroglyphs). They are simplified forms, if not like the small figurines from the ancient Aegean, then scaled-down versions of the gigantic Easter Island monoliths that show the kind of massive manipulation of scale that Kentridge often employs. At least some of the power of these idols lies in their strikingly pared-down simplicity: human figures (and vegetable forms too) reduced to their simple geometric essence. They seem altogether primitive and basic, but at the same time stand comfortably in the company of the familiar.

If one looks at *Lexicon*, the first bronze is a form that is either tree or human – reduced to simple geometric components. Later come an elemental horse and rider, a small upturned nose, an ancient pot, and tree-like forms that are more puzzling and ambiguous. All are shown amidst recognisably more modern and familiar objects, like the bottle opener, movie camera, embossing stamp, telephone, bell-push, and so on. The ancient becomes contemporary, the contemporary and slightly retro (somehow mid-century) become ancient and fetishistic (at least in this small format).

In 1963 Natalia Ginzburg wrote a plain yet magical account of her early life in Turin and titled it *Lessico Familiare*. Usually, and correctly, this is translated into English as *Family Lexicon*. But it could equally be called a familiar lexicon, or rather, a lexicon of familiar objects and familiar language. Everyday objects are central to her account: life and language revolve around them. It begins:

At the dinner table in my father's home if I or one of my siblings knocked a glass over on the tablecloth or dropped a knife, my father's voice would thunder, 'Watch your manners! If we used our bread to mop up pasta sauce, he yelled, 'Don't lick your plates. Don't dribble! Don't slobber!' For my father dribble and slobber also described modern painting, which he couldn't stand. You have no idea how to behave at the table! I can't take you lot anywhere.²

It's an all too familiar childhood scene. So too, perhaps, is her father's dismissal of their new neighbour as a 'nitwit'. But then, in the

² Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon*, trans. Jenny McPhee (New York: NYRB Classics, 2017), 1. Note from the author: Lightly adapted from this excellent translation.

midst of this mildly affectionate recollection comes something else – something alarming. For in addition to the stupid people he called 'nitwits', there were also the people he described, in the witless racism of the day, as 'negroes'. And then he went on to compound his abusiveness: Such people, he said, were 'awkward, clumsy and faint-hearted, they dressed inappropriately, didn't know how to hike in the mountains and couldn't speak foreign languages ...' They wore city shoes on a mountain hike; engaged in conversation on the train with other travellers, or in the street with passers-by; they took off their shoes in the sitting room; warmed their feet on the radiator; they complained on the mountain hike of thirst, fatigue or blisters; they brought greasy food on a hike, along with napkins to wipe their fingers. And she remembered how 'on hikes wearing our large, rigid, lead-heavy hobnailed boots, thick woolen socks, balaclava helmets and snow goggles across our foreheads with the sun beating squarely down on our sweating heads, we would stare with envy at the people who strode easily in tennis shoes or lounged at the chalet tables eating ice-cream'.

Ginzburg's family lexicon is also a lexicon of familiar objects. It could be one of Kentridge's. The familiar forms of behaviour she describes are not exceptional, they are all too human. They have nothing to do with race. They offer no basis for bourgeois claims of cultural superiority. While Ginzburg's account is notable for its self-aware acknowledgement of her father's snobbishness and racism, Kentridge's treatment of these larger issues shows the full extent of his all-embracing humanity. It extends not only across race, but across every aspect of both the animate and the inanimate world: from people to animals to objects, which he renders more familiar by impressing them with signs of movement, and therefore of life, to which we can never but relate – not just formally, but emotionally as well.

4. Animacy and Animation

Kentridge's familiar objects are rarely inanimate (but so too for the unfamiliar, the abstract and hybrid ones as well). Even when he takes his coffee pots, corkscrews, old movie cameras and dial telephones and makes them monumental (such as *Cape Silver* (2018), *Duke* (2018) pp238, 272, 274, 318, *Duchess* (2018) pp238, 272, 274, 318, and *Ring* (2017)) pp240, 272, 318, he seeks to animate them, however block-like and ungainly they may seem. He knows precisely how to do so. They may be as immobile as a Brâncuși or a Henry Moore, but he takes

their horizontals and verticals slightly off-angle, tilting them gently so that they seem about to move, or he provides them with machines and springs to effect their movements at his or his public's will.

Just as Leonardo did in his tiny sketches in the margins of his manuscripts, Kentridge sets out to understand the skeletal structures and pivots of things. He then adjusts them ever so slightly so that they seem to become instantly animated. Rigid geometry becomes geometry potentiated with movement and expression. Even pure geometricity has soul. The most monumental of his works are animated by the quirks that anthropomorphise geometricity, as if errancy and quirkiness were immediate signifiers of liveliness and humanity.

Kentridge knows how to express lightness and nuance by the mere insinuation of implicit movement, and hinting at how gravity not only anchors things, but also moves them forward. He is like the ancient wizard inventor Daedalus, who gave life to blocks of stone by making them seem to walk, just by separating their legs. Everything for Kentridge is capable of animation. He animates his works in every possible way: sometimes bluntly, sometimes subtly.

Some of the objects in the lexica are inherently moveable, others inherently stable. Often he subverts these states too: making the inherently moveable seem permanent and static, and the inherently stable seem mobile. Some acquire degrees of hybridity in order to move or grow, as do the megaphones grafted onto old men's legs, or the human figures sprouting branches, or the head attached to the top of dividers which turns into legs, rather like *World on its Hind Legs* and its 2009 maquette p303. Others are just left in their ordinary form.

