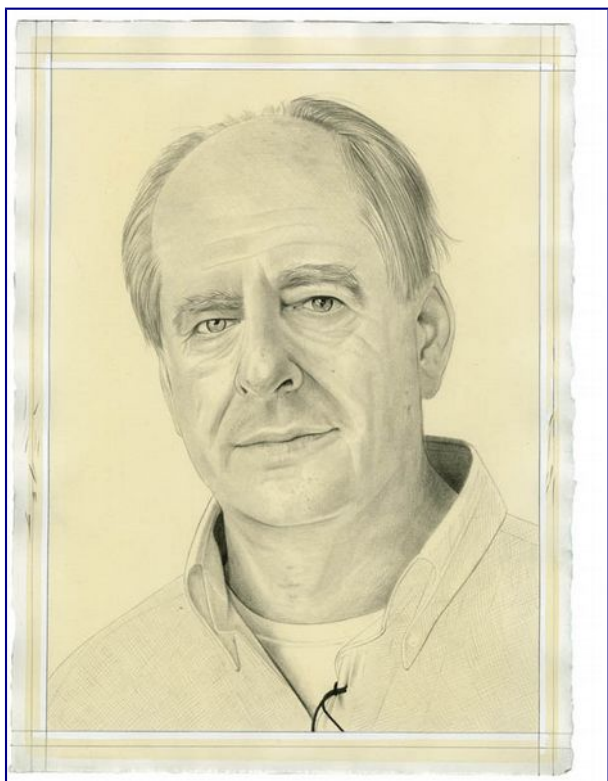


<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2016/05/art/william-kentridge-with-ann-mccoy>**INCONVERSATION**

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

with Ann McCoy

William Kentridge's *Triumphs and Laments* opened April 21 – 22, 2016, in Rome. On a 550-meter-long, ten-meter-high section of the Tiber embankment wall between Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini, eighty figures, pulled by power washing from the grime on the walls, depict Rome's greatest victories and defeats from mythological times to the present. Two musical groups, representing a diverse range of instruments and traditions with scores by composer Philip Miller, will process with puppeteers, musicians, and singers from Europe and Africa. Their shadows are projected over the figures on the wall using a series of large lights mounted at the river's edge. This is William Kentridge's largest production to date, and this Project for Rome is presented by TEVERETERNO, which was co-founded by Kristin Jones, a Fellow with the American Academy in Rome (AAR). Kentridge sat down with AAR Fellow Ann McCoy for a public conversation at the Academy, sponsored by the AAR in cooperation with the *Brooklyn Rail*.



Portrait of William Kentridge. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Marc Shoul.

Ann McCoy (Rail): Looking at your monumental figures on the wall along the Tiber quays, I kept thinking of Heraclitus and his quote about flux: "One never puts one's foot in the same river." We see the Tiber as Oceanus, the ancient time and river god, reflecting images of Rome past and present, stenciled and power-

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washed onto your timeline on the embankment wall. The second concept from Heraclitus, which came to me as I was looking at your Capitoline She-Wolf and her corresponding skeleton, is enantiodromia, where something can transmogrify into its polar opposite, or into its shadow. We see this often your work: life into death, a utopian fantasy morphing into a *danse macabre*; or Soho, the capitalist randlord melting into Felix. I can think of few artists who do this in the same way that you do—perhaps Francis Bacon with his obsession with Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X, or Tarkovsky's Domenico delivering his lament on the scaffolding beside Rome's Marcus Aurelius statue and then dying by self-immolation. Perhaps Krzysztof Wodiczko comes close when he projects an image of a wheelchair-bound veteran onto an equestrian stature of George Washington. I want to start with your version of shape-shifting, where something can go into its polar opposite: life into death, or triumph into lament.

