

Kentridge, Mozart, Namibia... ***Black Box / Chambre Noir* in Berlin Guggenheim**

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The article deals with *Black Box/Chambre Noir* by William Kentridge, an art creation consisting of a miniature mechanized theatre, which had as commissioned work been exhibited at the *Deutsche Guggenheim* in Berlin. The artistic process and development of the art work is explored. Special attention is paid to the historical context and background, in relation to the animated video film screened onto the miniature theatre scene, as well as to the value and meaning of its accompanying music. The message being conveyed by the artistic creation as "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" is taken into account.

Kentridge, Mozart, Namibië... *Black Box / Chambre Noir* in Berlyn Guggenheim

Die artikel gaan oor *Black Box/Chambre Noir* deur William Kentridge, 'n kunswerk bestaande uit 'n gemeganiseerde miniatuurteater, wat as opdragwerk uitgestal is by die *Deutsche Guggenheim* in Berlyn. Die kunssinnige proses en ontwikkeling van die kunswerk word ondersoek. Spesiale aandag word bestee aan historiese konteks en agtergrond, in verhouding tot die ge-animeerde video film wat op die miniatuur teater se skerm geprojekteer word, asook oor die waarde en betekenis van die begeleidende musiek. Die boodskap wat deur die kunsskepping as "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" oorgedra word, word beoordeel.

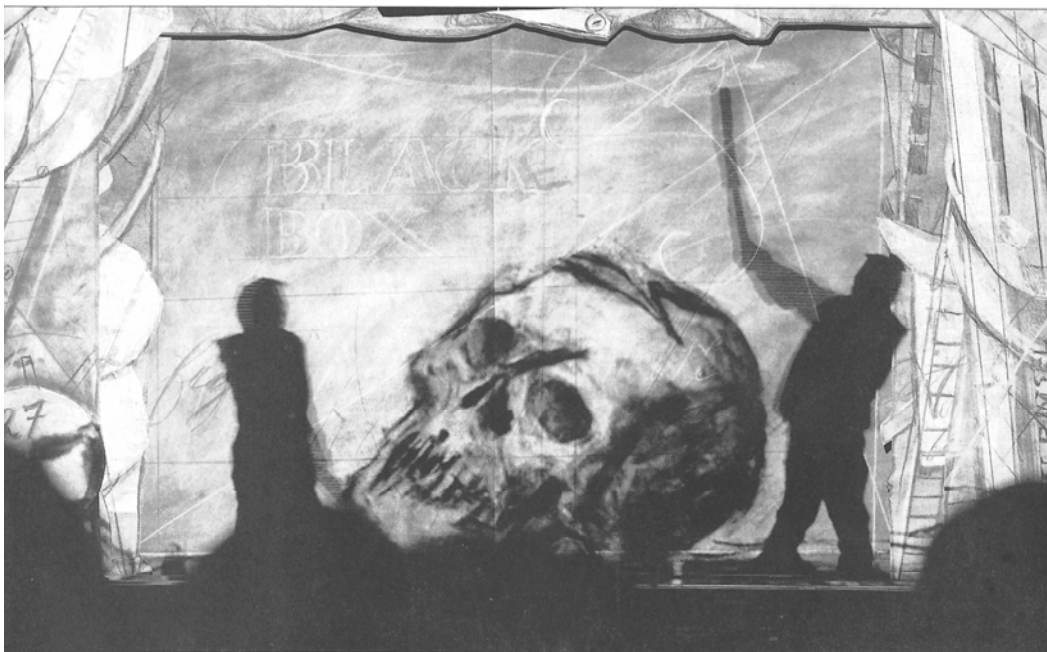


Figure 1

Symbolic representation in *Black Box/Chambre Noir* of the genocide and atrocities committed against the Herero population by the German forces under General Lothar von Trotha between 1904 – 1907. Copyright obtained from photographer: Brett Eloff

Receiving a commission to create a new work of art is usually a great source of inspiration for any artist. The artist, be it a visual, plastic, tonal creator, feels that there is a need for the artistic creation. A goal is set, while recognition and a material award for the hard work is guaranteed. With such a commission and proposed project theme, the artist should obviously be consulted. At times the theme can be rather nebulous, but with

the commissioning body expected to having done their homework, the scope and style of the end product should be predictable to a certain extent.