Kentridge has engaged with the techniques of animation from the start of his career. He has done so in drawing, film and puppetry. In his work with sculpture, he has devised new strategies to expose the mechanisms by which forms can become mobile. He never shies away from exposing the human in the machine, and vice versa. As if determined to show the multitudinous possibilities of the connection between movement and liveliness, he reveals the workings of a machine that can adjust his Bialetti ever so slightly to make it all the more animated – as in the *Coffee Pot* (2018) pp266, 317, designed, engineered and constructed by Jonas Lindquist. It becomes a figure of a woman with a cheekily decisive arm bent behind her, as if ready for some spirited yet playful action with her mouth open and fist clenched. She becomes a wry and cocky figure. Then again, in some of the small bronzes, he models a head topped by a rudimentary turban to go on the handle of the lid, and a dress to go round its base, to make the gendered

nature of the pot even clearer. In one of the large-scale sculptures, the entire pot is at one point a profile with a moveable mouth; at another the mouth is a bird-like orifice formed by the lid at the very top, which can open and close. It takes only the slightest opening of the lid to animate the mouth and to adjust its nuances – as subtly as in any human. We humanise objects and machines at the slightest prompt, and the artful exposure of the machine beneath the pot makes the inherent paradox all the more striking. *O Sentimental Machine* is the significant title of the 2018 exhibition in the Liebieghaus (Frankfurt, Germany), where the coffee pot and the Singer sewing machines achieve still further degrees of humanisation.

When Kentridge dismembers the pot – or rather breaks it down into its parts – and then turns it into flat planes (as in the small bronze series as well), the viewer is still able to reconstitute it into solid volume. They do so by moving themselves to the various positions that enable the eyes to take on the work of reconstitution and reintegration (see *Coffee Pot* (2011)). Throughout this process the inclination to anthropomorphise remains, until the pot seems even more cheekily posed than in some of the other examples.

Kentridge never rests in his search for the basic forms of movement. Over and over again he strips his figures of their flesh to uncover the rudimentary, schematic bases of their movements. He draws a soldier for Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836-37) banging a drum, or stepping out in Fascist style, or doing a dance step – and then reduces that step to its mechanical minimum. He takes several of his beloved horses and does the same. He makes us see the human even in the mechanical – or vice versa – as in Giovanni Battista Bracelli's wonderful etchings of geometricised workers, fencers, acrobats, dancers and gymnast in his *Bizzarie di Varie Figure* (1624). But Kentridge's figures are different from the relatively soulless figures of that work. For even when he reveals their machinic underpinnings, they still betray signs of emotion that lie within. We know it is somewhere there, and so we anthropomorphise what we can, striving to invest even the coldest objects with movements that express emotion. Even the *homme machine* is capable of cheerfulness and melancholy.

Needless to say, there is a further, perhaps even more obvious dimension to all of this. From childhood on, it is hard to stop ourselves from seeing the person in the animal. At the same time, or perhaps a little later, we become more self-aware of the animal in the human. 'Stop behaving like animals,' my father used to say to us children around the table in South Africa. It is part of Kentridge's extraordinary species

democracy that he sees the human – and above all the qualities we value in the human – in the animal. He even sees the qualities of sensitivity that we think of as human as being shared with animals. Can animals also be melancholic? That too, of course.

Consider the stumbling bishop about to collapse in the bronze *Procession* (2000) pp94-95, 100 and in *Processione di Reparazionisti*. He barely keeps himself up as he clings to what is presumably intended to be his staff. If every movement can convey poignancy, here it does. The weakness of his movement and the fragility of the body beneath his all-enveloping robe is way too clear: his muscles are about to fail and he will progress no further before he falls. There is something ineffably sad about the imminence of his crumpling to the ground. Then we notice that the mitred head of that bishop, recalling countless such forms in Western religious art, is nothing less than the head of a rhino: with ears and horn forming an almost perfect double mitre. Parapraxis moves from slips of the tongue to slips of sight, and to life as a whole. Kentridge loves anamorphosis not just because it is a practical trick of perspective, but because it is moral as much as it is conceptual. Both literally and morally, it requires the adoption of different viewpoints beyond one's own comfortable and habitual ones.

This is the underlying parable of his experiments with the possibilities of animation, not just across people, but also across species. Moreover, by invoking and showing hybrid forms, we are made to recall not only the work of Bosch, but Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Francisco Goya's too. Over and over again, he grafts vegetable forms onto human ones. He makes parts of the body walk across the stage on their own, as in the peregrinating noses, inspired by Nikolai Gogol and Dmitri Shostakovich, which suggests that our instrument of smell can acquire motor skills as well. Who would not recall Bosch's astonishing bimorphs – parts of humans attached to parts of animals, or the famous tree man on the left wing of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-1515) – upon seeing their Kentridgian equivalents, such as the slightly mobile bug parading with pruning blades sprouting from it, or the figure with his back tied to bundled branches? Kentridge wrote of the latter that 'I lay awake unable to get these figures out of my head – for example, an old man – half tree, half man – carrying firewood. It doesn't make any sense. However, in a dream it was revealed – by the tree-man – that you can wait as long as you like, but no explanation will come'. It was only when he realised that the persistence of these figures and their refusal to make sense could become the subject of the shadow theatre, that he could sleep.