William Kentridge: Good, we can start there. I'm sure we will go many different places. In the field of drawing, transformation and metamorphosis are a kind of given: you start with either an empty sheet of paper, or, in the case of the walls of the Tiber, the black surface of the stones. The first mark you make is already a beginning of transformation: to pull one image either out of the sheet of paper or out of the wall. If you continue with that activity (so it's an activity rather than a photograph; it's not a moment, it's a physical practical activity), once you find your first image you're already on the process of finding a second, or changing it into another. So the idea of transformation and metamorphosis is very much built into the mechanics of drawing. If you photograph each of the stages of making a drawing, then what you have is a kind of crude animation. So it's almost a given, it's something that the technique itself brings, rather than an idea that you bring to it. The broader question is about metamorphosis and object changing from one form into another, and one thinks of the ultimate expression of that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which are people turning into trees, birds, objects, figures. In Ovid, they almost always have to do with a panic or an emergency. There's an emergency, the solution to which is transforming into something else; it's a response to it. So if one thinks of (I can't remember, you would know the mythology much better) a woman who, to get back at her husband, feeds him her own children.

Rail: Cronus the Titan? No, his wife objected to infanticide. Pelops?

Kentridge: There we go: Pelops. He takes his great curved sword in a rage when he discovers that he has been fed his own children, he chases her through the halls of the palace; and she, in her panic to escape, becomes a bird and flies out and goes into the forest—and then sits in the eaves of the palace. He, in his rage, also running through the halls of the palace, turns into, I think, a wood hoopoe and his curved sword becomes a curved beak. So there is this transformation of a classic metamorphosis, but it is also a kind of a response to an impossible situation. I hadn't really thought of the hungry wolf being that kind of metamorphosis or transition, but I'm sure it does relate to it.

Rail: I was thinking of *Tide Table*, where you have Soho sitting on the beach in the lawn chair watching the cattle turn into skeletons, very much like the horse and the Capitoline She-Wolf in your Tiber piece.

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Kentridge: The cattle in the film *Tide Table* are fat cattle on the beach (which you see in the Trans Sky in South Africa—there are cattle on the beach, it's not an invented image) that then turn into the skeletal, having to do with obviously different things. On the one hand, it's the dream of the Pharaoh, which is interpretive of the fat cows and the thin cows and what that means for the future of Egypt. But it also has to do with an image of AIDS, which was, in South Africa, described as the condition of thinning, being the thin sickness, that people would get thinner and thinner and thinner. So it is a way of describing that kind of panic too. But it is the shift from the very fat, self-congratulatory wolf in Rome, which one still sees at the top of the Campidoglio three or four times—the Etruscan wolf (I think they're 16th-century) with the twin babies—in the mayor's office in one form, on top of the pillar outside the senate, and somewhere else in the building. The idea of the skeletal wolf is not a new idea. The skeletal wolf as a kind of a comment on Rome one finds clearly in Dante, where, in the very first Canto, the skeletal wolf is encountered. My Dantesque Italian is no good, but the words are to the effect of: "A wolf that has become this thinned-out animal by the strength of the passions around it." It's a long answer to your question about transformations; it is one of the key raw materials that I work with. And one can say it comes really simply: you can either understand the world very simply as a series of facts, like a photograph, here is an image of the world and it's a fact as we do it, and that fact is always provisional, effect is always in the process of becoming something else.

Rail: I was also thinking of utopian fantasies. For the Istanbul Biennial you did work on Trotsky's exile. In American we have these old Trotskyites, Leo Strauss disciples, who've now become frightening neocons. Trotsky's utopian fantasy of perpetual revolution has switched into a program of perpetual war for American supremacy.

Kentridge: The important thing to understand is that in an individual psychological way there are transformations that people have, but that there are also circumstances in society that go through extraordinary transformations, not from nowhere, but as if there's an engine inside that is producing them. The transformation in South Africa from the nationalist, Apartheid-era government to the government we have now does not come from nowhere; it's an unfolding of events and movements. The most important thing to understand is that engine of transformation, rather than the moments of different facts. You can find that the disasters we have in South Africa now with a large section of the government can be traced back to movements that were turning much, much earlier and that will turn into something else, as well.

