William Kentridge
Five Themes
Teacher Resource Kit
Thursday 8 March – Sunday 27 May 2012
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Written by Susan Bye
Education Programmer
ACMI Screen Education

Thank you to Zart Art for
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WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: FIVE THEMES

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST

William Kentridge (1955-) is a South African animator, artist and performer who was born in Johannesburg, South Africa and has lived there for most of his life. He grew up in the shadow of apartheid, an unjust and racist system of segregation. Kentridge’s parents were human rights lawyers who resisted the injustice of the South African regime. Kentridge’s father defended many black political activists in court, including Nelson Mandela, the first president of post-apartheid South Africa. As a person of European heritage, Kentridge benefited from the privileges granted to the white South African population, but from an early age was aware of the inequality and violence at the heart of his society.

At university in Johannesburg he studied politics and African studies before studying art, specifically painting.

In the early 1980s, Kentridge went to Paris to study acting before working as an art director on television series and films. Kentridge has joked that, having failed as a painter, actor and filmmaker, he was ‘reduced to being an artist’.

EXPLORE

- You might like to listen to Kentridge describing his gradual development as an artist. He describes it as a negative process where he discovers what he is not good at but, in fact, the trajectory he describes is a positive one. He pursued interests and developed new skills until arriving at a point where this as all brought together in his art:
  http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/95/

- To find out more about the system of apartheid into which William Kentridge was born, visit this excellent website published by the African Studies Center at Michigan State University:
  http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/index.php

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: POLITICAL ARTIST

In the 1990s, Kentridge rose to prominence as an artist and animator. He achieved international recognition for a unique style of stop motion animation in which he erases, redraws and photographs minute changes to a single drawing. When the sequence has been completed, so too has the drawing.

In addition to what he has described as his ‘stone age’ animation style, Kentridge is constantly expanding his repertoire of forms and media. His body of work includes opera direction and stage design, theatrical performance, puppetry, collage, tapestry and sculpture.
Kentridge’s work has been described as a combination of the political and the poetic and is deeply intertwined with his experience of South African society and politics. While Kentridge’s parents and siblings have left South Africa, he has stayed in Johannesburg:

I have never been able to escape Johannesburg, and in the end, all my work is rooted in this rather desperate provincial city. I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and the films are certainly spawned by, and feed off, the brutalised society left in its wake.2

The dehumanising injustice of the apartheid era is an inescapable part of South African history and identity. Kentridge has described apartheid as an immovable ‘rock’ that can threaten to overwhelm him as an artist, and he contends with its enormous impact by approaching it obliquely. Kentridge’s art is political but neither certain nor dogmatic. He has commented that his job as an artist is to make drawings, not sense.3 Conscious of the violence and brutality that have historically accompanied certainty, Kentridge’s art is ambiguous, contradictory and made up of ‘uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings’.4

While Kentridge’s art is embedded in South Africa, its history and its politics, it also engages with history and human existence on a much wider scale. His work explores ideas relating to power, oppression, colonialism and dispossession. He is also fascinated by the construction of identity in relation to the self, the nation and humanity. Kentridge’s fascination with the layers of the past and the process of remembering and forgetting, is reflected most strikingly in his erased and redrawn charcoal animations but is very much part of his work as a whole.

Further Reading

EXPLORING THE EXHIBITION

THEME 1 – OCCASIONAL AND RESIDUAL HOPE: UBU AND THE PROCESSION

This first section of the exhibition examines the experience and aftermath of the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 1995, the year following the nation’s first democratic elections. The Commission provided a context for both victims and perpetrators to tell the truth about the violence and human rights abuses of apartheid. The Commission was constituted in the spirit of the new South Africa, as a way of bringing the truth to light and working towards a shared future based on the acknowledgement of guilt, the desire for atonement and a corresponding spirit of forgiveness.

Yet, however admirable the intentions of the Commission and however strong its commitment to the future, the revelations of the past were devastating and unrelenting. Moreover, many South Africans, including Kentridge, felt that the Commission’s commitment to bringing the truth to light failed to adequately take into account the basic principles of justice. The issues arising from this process were explored in the production Ubu and the Truth Commission, written by Jane Taylor and directed by Kentridge. In this production and in a wide range of related artworks, Kentridge
reflected on the brutality of power gone mad with reference to the absurd and tyrannical King Ubu, a character created by French playwright Alfred Jarry at the end of the 19th century.