Kentridge's work is perfused with such images, including those that go even further to mix the living with technological or machinic form – from the mobile bugs that parade with pruning-shear blades sprouting from them, to the more modern, yet still faintly retro combinations of umbrellas and sewing machines that are themselves animated by turntables and other mechanical devices. In addition to the giant coffee pots, there are the projectors, speakers and telephones – the latter another favourite from the 1950s that can morph from yet another stodgy piece of communicational technology (barely animate but never dead) into the head of a gigantic striding woman-machine. There is animacy even in the blocks, cubes and other geometrical shapes Kentridge draws, models and sculpts. Against all our reasonings, and some of our intuitions, they seem to have life within them too. It is not just everyday objects and improbable hybrids which we invest with character and soul, but also the cubes, squares and circles which we can slightly tilt or roll downwards to animate the most solid and basic of forms. In the great *Lexicon* that accompanies the performance of *Ursonate* (2017), one can flip through the pages of a book on which these forms are drawn, and release them into the air. Lightly, if we flip these pages fast, rather more soberly and heavily if we do so slowly, allowing them to gain a semblance of character and, if we want, emotion too.

5. Movement and Emotion

In every case it is not just a matter of animating the inanimate, but also of the infinite ways that movement is inescapably invested with emotion. Take the pair of dividers acting as rudimentary legs topped by a head with a dry tree attached to what is presumably a neck. It is the determined stride of the anthropomorphised pair of dividers that somehow makes us feel the stirrings of emotion in the hybrid and the stirrings of empathy within us. In Kentridge's early film *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997), a television is attached to the legs of dividers. It too, despite its blank screen face, acquires a kind of sympathetic character thanks to the movements of its rudimentary divider-legs. It is clear from his work and his interest in the manifold transformations of the objects and figures that Kentridge is a master of metamorphosis. He is always changing something to something else. His fertility of invention is matched only by his ability to convey flux and change, similar to the ancient poet Ovid's masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*, that vast compendium of stories about creation, destruction and regeneration, and all the joys and terrors,

triumphs and laments they entail. Almost as in Leonardo's little drawings of figures struggling against the wind, Kentridge's drawings and sculptures showing a faceless body with only a megaphone attached to it seems to lean backward in the face of some pressure or another. In this case it is the witnessing of too much pressure on a body that is already getting on in years which arouses in us a complex emotion that is difficult to identify, but seems a combination of both triumph (the implied words that will be broadcast over the megaphone) and melancholy, if not downright sadness. Indeed, the angle between that body and the megaphone seems perfectly calculated to convey the equivalent combination of both struggle and triumph.

It is as if Kentridge wants to show that the world would not exist without emotion, and that emotion cannot be shown - let alone conveyed - without movement. There has always been a debate about what comes first: emotion or movement? Many of us tend, intuitively, to think that it is emotion. For the great philosopher and psychologist William James, it was movement. He insistently pointed out that there would be no emotion without some form of movement. It is on this, I think, that much of Kentridge's art seems to depend.

The precision with which Kentridge calibrates correlations between movement and emotion over multiple, indeed multitudinous instances, is extraordinary. Even the slightest movement - not necessarily with the full body, not necessarily proprioceptively even, but with the slightest curl of the mouth, or bend of the back - is registered with an attention to nuance that is one of the most remarkable aspects of his art. It is as though he has thoroughly absorbed Leonardo's notes on movement and expression, and gone beyond them. He has succeeded in capturing their fleeting changes almost as precisely as Leonardo's miraculous drawings of every tiny change in the movement of water (still more fluid and variable than the movements of the human body).

As always in Kentridge, there are lessons beyond humans too. For him (as for Charles Darwin in his treatise *The Expression of the Emotions in Animals and Man* (1872)) the emotions of animals are also revealed by their movements, and it is worth taking the trouble to read them right - not only for their sakes, but for ours. Perhaps the nuances of emotional expression via the body become even more critical in the absence of words and in the presence of physiognomic expressions that are less easily read by humans. No one who has looked at Kentridge's horses - to say nothing of his versions of Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov's walkabout nose - could doubt his commitment to ensuring that we recognise the emotions of animals, even if that

means anthropomorphising them. Yet, when he raises the possibility of doing the same for independent body parts and machines, with all the lessons that the latter entail, then we realise that these lessons are as much about ourselves as they are about the artist. Is it the artist who is so brilliantly capable of investing movement with communicable emotion? Or is it the viewer who simply (and often blindly) projects emotion onto the movements and therefore the person, animal or machine they see?

Already in his treatise on painting of the mid-1430s, Alberti had codified an important position that has acquired new resonance in our time: *'the movements of the soul are known from the movements of the body'*. Few now are greater masters of demonstrating this in art than Kentridge. He knows that it is not only difficult to grasp the emotions of others in the absence of their bodily expressions, but that for the artist to convey them requires a comprehensive ability to show the muscles of the body, and the face contract and relax - or to suggest their imminent contraction and relaxation. For this reason, as we have seen, Kentridge studies not only the body en fleshed, but also the body un fleshed, so that its working armature can be revealed and studied. There can be no doubt about his dedication to this, as the visual evidence of his skeletal figures and the workings of his varieties of the *homme machine* also show.