Recently the South African visual artist, William Kentridge, who lives in Johannesburg, received such a commission without restrictions as part of the Deutsche Bank and Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation's commissioning program for the German Guggenheim Museum in Berlin. This was to produce a new work of art to reflect on the occupation of German South West Africa during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Kentridge had decided to create a miniature mechanized theatre, consisting of an animated video film, kinetic sculptural objects, drawings and music. The art work was materialized and exhibited at the *Deutsche Guggenheim* on the main Berlin Boulevard, *Unter den Linden*, between 29 October 2005 and 15 January 2006. Almost no promotion on the exhibition was made in the artist's home country, South Africa,¹ and had it not been that the author coincidentally at the beginning of January had been lecturing right across the road, at the Humboldt University, this event might then even have gone unnoticed, at least to him. Although the theme of this work of art deals mainly with a neighbouring country, Namibia, the thematic context is so closely related to the South African historical perspective, that it warrants a closer investigation and discussion. One would thus through a better understanding of the topic arrive at a more in-depth evaluation of the intrinsic political, racial, sociologic and artistic problems and challenges encountered by the inhabitants of these two countries.

Kentridge had considered the term *black box* for the title of this work of art in three senses, namely a 'black box' theatre, a 'chambre noire' as it relates to photography, or as the 'black box' flight data recorder being used to record evidence in an airline disaster. This article will explore and evaluate the artistic process and development of the art work, taking the differing parameters contributing to the "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" into critical account. Special attention will be paid to the historical context and meaning of the "virtual" script in relation to the animated video film screened onto the miniature theatre scene, as well as to the accompanying music. The meaning and value of the piece, as a work of art, will be investigated. Questions will be asked and answered, as to what message, if any, is being conveyed by this artistic creation.

Historical context

A prerequisite for an artist before embarking on a project of this scale and magnitude, would be to devise a script, which Kentridge did not abide to, having in his artistic creations never been bound by the conventions of discipline. It was, however, for him necessary to do an historical research on the subject. During the latter part of the colonizing period in Africa the Imperial German government in 1884 started granting protectorate status to certain areas in Namibia, eventually calling the whole region *Deutsch Südwestafrika*.² Kentridge had decided, in his presentation to reflect on the background and history of the German colonial presence in Africa. In comparison to the other imperial powers of the period, German occupations were much more limited. With South West Africa, having become a German protectorate and the German settlers who through so-called legal acts increasingly encroached upon and expropriated the land of the Hereros, a local tribal community, trouble was brewing. These acts were mostly achieved through fraudulent treaties and usurious practices, causing the Hereros to fall into ever-increasing circles of debt, resulting in practices which inevitably caused losses of cattle and land for the Herero. With their frustration rising, the then Herero chief, Samuel Mahareru (1856³ – 1923), was pressured by his community to respond to the escalating injustices. In 1904 the chief ordered his sub-chiefs to carry out a directed attack against the ruling Germans. He gave explicit instructions to his sub-ordinates to avoid killing women, children, missionaries, English settlers, the Afrikaner Boers, and

other tribes. The German Kaiser, who was stunned by this attack, appointed General Lothar von Trotha (1848 – 1920) to counter strike. Von Trotha was renowned for his ruthlessness in suppressing revolts in East Africa and China.⁴

The resulting massacre of the Hereros, considered by many historians to be the first genocide of the twentieth century (should the genocide on the Afrikaner Boer and Black women and children by the British in South Africa at the turn of the century not be taken into account), resulted in a near annihilation of the tribe. In a wider context this could be seen as an initial mental preparation for the eventual genocide on the Jewish population in Europe by Adolf Hitler (1889 – 1945), taking place later in the century. To escape the ensuing massacre, many Hereros fled into the Omaheke desert in an attempt to reach safety, but the extreme harshness of the region's climate led to thousands of deaths. This added to the already significant toll of those killed directly by the German troops. The action continued until 1907.⁵ Despite objections by Germans living in the colony and in Germany to the extreme measures taken by General von Trotha, it had not been until 1905, after seventy-five percent of the Herero population was decimated, that the General was removed from command.⁶ The Union of South Africa conquered the region during the period of 1914-15, and received a mandate to govern South West Africa in 1920. After intensive guerrilla war activities between South Africa and the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), Namibia gained its independence in 1990.