This first section of the exhibition also introduces the image of the procession – a stream of figures weighed down by possessions. This is a recurring image in Kentridge’s work, as he explores South Africa’s traumatic history of loss and displacement alongside the universal experience of change, migration and relocation.

EXPLORE

In the director’s notes accompanying the play *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, William Kentridge described the distress caused by the amnesty process: ‘As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done, they get closer and closer to amnesty and it gets more and more intolerable.‘

- Research some of the work done on trauma and recovery.
- What does reconciliation mean?

REFLECT

- Do you think truth and transparency are more important than justice and making amends?
- How important is it that the wrongs of the past are brought to light?
  - Do you agree that this is essential to the process of reconciliation?
  - Why or why not?

**UBU TELLS THE TRUTH** (1997, SERIES OF ETCHINGS)

The grotesque figure of Ubu not only works as a metaphor for the brutal absurdity of the policy of apartheid but also for its poisonous aftermath. In a series of drawings, *Ubu Tells the Truth*, Kentridge depicts Ubu as split between the monstrous public figure drawn in chalk and an internal naked self, who tries to escape or wash off the consequences of his actions. These works highlight the importance of personal responsibility and suggest that we cannot justifiably distance ourselves from our actions.

RESPOND

- Focus on the image below from *Ubu Tells the Truth*.
- What is it suggesting about the relationship between the public and private figure of Ubu?
- Does feeling bad about your actions in any way exonerate you? Why or why not?
- Kentridge often works in black and white, using a range of media to tell a story. Describe the techniques used in this image.
- Why do you think Kentridge might choose to work in black and white?
UBU TELLS THE TRUTH (1997, MOVING IMAGE PROJECTION)

This film is a combination of Kentridge’s signature animation style, puppets, photographs and documentary film footage.

Working with material created for the production of Ubu and the Truth Commission, Kentridge not only holds us accountable for our actions but for our failure to act. The monstrous Ubu appears as a clumsy shadow figure moving behind a backlit screen, while the camera on the tripod becomes the centre of attention.

Kentridge’s drawings of murder and torture victims punctuate footage of anti-apartheid protestors being charged by security police and, through the image of the camera, we become implicated in the violence we are watching.

While Ubu Tells the Truth forces us to reflect on the accountability of the onlooker or witness, its violence is hard to watch. For many South Africans, this was the effect of the stream of revelations emanating from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this work Kentridge asks how it is possible to respond to and absorb the ‘implications of what one knew, half knew, and did not know of the abuses of the apartheid years’.

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RESPOND

- Watch this work and describe the range of media and techniques used. How does each medium add to the overall work?
- The camera on the tripod has been described as the protagonist of this work. What does this mean? How does this work?
- This work demands a response, asking the viewer to reflect on the responsibilities of ‘looking’. How does it do this?

**PORTAGE** (2000, CONCERTINA COLLAGE IN GLASS CASE)

In *Portage*, Kentridge explores the theme of displacement though the image of the procession. He presents a never-ending line of refugees carrying their possessions from one place to another but never arriving.

With the image of the procession, Kentridge reflects on the South African experience of colonisation but this image also connects with the universal experience of exile and displacement. Although Kentridge reflects on the universality of this experience, each figure in the procession is represented as an individual.

**RESPOND**

Kentridge has used torn black paper to create the figures in *Portage*. Yet, these silhouetted figures are highly individual.

- Choose one of these figures and describe what it is that makes it distinctive.
- What kind of experience do you think this figure adds to the procession?
- Take a closer look:
  - What forms the background of Kentridge’s procession?
  - Why do you think Kentridge chosen to present the procession in this way?
  - Why do you think Kentridge has folded the sheets into a concertina?

**CREATE**

- Create your own Kentridge-inspired procession.
- The experience of change, loss and displacement is central to most people’s lives.
  - How would you represent your own experience through the image of the procession?
  - Who/what would your procession be made up of?
  - What media would you use?

**SHADOW PROCESSION** (1999, 35MM ANIMATION TRANSFERRED TO VIDEO)

The animation *Shadow Procession* makes dramatic use of the silhouette. As these figures trudge onwards bearing their burdens, the impression is one of universal exile.