The results are evident in all his work: from the puppets to the small bronzes to the drawings and the shadow plays. In the small bronze *Procession*, solemn in parts, ecstatic in others, the figures bend forward under their heavy loads and stagger under the weights they bear. They fight, just like Leonardo's figures, against some imaginary wind and, as we look at them, we seem to feel those same burdens and resistances too. We know what they are feeling, bearing and resisting because we feel, bear and resist such weights within our own bodies too and, if we are open and the artist is skilled, we feel it in our souls as well. For there is always a sense in his sculptures, just as in the poignant sculptures of the Middle Ages that are so borne down upon by the structures they support and the weights they carry, that they struggle not only with weight, but with emotion too.

Similarly with Kentridge's *Procession* figures as they collapse to the ground in defeat. They have given up their burdens, both physical and metaphysical, and have lost. Sometimes their grief seems so intense that we feel that we want to imitate their movements in our own bodies, perhaps with even greater intensity.

Then there are the dancers who fling their arms upward in joy. Even when cast in solid bronze, they seem as wild and ecstatic as ancient maenads. Their lightness belies their weight. Several remind us, just as

the simple puppets in the park reminded Kleist, of the country dances of Peter Paul Rubens, Jean-Antoine Watteau and Goya – some full of clumsy dancers, others full of grace, just as in real life. In the most striking of cases we seem to mirror their actions inwardly and are almost overcome by emotions that, at the moment of perception, seem akin to theirs. We feel the dancers' joy. What is so remarkable, of course, is that these are all figures which are basically inanimate and which Kentridge seems to endow with life and liveliness. Like Warburg, he realises that this is the fundamental challenge of all art: to convey convincing and emotion-enclosing movement within a still image, even though he is also perfectly aware of how to make them move by mechanical and filmic means.

He employs his stick figures, his skeletal reductions and his machinic exposures not only to study the elemental constituents of the form and movements of things, but also to note how the very slightest adjustments of their arrangements can convey emotion. He knows that even minimal further adjustment can convey maximal changes of emotion or *mutatis mutandis*: very slight nuances too. Once again, the very slightest tilt of the head, or what stands for the head, can convey emotion and feeling. The figures bent forward – or the assemblages that stand for figures – seem to move as if burdened by both literal and metaphorical weight, over and over again. And we share in those intimations of melancholy, inescapably.

Kentridge experiments with familiar household instruments that we remember from all our childhoods, as well as instruments (like divider and compass, telephone and coffee pot) that we learned to use as we grew older. Some are more specialised than others, but still modest. The simplest things are transformed into imaginative (and imaginary) vessels for the potentiality of emotion. Kentridge recruits all these objects to serve as a kind of school for anthropomorphisation, and shows how little it takes for the perceiver to turn them into living beings. We want them – the objects – to share at least some of our characteristic potential for feeling and movement. Each of Kentridge's everyday objects acquires existential being, capable of movement and emotion – of movement as emotion. Their individual elements look like limbs or hands raised in excitement or lowered in distress, as playfully exemplified by the levers of the classic corkscrew. The top instrumental part of the corkscrew becomes a head, which we fill with emotion because of the implied gait of the rest of what then stands for the body. A pair of scissor blades becomes a pair of upraised arms. Pointed downward they are a dancer *en pointe*. We need only these basic indicators to allow our imaginations to fill in the outward signals of

recognisable emotional expression. Even into these most rudimentary and schematic of forms, we find ourselves projecting our deepest fears and desires. Even in the everyday we find the basic structures of physical expressions of emotion. One kind of corkscrew becomes an ecstatic maenad, another, with its unequally-sized legs, a figure who barely manages to limp.

As always, then, we deduce emotion, even from the rudiments of movement, even when reduced to its stick-figure minimum: that Fascist strut, that droop of the body, that submission to weight. Like the puppets and marionettes, those limbs are no more than articulated rods with primitive hinges, and yet in them we discern the full gamut of emotion and of grace.

We may think we need faces – especially human faces – to show emotion, but just as Bruegel frequently covers or obscures the faces of his figures, so too does Kentridge – yet still he manages to convey emotion and feeling, whether grief over the dying or the pleasures of childish play. Who can resist Bruegel's winning children with their hats pulled over their heads so that we are obliged to read their moods and emotions by their movements alone? The fact that we may gauge so many feelings from the rest of their bodies is a kind of refutation of the point of Pliny the Elder's account of the famous work by the ancient Greek painter Timanthes, which showed Agamemnon's grief at the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia by covering his face with a veil. The assumption there was that the emotion was too strong to be shown, so it had to be left to the beholder's imagination. It was too awful to be portrayed.

Obviously, however, artists like Bruegel – or Kentridge, for that matter – could have risen to the occasion, precisely because they were so good at conveying emotion through the rest of the body. How otherwise would Kentridge have been able to substitute the heads of so many of his embodied forms with things like megaphones or giant fronds, and still allow us to read the powerful emotions he wants us to feel – whether it be triumph, sadness, joy, or sheer ennui? He seems to be saying, 'look at their movements, even the gross movements of the body, not just the movements of the corrugator, orbicular and superciliary muscles of the face, and you will know them'. Their bodily movements tell us most of what we need to know about their emotional states. They are no longer bodies that need faces to provide them with emotion, or even with their distinctive liveliness.