Visual aspects

Unlike a film production, an artwork, as being described in this text, does not really need a detailed written out script. The artist can make do with a series of sketches or drawings as a means of creating unity in the configuration and creation of the work. For these drawings Kentridge, true to his style, makes use of, in essence, a very restricted technique, namely drawings with charcoal, coloured pastel and pencil (in this case often in red). As background for these sketches he usually combines second hand paper of found texts, including: lists of mines and shares; an Italian ledger book of circa 1920; a student of 1911 handwritten lecture notes on German law; a vintage Johannesburg street map of circa 1940; indices from French scientific notes; a French textbook of circa 1868, *La merveille de la science*; a 1910 edition of the British text, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*; a text on the relative value of gold coins; *Universale Tariffa* of circa 1833; *Chamber's Encyclopedia* of 1950; *Introduction to Telephony* textbook of 1934; a 1924 copy of *Cyclopedia of Drawing*; photocopies of advertisements featured in the German journal *Simplicissimus*; share accounts of gold mines; *Baedecker travel guide to Italy* of circa 1900; Georg Hartman's map of South West Africa of 1904; private correspondence from German South West Africa of 1911; photocopy of General von Trotha's 1904 order against the Hereros, from the Namibian national Archive; *Index and Gazetteer of the World*; *Stieler's Handatlas*, No. 59, of 1906; and *Statistics of Revenues and Debts of the Component States*.⁷

These drawings, vigorously reworked, have then been used as the primary basis for an animated film to be shown as part of the miniature mechanized theatre. In the film there are obvious traces left of erasure and highly visible pentimenti, suggesting the work's process and the ineradicably presence of the past.⁸ Through the artist's unique filmic process, not only using these drawings, but also combining and integrating his own footage of Namibia, archival photographs and excerpts from German colonial era film. In this concentrated and minute theatrical production the video showing becomes a sculptural object, integrating very cleverly and unobtrusively with other kinetic sculptural objects, stage décor and drawings, the moving mechanized figures and their cast shadows, as well as stage lighting. This results in a richly multi-layered work which calls into question notions of agency and complicity, atonement and grief. Taking the historical background into consideration, one realizes how

this relates to William Kentridge's South African identity, prompting him to question those notions mentioned.⁹

Music

In a much similar way as being practiced in commercial film making, music is being used to accompany the text and events in this work of art. As an appropriate gesture during the 250th anniversary year of the birth of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756—1791), extracts are used from one of the composer's operas. The opera, from which quotations are being used, is *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), the 1937 recording of Sir Thomas Beecham conducting a Berlin orchestra. Arias being used are Sarastro's aria "In diesen heil'gen Hallen"; fragments from the Queen of the Night's aria "Der Hölle Rache"; Pamina's aria "Ach ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden"; as well as the exchange between Papageno and Monastatos. The Johannesburg street singer, Alfred Makgalemele, gives a rendering of "Marsch der Priester". The soundtrack further contains such musical elements as a Herero lament, Herero praise song, traditional Namibian music for the musical bow, as well as original compositions by the Johannesburg based composer, Philip Miller.¹⁰

Evaluating Kentridge's *modus operandi*

William Kentridge has over the course of more than three years developed *Black Box/Chambre Noir*, a complex artistic installation and miniature theatre consisting of animated film, mechanized figures and drawings. Although much focus is placed on the technical development of the theatre and visual reproduction procedures, the contents deal with and reflect on some rather unpleasant aspects of Germany's colonial history in Africa. An evaluation will be given as to how Kentridge manages to simultaneously realize the unique potential of the miniature theatre as sculptural object, projection, and installation. Attention will be paid to the artist's political engagement, his sense of inquiry, whether historical, formal, or philosophical, as well as his deeply humane and collaborative approach to art and life.