Yet, while Kentridge represents loss and dislocation as part of the human condition, the procession is always grounded in the grim reality of South Africa’s violent history.
RESPOND

- The silhouetted figure of the monstrous figure of Ubu breaks into this procession of jointed paper.
  - What is the effect of this sequence?
- As well as the jointed paper figures, Kentridge’s procession is made up of images in silhouette of the family cat, toys, a coffee pot etc.
  - How do these figures change the mood of the work?
- Sound and music are central to this work.
  - What kinds of sound effects and music does Kentridge use?
  - How do they affect our response to, and our understanding of, the procession?

REFLECT

- This section of the exhibition is entitled ‘Occasional and Residual Hope’.
  - What do you think this means?
  - How do you think this title relates to the themes explored in this section of the exhibition?
  - Can you suggest an alternative title that would similarly reflect the issues at stake in Kentridge’s work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?
- In what ways do the themes and issues explored by Kentridge in this section of the exhibition relate to your own experience?
  - How do the issues he explores connect with the experience of Australians?
**THEME 2 – THICK TIME: SOHO AND FELIX**

This section of the exhibition focuses on a series of nine animated film works portraying the characters Soho and Felix, each of whom reflects an aspect of Kentridge.

These animations feature Kentridge’s distinctive stop motion animation technique. Instead of using storyboards, he commences with an image that interests him, letting the animation take shape in a process of discovery.

Unlike traditional cel animation where each frame involves a new drawing, Kentridge begins each sequence with a charcoal drawing which is then erased or redrawn in a series of tiny changes. Because his changes leave marks, his work bears with it the memory of what has gone before:

> These smudges and shadows reflect the way in which events are layered in real life – how the past affects the present through memory.⁷

For Kentridge, the present is inextricably connected with the past out of which it has been produced. Rather than wanting to produce a work that is complete and conclusive, he foregrounds the history of its creation:

> The imperfect erasures of the successive stages of each drawing become a record of the progress of an idea and a record of the passage of time.⁸


These films explore the public and personal experience of living in South Africa during a period of great change. The earlier films reflect on the final stages of the apartheid era and later films explore the challenges of coming to terms with the past.

**REFLECT**

- When Kentridge exhibited the first of these films, he didn’t exhibit the drawings. He now considers they are interrelated in important ways, each only existing because of the other.
  - How do the drawings add to our understanding of the film and vice versa?
- When Kentridge works on an animation, he begins with an image or an idea and then sees where that takes him.
  - How does this fluidity affect the way that Kentridge explores ideas and themes?
- What is process-driven art?
- Kentridge has said that a challenge for him as an artist is ‘to keep clarity at a distance’.
  - Why would an artist want to be less than clear?

**RESPOND**

- What is the effect of the ‘ghost images’ in Kentridge’s animations?
- How does Kentridge’s limited colour palette contribute to his exploration of the themes of apartheid, memory and the past?
- Music is integral to this series of animations and is used to evoke mood and add meaning.
When you watch these animations think about what the music is adding to your response.

Be aware of the changes in the style and rhythms of the music.

Focus on one animation and find out about the music used and where it comes from. Why do you think Kentridge has used each piece of music in the way that he has? Explain.

**JOHANNESBURG, 2nd GREATEST CITY AFTER PARIS** (1989)

The first work in the series, *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*, introduces the characters of Soho Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum. Soho is a wealthy and ruthless industrialist who is contrasted with the emotional and artistic Felix.

Distinguished by his pinstriped suit, Soho is associated with the bustling metropolis of Johannesburg, while the naked Felix is less substantial and is depicted in relation to the landscape that surrounds Johannesburg, devastated by mining and industrialisation.

These two characters are defined by their difference from each other, but they are the opposite sides of the same coin, the other’s shadow self. These two characters are connected within the narrative through the character of ‘Mrs Eckstein’, Soho’s wife and Felix’s lover. Emerging as a fourth character in this work is the endless line of black workers, exiled to the wasteland that lies on the edges of the city.

**RESPOND**

- Why do you think Kentridge has given the animation this title?
- Describe the different landscapes that the characters in this animation inhabit.
  - How are these very different landscapes connected?
- How would you describe the procession of black workers?
  - What is the effect of the music that accompanies them?