Why is this? Because of the human inclination to anthropomorphise, even when there is no face. We invest coffee pots, megaphones and cameras with character and feeling. Megaphones bear down on all-too

human bodies and we seem to feel, in our own bodies, the effects of their imposed weights. Branches sprouting out of the neck of a stick figure give a sense of sprightly possibility; trees with legs seem to run away. Even when the anthropomorphised body below seems to be inanimate, we animate it almost inevitably to grief or to cheerfulness. Bosch's bimorphs with human bodies and animal or demon heads both show and arouse emotion, almost as if they were human themselves. Kentridge knows the importance of parapraxis, not only in words, but in life. It is a slip of perception, like a slip of the tongue rooted in reality. 'Don't be an animal,' our fathers warned us at the table! 'Don't behave like an animal,' is what they meant. But in the end we are animals, and so we still need to discern the human in the animal.

Even Kentridge's musical instruments may be anthropomorphised and invested with emotion. Ultimately, he does not have to do much to make us feel that those megaphones and gramophone horns and concertinas partake in human emotion. The same applies to his other mechanical devices, as well as his stick figures. Whether innately, or through long study, Kentridge knows how to show how limbs (rudimentary as they may seem) relate to each other and move, however slightly, in order to convey incipient or more emotion. In every case, however, the beholder's function is critical, for it is through imagination that viewers are able to anthropomorphise, and thereby vitalise an emotion. Once again, it is the superior artist who knows how to make viewers feel the emotions he wants them to feel. He is able to do so thanks to his extraordinary understanding of the bodily expression of emotion. Kentridge knows how to do so in such a way that the viewer never feels pushed into projection. Viewers need only a nuance of expression or the hint of a movement to feel nudged into understanding, recognition and empathy.

6. Urformen

Time and again, Kentridge looks for the basic forms of things. He pares them down to bone and muscle. He does so in search of the basic principles of movement, and to understand how forms are built from their most rudimentary elements. Hence the stick figures and the machinic mechanisms that emerge so often in his work; hence the various techniques of point light and continuous light that he uses to understand the principles of movement and dimensionality.

In English we have no word for these basic forms – forms that could once be described as elemental and primitive (the latter without the

negative connotations it now has). The Germans have a word for them: *Urformen*, and apply that particular prefix, *Ur*, to all the cognates of form: from *Urgebärden* to *Urworte* and *Ursprache*. Those are primitive gestures and words that suggest the imagined language that stands at the origin of things – ancient beyond comprehension. No wonder that Kentridge, in his tireless research into how to evoke our sensorimotor and emotional responses, needs his Ur-lexicon!

The objects in Kentridge's *Procession* of small bronzes may at first look like a collection of archaic objects, small fetishes and ancient small idols of one kind or another. Yet, when examined more closely, they turn out to be mostly everyday objects: rather than being estranged from us, they are nothing less than objects from a familiar lexicon.

When Natalia Ginzburg reflected, in her own *Family Lexicon*, that even though members of her family lived in different cities and different countries, it took just one word or phrase from their remote past, like 'Sulfuric acid stinks of fart', to bring them back together again, revive them and liberate them from distraction and indifference. And she continued:

These phrases are our Latin, the dictionary of our past, they're like Egyptian or Assyro-Babylonian hieroglyphics, evidence of a vital core that has ceased to exist, but lives on in its texts, saved from the fury of the waters, the corrosion of time. Those phrases are the basis of our family unity and will persist as long as we are in the world, recreated and revived in disparate places on the earth.³

This lies at the very core of Kentridge's art. Ginzburg, *avant la lettre*, knew in her heart that all those portentous ur-forms, those archetypes, those bases of everything we do, are nothing so much as the common and garden language of our everyday life. They have the same status as the great stories of ancient history and myth, with their tales of Atlas, the giant who carries the world on his shoulders; Medea, who abandoned by her husband kills her own children; Philoctetes, who suffers excruciating pain from a snakebite on his way to Troy; Narcissus, who so admires his reflection in the water that he falls into the well and drowns.

But Kentridge goes deeper than just words. His whole being emerges in one of his most indexical achievements: his performance of *Ursonate* (1922-32) by Kurt Schwitters, collector of litter and rubbish, creator of the nonsense word *Merz*, with its connotations of shit (as in *Merde*) and suffering (as in *Schmerz*) to describe his own work. It is, in fact, a reworking of that piece, not just in terms of sound, but in the way he uses it as a sonic backdrop to his demonstration of how ur-forms themselves

3 Ibid., 1.

can become both mobile and emotional. While Kentridge beautifully intones the syllables of Schwitters' ur-language, childish and profound at once, infinitely archaic (engaging a chorus that moves from low bass to the high and shrill), he also projects on the opposite wall a film of his own ur-lexicon. This consists of images of every kind: from the natural world out there to the human within, and then on to geometry itself – the full gamut of his objects. As we hear these ancient yet wholly suppositious words, we see his ur-forms gather speed, begin to move, dissolve and reconstitute themselves. He liberates his geometric shapes by investing them with speed, and shows their potential by accelerating them till they explode into nothingness. But the lesson lies, as always, in the possibility of reconstitution as a whole, of integrating what has been separated and long thought lost. That is the hope of whatever it is that we call 'primitive'. If nothing else, it reminds us of the potential – within ourselves and others – even if too much knowledge destroys the possibility of grace.

And so we return to Kleist's bear.