Black Box/Chambre Noir is not the first artistic creation of this type by the artist, where he uses films composed of numerous charcoal drawings as an integrate part of the process. As examples works could be named like *Stereoscope* (1999), *Sleeping on Glass* (1999) and *Medicine Chest* (2000). It seems that Kentridge has found and is utilizing a winning recipe to create successful works of art which is in high demand on an international level. At this stage in his career, the question should be put whether this procedure has become a routine operation, or whether original artistic creativity is still involved in the process. Is Mr. Kentridge approaching, or is he becoming the personification of his alter-ego,¹¹ Soho Eckstein, a character he himself has created, and whom he obviously despises?

Criticism has been raised against traces of similarity in his drawings and a certain familiarity to what he had been producing in respect of drawings earlier on in his career.¹² Although many of Kentridge's strengths can be found in his utilization of intermedia, his films used as integral part of these multimedia productions are composed of exactly these series of repetitive charcoal drawings. These drawings have been modified, erased, and reworked into frames for projection. One of the great strengths of this miniature theatre installation at the Berlin exhibition, was the opportunity it offered to view the drawings first, and then observing them through various stages into the theatre projection. Kentridge claims that he uses neither storyboards nor scripts for his films, preferring to work on impulse and whim.¹³ This absence of thorough storyboarding and conceptual development does at times lead to one-dimensionality, or even showiness.

The video art work, *Zeno Writing* (2002), can be considered as a turning point in his career, where Kentridge emerges as a progressive and mature artist. He is suddenly released

from the narrative's naturalistic grip and the stereotype that have held him captive for almost two decades. These restrictions are now suddenly undermined through imaginative suggestion and expressive abstraction.¹⁴ Kentridge has managed by means of the film eye, to collapse the distinction between the human body and the filmic apparatus. As later in *Black Box/Chambre Noir* the artist searches for and crafts meaning through the lens of the camera, whether his own or that of an anonymous camera person of archival footage, revealing himself as a restless and searching performer.¹⁵ In this work the scope of the artist is revealed in his output through interdisciplinary terms, and not so much in the articulation of a conceptually complex narrative.¹⁶ When producing his films Kentridge creates approximately twenty to thirty charcoal drawings. Each one depicts a "scene" in which he draws, erases, and draws anew, capturing every change in a stop-frame filming of the modified drawing. The same procedure takes place with cut-outs, both still and animated. Eventually the resulting frames are edited together to create a six to seven minute animated film. The artist refers to his often intuitive drawing processes as "thinking aloud".¹⁷



Figures 2—4
Three scenes from *Black Box/Chambre Noir*, showing how the video projection in this miniature theatrical projection is being treated as a sculptural object, integrating very cleverly and unobtrusively with other kinetic sculptural objects, stage décor and drawings, the moving mechanized figures and their cast shadows, as well as stage lighting. Copyright obtained from photographer: Brett Eloff

Kentridge does not seem to have ever offered his films for consideration in terms of film as genre or discipline. These films can be conceptualized as artworks, even though the boundaries between art as film and film as art are often blurred. The sense of an articulated individualism and experimentation with new cinematic forms, as a manner of opposition to established genres, can be regarded as a remarkable achievement by the artist.¹⁸ The British writer, Anthony Burgess, has classified films in two categories, namely those with Class 1

and those with Class 2 qualities. He equates these classes with fictional writing. In a purely literary sense Class 1 fiction could be described as yearning towards a non-verbal or pre-verbal condition – that of direct presentation of character and actions without the intermediary of words. Therefore many Class 1 novels are better as films than as verbal constructs. In Class 2 fiction, on the other hand, the opacity of language is exploited; structure may have significance apart from mere plot, while adaptation to a visual medium invariably conveys little of the essence of the work. To Burgess Class 1 fiction is close to film, in contrast to Class 2 fiction being close to music.¹⁹