**REFLECT**

- Soho looks like William Kentridge, while Felix suggests the artist’s younger self.
  - Why has Kentridge inserted his own image in this work?
  - Why would Kentridge, the artist, choose to draw this connection between himself and a greedy and unimaginative businessman?
  - What aspects of Kentridge’s description are portrayed in *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*?
  - How does Kentridge’s account of Johannesburg contribute to our understanding of *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*?
  - In what ways is Johannesburg ‘a complete fiction’? How is this idea represented in Kentridge’s animation?
**SOBRIETY, OBESITY AND GROWING OLD** *(1991)*

This is the fourth film in the series of *9 Drawings for Projection* and continues the narrative and themes woven through *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*.

Kentridge returns to the relationship between Felix and Mrs Eckstein and explores the impact on Soho of the loss of his wife.

Soho is a man used to success and, unlike the fragile Felix, is used to making his presence felt. However, in this animation, Soho’s sense of loss and loneliness is so intense, the built world he has constructed around himself disintegrates: ‘the buildings of Johannesburg literally melt and crumble – they are erased’. ⁹

**RESPOND**

- How are the characters of Soho and Felix depicted in this animation?
- What is the effect of the blue of the water in this landscape of black and white?
- Kentridge’s animation technique in these films involves making (and then photographing) many infinitesimal changes to the same drawing.
  - Describe how this affects the ‘look’ of the animation.
- How does the music featured in this animation contribute to the mood and the impact of the animation?
  - Describe the changes in music and musical styles.

**EXPLORE**

- Find out what was happening in South Africa at the time Kentridge made this animation.
  - How are these changes explored in the film?
  - How does the character Soho deal with change?
  - How is Soho’s connection to the outside world challenged?
  - How does this affect Soho’s understanding of who he is?

**REFLECT**

- A distinctive aspect of Kentridge’s animation technique is the way that ‘remnants of successive stages remain on the paper, and provide a metaphor for the layering of memory’. How do these reminders of what has gone before contribute to the themes of loss, loneliness and alienation in *Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old*?
- Focus on the drawing on the next page: *Her Absence Filled the World*.
  - How does Kentridge use text in this film?
  - What is the effect of this particular use of text?
  - Compare this image of Soho with the way that Soho is depicted in *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*.
  - What is the significance of Soho facing away from us?
HISTORY OF THE MAIN COMPLAINT (1996)

This is the sixth film in the series and involves a reflection on and response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This film features Soho Eckstein who is lying unconscious in hospital and is examined by multiple versions of himself. The examination that Soho undergoes echoes the investigation into the abuses of apartheid.

Soho’s examination is intercut with the view through the windscreen of Soho’s car as he drives through the night. As he drives, he witnesses scene after scene of brutal violence, all of which register on his own body. He then hits a man with his car. The body is flung against his windscreen and, in response to the impact of this memory, Soho is jolted out of his coma. However, rather than changing Soho, this moment of truth seems to bring his openness to other people’s pain to an end.

RESPOND

- What is the effect of the multiple Soho figures that gather around Soho’s hospital bed?
- How is the idea of empathy explored in this animation?
- Describe what happens when Soho wakes up.
Think about the use of sound as well as image.

Throughout the animation series, water relates to emotional connection and healing.
  - What does the bowl of water in Soho’s room suggest? (Think about its size and position in relation to the patient.)

REFLECT

- Kentridge has said ‘I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings.’
  - Focus on the ending of *History of the Main Complaint* with these comments in mind.
  - How does the unexpected bleakness of Soho’s ‘awakening’ demonstrate Kentridge’s vision of his role as a political artist?

- What do you think the title of this animation means?
  - What do you think ‘the main complaint’ might be?
  - What does the title add to the viewing of this work?

  - Do you agree?
  - What are the responsibilities of the artist?

CREATE

- Experiment with drawing in charcoal. Add a dash of colour. Think about the way a fragment of colour dominates a primarily black and white drawing.


- Don’t be too ambitious: focus on the process rather than the finished product.

- Experiment with white chalk on black paper.

- Try working with a blackboard.
THEME 3 – PARCOURS D’ATELIER: THE ARTIST IN THE STUDIO


7 Fragments for Georges Méliès is a suite of films that demonstrate Kentridge’s fascination with the process of making art. Kentridge often uses his own body and image in his works and in this series of films he uses his body to explore his practice as an artist.

These works pay tribute to Georges Méliès, an early filmmaker renowned for his pioneering experimentation with cinematic effects. Kentridge responds to Méliès’ exploration of the possibilities of the new medium of cinema through techniques such as running the camera in reverse, using time lapse and multiple film exposures. Méliès was a showman who had no interest in filmic realism but instead drew attention to the process of experimentation.