Throughout Kentridge's work there are some objects and drawings that are enormously intricate, and others that seem solid and basic to the point of immovability. At first many of the larger sculptures seem ungainly – whether rudimentary or everyday. We have seen how little it takes, in terms of adjustment of the smallest angle or crack, to give almost every one of these blocky objects a sense of incipient movement and unfolding of emotion. Then it dawns on us, as he intends it to, that the apparent tension between ungainliness and grace is nothing less than a proclamation of the possibility of the very opposite of what we suspect. Even the most primitive forms and movements also have their grace, and thus it subverts our very notions of the primitive, and of that which may seem alien to us. There is both ungainliness and grace in Kleist's bear.

Every gesture the bear makes, however brisk or clumsy it may seem, is efficient in its imperturbability, but this is not the animal imperturbability of which Georges Bataille famously wrote when he spoke of the apathy of the savage and devouring beast. It is the archetype of the grace that resides in innocence and unselfconsciousness, the state of grace that extends across boundaries (even the boundaries between human and animal) that we have never to relinquish pursuing. In this lies the importance of Kentridge's research, even across the stumbles that are often apparent in his work, into the ways in which cultures and cultural forms incessantly overlap – not to the impoverishment of their original aura, but to their enrichment.

7. Warburg

There was no greater student of ur-forms than Aby Warburg. He took within his purview not only high art, but all images. He studied postcards and playing cards, amulets and armour, mannequins and masks. He spent his life puzzling over the relationship between the rational and the irrational, between superstition and science. He recognised the place of myth and magic in the development of civilisation. For Warburg the high and the low were not separate, but informed each other. The tensions between them generated new energies that ensured the transmission of cultural forms of all kinds, across time and space. Primitive and barbaric forms (or rather what people regarded as primitive and barbaric) were essential drivers of cultural exchange.

Warburg's work knew no boundaries. He studied the ways in which cultures fertilised one another and generated productive new forms, thus ensuring the survival of the old and the not yet appreciated forms of the other. He was old-fashioned in his commitment to the paleographical techniques of scholarship, but not in his invention of new ones. He knew he had to go back in time as far as possible, precisely in order to discover the origins of the relationships between cultures and their symbols.

No cultural or art historian was more conscious of the importance of the relationship between movement and emotion than Warburg. He realised early on that the outward movements of the body, barely covered by Botticelli's draperies or by those of sculptors like Agostino di Duccio and Donatello before him, revealed the inner emotions of the figures that such artists painted and drew. Anyone who has seen the flying draperies of Kentridge's figures in his grand processions of puppets, or his projections of them onto flat walls or screens, or his procession of *Triumphs and Laments* (2016) along the Tiber River in Rome (to take one of his most admired recent works), knows precisely how movement both generates and animates the emotions of the figures who pass before one. Often they activate very similar emotions, or memories of the emotions they show, within oneself.

These are amongst what Warburg would have called the engrams of civilisations: those traces of cultural forms that persist across the ages. For him, as for Kentridge, the ways of memory were everything – not its accuracy nor its failures, but rather how it manifests itself across cultures, casting light on our capacity to adapt our inflexibilities in order to grasp the meaning of what joins us across the boundaries of that

which alienates and separates us. After all, who amongst contemporary artists has engaged as critically with artists of the past – not out of nostalgia, but out of a sense of their command of issues that are important to him and from which he can learn more? Often it seems as if Kentridge's work encapsulates the whole of the history of art. In his vast and ecumenical range, he is a Warburgian *par excellence*. Few artists seem as aware of the importance of the memory of the past for the vitality and welfare of the future. Few express that commitment more vitally in the present. At the same time, he perfectly exemplifies the conclusion of Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon*: 'Memory is ephemeral and books drawn from reality are often just glimpses and fragments of everything we have seen and heard'.⁴

It is not surprising that Dürer's *Underweysung der Messung*, his great treatise 'not only for painters, but also for goldsmiths, sculptors, stonemasons, carpenters, and all those for whom using measurement is useful' should feature so prominently in his work. The *Underweysung* is basically a treatise on how to draw from reality, but the assumption is that drawing is predicated on mastering the basic forms of things before moving on to the refinements of representation. In his own versions of the *Underweysung*, Kentridge takes Dürer's perspectival instruments and shows how the grid may be used to learn to represent a nude figure (just as Dürer does, but Kentridge's version gazes at the figure with much blunter sexual interest). He uses the window to represent a rhino (that Dürer engraves with extraordinary attentiveness and tenacity, endowing his animal with the first signs of emotional animacy), which Kentridge then expands into something worthy of our empathy. As if to make the point clear, the Kentridgian leitmotif of the coffee pot reappears in this series too, reminding us of the importance of basic forms and of the innumerable possibilities of animating them.

From Leonardo, Kentridge learned how to animate human forms in their struggles against the elements, how to show them resisting physical weight and pressure, and how to endow movement with emotion. From Bosch, he extracted his lessons about bimorphs and hybridity. From Bruegel, he learned about the relative insignificance of physiognomy in comparison with the rest of the body when it came to expressing intense vivacity and emotion. From Goya, he learned how to animate a gesture so that it seems perfectly adapted to the distress, joy, fear or triumph he wants to express. It becomes so definitive that it could never be different. These are all artists who have the most to teach us about the expression of emotions in art, and its significance for our common humanity.