Rail: Looking at your small drawings for the monolithic figures on the Tiber wall, I kept thinking of your wonderful German Expressionist-style drawings at Marian Goodman that were around twenty inches, but were projected thirty feet high at the Metropolitan Opera for *Lulu*. They retained the intimacy of a psychological portrait even when projected on the vast height of the stage.

Kentridge: I'm very interested in what happens to scale, and we were very used to it with projections. We were used to knowing that we were starting with a negative 35mm piece of film and that it's going to project to the size of a huge cinema with 800 people inside.

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Recently we are very much used to a contraction of images, we have a drawing of a huge size and we look at it on our iPhone, and then our screen becomes this tiny image. But the shift of scale you get with projections: the logic of a projection is one single, minute singularity of light—which you need to have for good focus—which goes through it and expands the image. So the expansion of the image is the given of all projections. The second thing is that obviously, if one's thinking about wall-size images, there is a tradition of large-scale oil painting and even fresco painting. Commenting as a non painter—you cannot make a huge charcoal drawing, because there's no way to glaze the final thing; you *can*, but it's very cumbersome. Whereas to work with a small drawing that finds its expansion either in a projection, or in other cases in the weaving of a tapestry (which is kind of like a projection that you can roll up and carry under your arm) or in the case of the project on the Tiber, what started off as a series of small drawings in the studio could be envisaged as projections, and they could have been physically projected. On April 21 we have the procession and concert to launch the frieze wall, which is the second part of the whole project. We will be working with live performance with shadows and hoping to cast moving shadows the size of the wall—but again with this enormous expansion you can do with projection.

Rail: Many designers use photographic images, manipulated through Photoshop, animation programs and other computer processes, and collage them together. Some have a contemporary, hard, cold “digital” look. In the early days of projection, places like the Deutsche Oper used Linnebach lantern projectors with hand-painted slides, or a painted glass disc or cylinder, that projected flames shooting across the stage, etc. Amazingly, you're one of the few people who can draw so well so that you can do much of an opera with hand-drawn images. Certainly you use photomontage, snippets of film, and typography but generally most of the images are hand-drawn or, in some cases, made from hand-torn paper. It gives your productions a greater psychological dimensionality and unique layering—they feel uniquely personal.

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William Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*. Photo © Adine Sagalyn.

Kentridge: I think it is kind of a given that projections came after drawing, so the drawing was the starting point and it is the language. But there's something else about the making of it, which has to do with a kind of crudeness and the gaps that come with not working entirely in a perfect digital world—even though, obviously, the films are digitized, edited digitally, and projected digitally. It's not a question of still using a 35mm projector or even a glass slide in the theater. It's a lesson that's hard-learned—and again, not one that I can take any credit for—that if you're projecting from the front, from where that projector is, onto different surfaces on the stage, on a flat screen, in front of it there might be a piano and a cupboard and a bed and a staircase, and obviously the projection hits it in different ways. If you're sitting exactly where the projector is, the images are still coherent. One of the problems we had was what happened to the poor people sitting out of that central line of projection: they start seeing the parallax and that a person's face that is perfect when you're looking from the center—suddenly you see a gap or you see it overlapping depending on what your angle is. You have something that should move seamlessly from one image across into the next screen and there's actually a gap in the middle. And it took a while to understand that that was not a fault for us to struggle against, but to actually understand that in that very gap and bad parallax and shattering of the image was actually an important part of the interest but also that's where the meaning starts to emerge. We'll see it on the river when we do our shadows because, in fact, there are a series of lights along the edge of the river, but you are quite close to the lights. The people walking will actually keep going in and out of the light, even though on the wall behind the lights will join up and meet. There'll be a series of rough disruptions; it's not going to be a seamless shift. As an audience, it alerts you to what you're seeing, because it makes you aware of the work you're doing in constructing and completing the images that are laid.