To my mind and feeling, William Kentridge in his animated films do approach or achieve the Class 2 category very closely. Film is mostly a popular art form which uses music to underline setting and action and to suggest unspoken currents of thought and feeling. Class 1 film will not permit music to be too original or even too interesting. In these category of films music should never intrude, and is permitted very few complete statements.²¹ The music used to accompany the Kentridge animated films, however, is not up to standard and representative of the Class 2 quality of the filmic work achieved by the artist in *Black Box/Chambre Noir*. The use of the 1937 Berlin recording of the Mozart opera, *Die Zauberflöte*, under the baton of Sir Thomas Beecham is dubious. This recording of a British conductor with mostly German musicians have almost no relevance with the music composed by Mozart, especially during the year of the 250th anniversary celebrations of his birth. An overpowering heaviness in and thick sound quality resembles Brahms more than Mozart. With so many excellent historically informed practice recordings of the composer’s music available on the market, there is no sense in utilizing an antiquated stylistic performance of this astonishingly beautiful opera. The musicians obviously did not have the necessary historical background at the time, and thus could not avail themselves of the necessary performance practice techniques, which would have enabled them to understand what Mozart’s music might have sounded like originally. This relationship with the European heritage and influence in Africa becomes even more important and revealed when it is realized that the opera was written in 1791, and furthermore quoting Kentridge that it happened at “The optimistic moment of the European Enlightenment, before Robespierre.”²² It would have been advisable and more reasonable to rather have used a reliable historically informed practice recording for this intricate art work. *Black Box/Chambre Noir* does not only deal with the inescapable truths about years of Eurocentric civilization striking into Africa, but also about apartheid, Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.²³

When the composer involved in this project, Philip Miller, reveals that he did not even know the Mozart opera so well beforehand,²⁴ it confirms the notion that his approach to and handling of the musical component of *Black Box/Chambre Noir* can be regarded as rather superficial. His layered potpourri of quotations of arias from the opera, these at times even electronically processed in a bad and amateurish manner, combined with extracts of field recordings of Namibian traditional music, and his own compositions very much based on sequences of I – IV – V traditionalistic harmonies, remains a mere accompaniment of entertainment value not up to par with the overall high artistic standard achieved in this miniature theatre production. Mr. Kentridge could afford himself a more professional team of musicians and advisors for musical guidance and support. In doing so his future art works in this vein could gain far greater meaning and value, thus approaching the ideals of Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883), of being able to create a real “*Gesamtkunstwerk*”.

Notes

1. An exhibition of *Black Box/Chambre Noir* has been arranged for May-June 2006 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery.
2. Jan-Bart Gewald. 1999. *Herero Heroes. A Socio-Political History of the Herero of Namibia 1890–1923*. Oxford: James Currey, p. 31.
3. Discrepancies occur regarding the date of birth

- of Samuel Maharero. *Wikipedia*. 2006. Samuel Maharero, available from:
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Maharero
 records it as 1856, while W.J. de Kock and D.W. Krüger (eds.). 1972. Maharero, Samuel. *Dictionary of South African Biography*, Vol. 11 C. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, p. 428, gives it as 1854.
4. *Wikipedia*. 2006. Lothar von Trotha, available from:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lothar_von_Trotha, p.1.
 5. Gerhardus Pool. 1979. *Die Herero-Opstand 1904 - 1907*. Pretoria: HAUM, p. 282.
 6. Maria-Christina Villaseñor. 2005. *William Kentridge: Black Box/Chambre Noir. Brochure of exhibition*. Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, p. 2.
 7. Footnotes, Brochure of exhibition.
 8. Villaseñor, p. 1.
 9. *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.
 10. Footnotes, Brochure of exhibition.
 11. Katrin Bettina Müller. 2004. Inconstant memory. *The international artist database, William Kentridge*, p. 2.
 12. Elfriede Dreyer. 2003. Views and (Re)Views. William Kentridge at the National Gallery in Cape Town: a retrospective exhibition. *De Arte*, 68, p. 50.
 13. Laurie Ann Farrell. 2002. William Kentridge. *African Arts*, p. 3.
 14. Dreyer, p. 51.
 15. Maria-Christina Villaseñor. 2005. Constructions of a Black Box: Three Acts with Prologue. *Catalogue of Exhibition*. Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, p. 85.
 16. Dreyer, p. 50.
 17. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. 1998. *William Kentridge*, exhibition catalogue. Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts, p. 152.
 18. Dreyer, p. 51.
 19. Anthony Burgess. 1982. *This Man and Music*. London: Hutchinson, p. 156.
 20. *Op. cit.*, p. 93.
 21. Gwen Ansell and Judy Seidman. 2006. Enlightenment's shadow. *The Weekender. Weekend review*, May 13 – 14, p. 1.
 22. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.
 23. *Op. cit.*, p. 1.
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