But Kentridge also reaches further back. He draws on classical

antiquity and the hieratic and simplified forms that lie at the very roots and origins of what we call art. This search for the survival of forms from antiquity is what Warburg and his followers referred to as the *Nachleben der Antike*, literally 'the afterlife of antiquity', but often translated as 'the survival of antiquity'. The point, of course, is the life that survives in images, not merely their survival in the form of copies and adaptations. Kentridge studied not only classical antiquity in the West, but the ancient art of Babylon, Egypt, India, and the earliest Islamic forms as well, and how these conveyed knowledge across cultures. He did so in order to access what he perceived as the common cultural roots of humanity; for him the transformation of ancient art was crucial to an understanding of where we are now and how we arrived here. Just as critically, it also allowed him to explore the most basic forms of the expression of emotion via the movements of the body. In the maenads of classical antiquity, with their frenzied gestures and fluttering drapes often revealing the moving body beneath them, he discovered the sources of similar figures in the works of the great Renaissance painters and sculptors, like Botticelli and Duccio. Here, in the figures of the drunken female followers of Bacchus, he found not only the remote origins of the 15th century artists' dancing nymphs, but also how they conveyed a sense of their frenzy to their beholders, and agitated them as much.

When scholars now speak of the *Nachleben der Antike*, they like to show, somewhat scholastically, what was copied from what. It is often forgotten that what is at stake is as much the *life* in the 'afterlife' as the *after*. It is not just a matter of searching for the prototypes. For Kentridge it is as much a question of how and why these ancient forms retain their vitality as from what and where they derive. How do images retain their own vitality, how do they continue to seem so fresh? That is why the artist must animate what he shows, why he must make the birds fly off the page and ensure that his viewers can also make them fly. Of course the achievement will not only lie in the enlivening of his images in the most literal sense possible, but in the ability to ensure that these forms have the vitality to survive through all their adaptations and modifications over time.

Everywhere in Kentridge's work, from the very large drawings to the smallest sculptures, there are echoes of the ways in which classical sculptures embody the most trenchant forms of the muscular underpinnings of movement. Anyone who looks at them will be struck by how often they seem to capture the most definitive and effective forms of conveying emotion through movement. Where Warburg saw the body beneath the drapery, Kentridge sees the muscles, tendons and joints

4 Ibid., 3

beneath the flesh, as if exploring the very mechanisms of emotion and seeking to access how they work.

In the course of his writing, Warburg identified what seemed to him to be recurrent emotional gestures: hands crossing the breast in fear or devotion, arms cast upwards in grief or horror, the wringing of hands in desperation, the wiping of tears from the eyes in sorrow, and the disconsolate resting of the cheek on the palm of the backwardly-inclined hand for sadness and melancholy (the traditional emotional state of the brilliant artist or scientist, as most famously represented by the seated protagonist of Dürer's engraving *Melencolia I* (1514)).

These for Warburg were basic emotional gestures. He called them pathos-formulae (or *Pathosformeln* in the original German). They were ancient and fundamental. They were gestures that recurred across time and seemed so rooted in the past that Warburg could not resist speculating about their origins, about identifying the primitive gestures, the *Urgebärde*, that were the foundation of all emotional expression. After all, how could one speak of the formulaic if one did not consider what lay at its basis and what its essential components were? No wonder that in speaking of his very first sculptures, Kentridge could say that they 'were made in the hope of fixing their gestures'.

Once again, scholars have tended to think of these seemingly formulaic movements in terms of the copying of previous representations or enactments of clearly similar gestures (whether in life or in art). Yet it is clear that the persistence of such gestures across time, space and medium has as much to do with correlations between emotion and gesture (that are as much biological and physiological) as the result of artistic transmissions from one image to another. It is not just a matter of artists drawing upon the work of others, but their ability to convey the emotions they wish to communicate via movements of the body. Of course, it may often be a matter of a deliberate, serendipitous, or purely unconscious combination of both - which may in turn even further aid the effectiveness of the imaged gesture. If ever there was an artist who thoroughly and sophisticatedly explored exactly such a combination of history and psychology - exploring the potential correlations between gesture and emotion, it is Kentridge.

Such precision certainly comes as a result of his study of ancient masters who also achieved this, from Lysippus to Leonardo, but it is primarily the way in which Kentridge has trained and disciplined himself to understand the correlations between emotion and movement, even the smallest ones, that takes his achievement in this domain even beyond theirs. He studies them meticulously, both physiologically and historically,

It is through his untiring transformations of his successive drawings of the same subjects of figures and motifs (whether in the interests of animation by film, or of the study of the emotions) - each time with a slight change from the preceding one - that he succeeds in conveying to us the delicate unfolding and closure of an emotion. It is as if we were attending upon the disclosure of the very development of psyche and soul.

Warburg himself never relinquished his study of the afterlife of antiquity, nor his pursuit of the evidence for, and explanations of, the pathos-formula. Like his similarly gifted contemporary, Walter Benjamin, he knew not only how such things were rooted in ritual, but also how they were transformed in the course of popular and everyday life by repetition and the intimate access mass reproduction (especially photography) provided. Like Benjamin, but with more money at his disposal and a life less interrupted by the travails inflicted by the outside world, Warburg was a collector of images that testified to the long and complex threads that join images across cultures and time. He began to study what he clumsily called *Bilderfahrzeuge* ('image-vehicles' we might call them), which refers to the vast and amorphous variety of objects that serve to disseminate images within and across cultures: from one social stratum to another, from friend to friend and enemy across every imaginable border and by every possible means and medium.