Méliès’ most celebrated film is A Trip to the Moon (1902) where a group of astronomers are taken by rocket to the moon where they meet the monstrous Selenites who disappear in a puff of smoke when poked by the astronomers’ umbrellas.

Delighting in the energy and inventiveness of this classic film, Kentridge constructed Journey to the Moon, a homage to A Trip to the Moon using a range of unexpected props: a coffee pot is a substitute for the rocket and an espresso cup becomes a telescope. In his Journey to the Moon, a blank piece of white paper and the espresso cup telescope allude to Méliès’ famous image of the rocket landing in the eye of the moon.

For Kentridge, Méliès’ allure lies in the way that he highlighted and extended the artifice of filmmaking. Both artists draw the viewer’s attention to ‘the process of seeing’. Méliès holds a particular appeal for Kentridge, because of the way he participated in every facet of his creation, painting the backdrop, performing in front of it and filming it.

The playful films exhibited in this section of the exhibition are not so much about the illusion itself but about the act of creating an illusion or special effect. The aim is not to mystify the audience but to share the fun of playing with perception and representation.

EXPLORE

  - Watch the video and think about what Kentridge means by ‘walking and stalking an image’.

REFLECT

- Kentridge has described the studio as ‘like an enlarged head’. He argues that the physical act of ‘pacing in the studio is the equivalent of ideas spinning round in one’s head’.

FREE FOR EDUCATIONAL USE - Education Resources - William Kentridge: Five Themes
Do you think that making art requires a different kind of thinking?
Is it possible to think with your hands?
- How important is play to being creative?
- How does Kentridge address viewers in these films?

RESPOND

- Think about the way we experience the delight of Kentridge’s illusions while also being alerted to the trickery involved in creating them: ‘we see Kentridge save drawings and books (from his drawings), in full knowledge that the artist, to achieve this effect, had to destroy or deface those drawings or books’.  
- Focus on one of Kentridge’s ‘fragments’ and describe the relationship it forms with the viewer.
- How does our knowledge of the destruction involved in making, for example, Invisible Mending, affect our response to it?

CREATE

- In these studio-based works, Kentridge combines animation and live action in unexpected ways. Use a digital camera to experiment with some of the range of effects that Kentridge explores.
- Explore the filmic and photographic possibilities of a range of everyday items.
THEME 4 – SARASTRO AND THE MASTER’S VOICE: *THE MAGIC FLUTE*

The focus of this section is on three major works produced in connection with Kentridge’s 2005 production of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. This production gave Kentridge the opportunity to combine his work as an artist with his past experience with set design and his lifelong love of opera.

Initially, when invited to design and direct a full-dress opera, Kentridge was concerned that his process-driven practice (responding to the moment rather than any fixed plan) would not be suited to such a task. How would he construct a complete and coherent vision of an opera production that could be communicated to the many people involved in putting on a full scale opera? He solved this problem by spending months developing his ideas in his studio and then working intensively on the staging with a four-person team comprising set designer, costume designer, assistant director and video director. The film installation *Learning the Flute* emerged from this planning period.

*The Magic Flute* is a comic and fantastical opera in which the light of reason embodied by Sarastro, the Prince of Light, takes on and defeats the darkness of ignorance and superstition in the form of the Queen of the Night.

In exploring this theme, Kentridge became fascinated by the idea of the photographic negative, an idea explored in *Learning the Flute* by shifting between black charcoal drawings on white paper and white chalk drawing projected onto a blackboard.

Kentridge suggests that the dark and light aspects of human nature are interrelated in the same way as the negative and positive versions of a photograph.

The installation *Preparing the Flute* is an adaptation of a model stage created in the planning stage of the opera production. ‘This theatre in miniature … comprises a computerized lighting system with front and rear projections, a soundtrack, and filmed footage from the staging of the opera.’ The installation concludes with an explosion of light marking Sarastro’s triumph.

After completing *Preparing the Flute*, Kentridge continued to reflect on the ideals associated with the character Sarastro, who personifies certainty and order.

The installation *Black Box* is like the negative version of *Preparing the Flute*, and highlights the connection between the ideals of reason and progress and the violence of colonialism.

EXPLORE

Mozart’s opera was written during the period in the history of European thought referred to as the Enlightenment.