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Rail: The Yale theater design students build a lot of scale models. I told them about the two mechanized set models in your retrospective at MoMA for the *Magic Flute*. You use many types of projection—rear projection and front projection (that created the illusion of the layering and heightened perspective of the Baroque stage), but your layers are constantly moving. With your scale models, one could really understand how you create this phenomenal dimensionality. The same layering happens on the Tiber with the wall drawings, the moving figures with puppets, and their shadows on the wall.

Kentridge: The scale model is one of the pleasures of working and it's a key starting point. When we first start on a project we'll gather six or eight people—the costume designer, the set designer, the acting assistant, the lighting designer—and over the course of five days we'll build five very rough cardboard models in different ways, with a projector in the room. Models are the scale such that you can actually sit between the projector and the model to have a clear sense of what works. If you're drawing, it's about thinking aloud as you draw, allowing the line to talk back to you as you do it. And with a scale model, in a way, it's the cardboard doing the same thing. It's actually allowing yourself to be surprised and to recognize things you don't anticipate as they emerge. For me, that's a completely vital part of the process. In the end, sometimes a very beautiful, detailed model would be built by the theater for their technical staff to know how to build a full model, but the rough cardboard versions, which are put together with masking tape and a glue-gun, are where our thinking about what the piece is really happens. And it's impossible for me to work on a theatrical project without it having that physical component.

Rail: I love the way that your *Nose* projections spilled out into the house. We always think of the Met as a contained stage, with heavy velvet curtains surrounding the presidium. The whole place has this dated look, with the gold-leaf ceiling, and those 1960s light fixtures that drop down. Suddenly, in the *Nose*, all this wonderful typography was spilling out over walls of the Met, and the whole space became alive.

Kentridge: I can think of no exceptions in which things that are really interesting have come about not as a good idea, but rather as a temporary failure. So, all the parts that spilled onto the edge of the Met—

Rail: Were an accident! [*Laughter.*]

Kentridge: Well, it was an accident in the format of the projector. We were getting around to cleaning it up and adding masks in to clear that all off, and instead at a certain point I said, "Hang on. Hang on. That's actually not so bad."

Rail: By going over the Met's velvet and leaf, the projections turned the 1960s theater into a Russian Constructivist happening!

Kentridge: So the key is not necessarily to have the good idea, because those are very few and far between, but to make a stretcher open to catching things that the work shows you or that come at the edges, that come at the margins, that are sort of the peripheral thinking of the project rather than the heart of it. And the periphery is always the interesting place.

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Rail: I love that in your studio you have “the room for failures.” Your megaphones remind me of the giant megaphones embedded in walls that Athanasius Kircher used to make statues speak. He would always try these crazy experiments, like translating hieroglyphs, that wouldn’t quite work out. From Kircher’s inventions for Baroque theater, his scientific obsessions, and experiments in optics—he seems to be an antecessor.

Kentridge: When we were starting on the *Refusal of Time*, a large project about our relationship to time, we tried different ways of making time material, taking something that is so evanescent and making it physical. Of course the starting point was working with Philip Miller, who is the other composer of that piece and of many other pieces, because music seemed like such an obvious way of making time palpable—you could slow it down, you could reverse it, you could sing a song backwards—and we wanted to work with the delays of a sound that started at one end of a room to the other. But the room had to become enormous; in fact we had to wait until we had the 500 meters of the bank of the Tiber between the Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini to have a 1.16-second delay from the sound made at one side and heard at the other side. So we tried it with hosepipes to make a sound at one end of a hose pipe and hoping you could find the delay at the other end. We tried to make an artificial embouchure with rubber piping, and to have a tuba that could play itself, so it could be like both a human lung breathing and a sound and keeping time. And we failed in many of these things. As soon as we announced “Let’s put it in a room of failures,” everybody working on the project said, “Well, I want to work on the failures. I don’t want to work on the successes.”