Around 1927 Warburg began to collect a vast 'Atlas of Images', which he called his *Bilderatlas*. Its aim was to demonstrate visual, thematic and psychological connections between images over time and across the globe. He decided to document these not in books, but through photographs attached to panels available for display. The photographs were organised according to subject matter, as well as the functions of the original images and objects. As a whole, the *Bilderatlas* concentrated on filiations of myth and emotion, and aimed to provide evidence of how these image-vehicles functioned both historically and psychologically. In his search for pathos-formulae, Warburg collected as many examples of emotional gestures as he could, and sought to identify the ur-gestures, indeed the ur-language of all cultures, as if this would enable the discovery of the very sources of the formulaic in the pathos-formula.

And so we find in Warburg's atlas of images, just as in Kentridge's, the great themes of antiquity. From sacrifice to dance, and from triumph to lament, they were fraught with the kinds of polarities that Warburg believed essential to the energies and transformative capacities of cultures. He presented ancient cosmologies along with the ways nations and cultures rationalised superstition; he showed how they illustrated the astrology that determined fate, and the astronomy that rationalised it;

he went from the organisation of the world to the organisation of our souls. The *Bilderatlas* contained ancient and modern horoscopes as well as all the symbols of fortune and fate. At the same time he sought to illustrate the high and the low, as if they too were matters of fortune and fate, of courtly and everyday life.

Above all, Warburg obsessed over the genealogies of myths associated with pathos and its gestures, such as those shown by the long traditions of illustrating Orpheus (the charmer of animals, torn to death by the wild women of Thrace for his homosexuality); the abandoned Ariadne saved by Bacchus; the betrayed and abandoned Cleopatra doomed to suicide (the two figures are often conflated in ancient sculpture, as in the small bronze 'copy' in Kentridge's *Paragraph II* (2018)) pp232-33, 274, 317; the rape of Proserpine, and all their Middle Eastern and Babylonian equivalents. He showed the maenads whose ecstatic behaviours bear such a close resemblance to many of the figures in Kentridge's work, with their wildly flowing hair, their gesticulating hands, and their often frenzied movements suggesting or betraying emotional frenzy. Their equivalents are not hard to find in his sculptures and drawings, as in the maenadic dancer in the *Procession* and its prior and later forms in other media.

Whether Kentridge consciously knew their mythical archetypes or not, these figures are predicated on his understanding of the past and strike deep chords within us. They include his reuses, adaptations and reworkings of the ancient myths, such as those of his modest Hercules lifting Antaeus (the giant who had been immovably rooted to the earth) off the ground, included in the small bronze in *Procession*; of Atlas, an archetypal figure if ever, bearing the world on his shoulders (despite its weight, Kentridge never tires of showing the world on legs, broken or pierced); the winged horse Pegasus, the swiftest of all hybrids, capable of flying from land and across sea, ethereal and triumphant in his migratory hybridity (he appears most clearly in the small bronze version *Untitled III* (2007) pp153, 298 shown in *(Repeat) From The Beginning* at Goodman Gallery (Cape Town, South Africa) in 2008.

Time and again, in Kentridge as in Warburg, the ancient categories of 'Sacrifice', 'Dance', 'Triumph' and 'Lament' reappear. They represent some of the most basic human attempts to come to terms with, embody and symbolise the movements and emotions that are the signs of our lives and that keep us alive. They are not only individual, but collective, as Kentridge's great *Triumphs and Laments* and *Procession* testify. They bear witness to the same dauntless exploration of the overarching theme of life in movement.

In the insistent making of images and relating them to one another - with a constant appeal, hidden or not so hidden, to the ur-forms, both ancient and familiar, both rudimentary and playful, that unite them - Kentridge's lexica and ur-lexica bring Warburg's final project to artistic fruition. Yet their reach is more coherent than Warburg's montage, and no less suggestive. They are, after all, lexica of both images and words, images often *on* words, that are both artistic visions and indexical pointers to the many ways in which humanity is constituted by our indebtedness to other cultures, to other people's familiarities, as well as to our own; to ordinariness as well as to archetypality; to the alien and the exotic; to the barbarisms we reject and the exotic forms we consider chic. It is as if we are always transforming the Other into more harmless, but ever more colonialising exoticisms before which we must raise the alerts of scepticism in the face of covert and not so covert exploitation. Only by seeing these collections of images as atlases of affiliation, rather than of parcellation and domination, can we begin to understand the expansive curiosity that the crossing of borders opens up to all of us. That is the hope that Kentridge's art offers; that is the prospect it entails.

There is one more hope. The question of how to deal with the seemingly endless succession of images, whether microcosmically in the art of Kentridge, or macrocosmically in the digital world of our time, remains. Because it is so exceptional in its fantasy and its fertility of invention, and so attentive to the significance of gesture in civilisation, Kentridge's art is more than usually capable of drawing the attention of its viewers to its messages. The hope is that, in its appeal to our imagination and its call to our embodied selves, it will continue to make us pause amidst the distractions of speed, continuous movement and change of contemporary image production, and arouse us to reflection, self-awareness and understanding of what seems alien. Achieving that has now become the most difficult problem of all in art - and more so than ever when it comes to the art of our time.