Rail: Your updates of Baroque gadgets remind me of Fellini using sheets of paper for the rolling sea in *And The Ship Sails On*. These old stage devices like ocean waves on rollers have a charm much new technology lacks. Your processional puppets are also from another time.

Kentridge: There are all of these different things that are kind of wonderful in themselves, and I think the fantastic thing about them is that you can see how they work. There’s a direct connection between seeing something and the fact that it still has the effect. You can see it’s a cylinder and it’s just someone turning the handle, but it also has the effect; you can’t stop seeing the sea arriving also. So I think there’s a whole other world to be done with. In the *Magic Flute* we used a lot of the idea of Baroque scenery, both because it is very good for projection and because it gives you kind of a quantum sense of perspective, of distance divided into finite nips and jumps of the different planes of distance.

Rail: I love the telescopic perspective of the Baroque stage.

Kentridge: It is also like what you see through binoculars—the world becomes a series of flat planes that shift behind. I did like being able to play with perspective, increasing and reducing it.

Rail: I love the megaphone in your work; people talked a lot about it in relation to political rallies where people have to use a megaphone. In *Refuse the Hour*, when Joanna Dudley sang Berlioz backwards into the megaphone, it was riveting. The megaphone will also appear in the processions on the Tiber.

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Kentridge: There's something fantastic about the change of sound that happens with a megaphone, but also they come from different sources as well—Max Beckmann's painting of death, and there are sculptures of angels in the Baroque with trumpets (which are like kind of megaphones) being used. But the point about the megaphones—and our megaphones generally are very simple aluminum cones—partly has to do with the joke about what modernism is, and the different trajectories of modernism, and of the trajectory of art in the 20th and 21st centuries, and the tradition we were taught at art school—and I'm not sure if it's still a primary one—was of the shift of Post-Impressionism, starting with Cézanne going through Matisse, crossing the Atlantic and ending with American abstraction, and history coming to an end with New York School paintings in the 1960s. That's the sort of Clement Greenberg trajectory of art. And I was interested in the ways in which one could still keep the modernist project, but keep it connected to the world. I looked for many different ways; like what happened with the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, with Max Beckmann, with what happened with Constructivism in Russia, for in South Africa it seemed vital too. It just seemed so impossible to have an art that was not connected to the world that we were in, but which should not just become a sentimental figuration that pretended that none the extraordinary things done by artists in the last hundred years had ever happened. So that was a broad project, and within that, one comes across Cézanne who says all of the world can be described in the terms of the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder. And I thought, yes, that is fantastic formulation, but there are geometrical solids that must be put to work. And the megaphone is Cézanne's cone being sent back out into the world, from the studio back out into the world. And the images of the spherical world are his sphere being carried and sent back into the world. So it's taking it but saying: the job is not done.

Rail: It's hard to see the megaphones and not think of those goofy Rudy Vallée movies where he's singing songs like Winchester Cathedral through the megaphone. Have you seen those?

Kentridge: I haven't, but I can imagine—

Rail: I'll send you a clip! [*Laughter.*]

Kentridge: Of course, the megaphone is a fantastic image, because you think about the places where the megaphone or the cone has been set to work. One thinks immediately of images of the Spanish Inquisition and of Goya's etchings of people wearing dunce caps, those conical dunce caps that they had to wear. And then you take it to the last fifty years and you think of China during the Cultural Revolution where there were all those self-criticism struggle sessions with people with the wrong class origin, or who made non-revolutionary statements, who were humiliated and criticized, and one of the things they had to wear were these conical dunce caps. If you think of the blaring of the truths of the revolution through the megaphone, and take that and just put it on your head you get the dunce cap and the silencing and the mute of the trumpet. So it's not that it has to have all those meanings, but there are all hovering around the edge of Cézanne's pure object, and for me the key thing is to not respect that purity: to not say it has to be one thing, to only see a cone when you see a conical object is kind of an act of violence against how we see and understand the world. Because we always see a megaphone, a dunce cap, all these different things.

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William Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*. Photo © Adine Sagalyn.

Rail: One of the things I love about your work is that you allow a kind of crazy synchronicity to come in. When you were making the projections for the *Magic Flute*, where you had an ant invasion in your home, and so you were, I guess, sitting at the kitchen table watching the ants parading around droplets of honey. I believe you took the sugar water and put it on a piece of paper and then you trained the ants to follow a configuration of sugar water and then used it for the projections, for the stars, right? Then you did a black to white reversal.

Kentridge: It's a synchronicity. The fact that you could have all these black dots of ants on a white sheet of paper which are eating sugar water—they're just black dots and you can see they're little ants. But as soon as you invert to the photographic negative so there are little white dots on a black sheet of paper, you do have these shifting stars. That's one element. The next is to actually learn the grammar of, or learn how to train, ants. And that's where the time in the studio actually happens. Its recognizing an idea and then working with the idea to get it to start to mean something, or to discover what its meaning is. So with the ants it had to do with the ants running around randomly and then I could clap my hands and then they'd immediately run into formation and form a centaur, or Scorpio, or a constellation. They had to do it within about one second for it to be right, and that took a while. Then, once it was learned, they would do it every time, and we could do whatever drawing, it would take a while, but then you'd [*Clapping.*] and there would be the drawing.

Rail: I had no idea. That's amazing. I love that!

Kentridge: Yeah. [*Laughter.*] I mean, it's completely both obvious—well, now maybe I won't tell you—but it does, it works that way very simply.

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Rail: I think that Georges Méliès would have been very jealous of your ant discovery—sort of like a flea circus, but more original.

Kentridge: The ants came when Méliès did his *Journey to the Moon*. There's a sequence of stars in the sky, and the seven sisters, the Pleiades, are there. And as in many of his films, the stars are represented as scantily clad women with *papier-mâché* crowns on swings, and they are little noticed, and these make the stars.

Rail: I love all those French chorus girls in his films.

Kentridge: So these ants also had to stand in as the chorus girls.

Rail: And not be costumed.

Kentridge: And they did not have to be costumed. Méliès is a good person to talk about, because he was in the fantastic position of not knowing how things were done, coming from the position of not knowing, which makes everything kind of possible. So when Georges Méliès was in his first year of making films, just after cinema had been invented, or developed, by the Lumière brothers, I think he made 400 films in his first year. And they're three minutes long, two minutes long, one minute long, but playing with every possible technique and allowing the studio to be a space of exploration and play.

Rail: He didn't have ants, but he did a wonderful film called *The Mermaid*. It's shot through a fish tank, with a gold fish swimming back and forth. I think maybe that's his version of the ants.



William Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*. Photo © Adine Sagalyn.

Kentridge: It is. And it works perfectly—because you just have someone behind the fish tank and you believe

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they're in the water, if they just move the right way, with the fish swimming in front.

Rail: I think of you as a Georges Méliès. He had this glass studio where he painted backdrops and made magic-show-inspired props. You do a lot of this in *Refuse the Hour* where you have that stage-painted, domestic interior and also the observatory. And I think that your studio must be sort of like his, with crazy contraptions, and puppets, and hand painted sets, and people dressed up.

Kentridge: It's not entirely unlike it—there's a big costume rail. There are two studios, there's one where I just do drawing, and that's in the garden of the house, and then there's a larger, more industrial space in the center of the city of Johannesburg, where there's space for workshops and theatrical rehearsals and music rehearsal and there is indeed a costume rail, with many flats waiting to be painted on or drawn on, or used. There is an increasing storage of raw material that does get used kind of as Méliès did. And Méliès was both the actor and the cameraman and the painter of the sets, and it's a kind of filmmaking—filmmaking where dream comes out of theater and vaudeville. To go back to the very beginning of what we were talking about at the start of our conversation, cinema was very much a development of ideas of performances of transformation, which had an older history: there were lots of older, different pre-cinematic devices that had different ways of showing transformation.

Contributor

[Ann McCoy](#)

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