- Find out more about this period and its ideals.
- According to Kentridge, ‘*The Magic Flute* is about the Enlightenment and its limits and those not eligible for it, like Papageno and Monostatos.’
  - Why aren’t these characters eligible for enlightenment?
  - Why is this a problem?
- *Black Box* explores the dark underside of the ideals of the Enlightenment. Kentridge points out that colonialism in Africa was inspired by the idea of ‘bringing enlightenment to the
Dark Continent’ and in *Black Box*, he draws attention to the savagery of the colonial forces, focusing on the genocide of the Herero people by German troops.


**RESPOND**

- Sarastro is the Prince of Light who prevails at the end of *The Magic Flute*. However, for Kentridge, true knowledge requires awareness of the coexistence of good and evil and of dark and light.
  - How does Kentridge express this understanding through his artwork? (Think about things like his use of black and white and his focus on the shadow.)
- How many different media and forms does Kentridge use in creating *Black Box*?
  - Focus on each of the elements of this work and consider what it adds to the work as a whole.
- All three of the projection installations in *The Magic Flute* suite explore the themes of light and dark and good and evil through the image and/or idea of the camera.
  - Explain how this is done in each of the works.
- ‘...Kentridge considers the term “black box” in three senses: a “black box” theater, a “chambre noire” as it relates to photography, and the “black box” flight data recorder used to record information in an airline disaster.’
  - How do these three meanings contribute to Kentridge’s exploration of the traumatic consequences of colonialism?

**REFLECT**

- One of the most charming features of *Preparing the Flute* is the animated rhinoceros, while the rhinoceros in *Black Box* provides a confronting reminder of the human capacity for cruelty.
  - What is the effect of watching *Black Box* after *Preparing the Flute*?
- What is the place of music in each of these works?
  - What is the viewer’s relationship with the music?
- Kentridge has said *Black Box* is connected to *Trauerarbeit*, the work of mourning. This (Freudian) notion relates to the work required to deal with the trauma of the past.
  - How does *Black Box* do the work of *Trauerarbeit* and on whose behalf?
- How does the ‘staging’ of the Black Box ‘performance’ affect our relationship with the material being explored?
THEME 5 – LEARNING FROM THE ABSURD: THE NOSE

Kentridge was once again able to explore his interest in opera when he became involved in creating and directing a production of Shostakovich’s 1928 opera The Nose. As part of the process of developing ideas for the staging of The Nose, Kentridge produced an array of works including sculptures, drawings, collages, tapestries and the extraordinary multiple channel projection of I am not me, the horse is not mine.

Shostakovich’s opera is based on a story written almost a century earlier by Nikolai Gogol:

It tells the tale of a pompous civil servant named Kovalyev who wakes up one morning to discover – to his horror – that his nose is missing. After much searching, he finally comes upon his estranged nose in a church, where we learn that the nose is now of a higher bureaucratic rank than Kovalyev and consequently will not speak to him.

For Kentridge, the attraction of the story lay in its treatment of the absurdity of the hierarchies put in place to preserve power and privilege. In exploring the possibilities of this story and of the opera, he was also captivated by the creative potential of the idea of a ‘nose on the loose’.

In the opera production of The Nose, Kentridge used texts, slogans, bureaucratic lists and archival film footage from the post-revolutionary period in the former Soviet Union. He wanted not only to evoke the historical moment of production, but also to draw on the present-day audience’s knowledge of the grim events that were to come.

Shostakovich’s opera emerged towards the end of a period of optimism and artistic innovation as Soviet artists sought to make new art with a social purpose. The opera worked as a warning about the oppressive bureaucracy emerging at the time, and only two years after the opera premiered, Stalin brought this explosion of creativity to an official end. From this point on, Soviet art was to be ruled by a strict policy requiring all artists to follow the principles of social realist art.

EXPLORE

- Read Gogol’s The Nose and consider how this story inspired Shostakovich’s challenge to the growing Soviet authoritarianism.
- Find out more about the USSR during the period when Shostakovich composed The Nose.
- Write down any unfamiliar terms you come across in your research (bureaucracy, Soviet Union etc) and find out what they mean.

REFLECT

- According to Kentridge, ‘The extraordinary nonsense hierarchy of apartheid in South Africa made one understand the absurd not as a peripheral mistake at the edge of a society, but at the central point of construction.’
  - What does he mean by ‘the absurd’?
- Kentridge describes the ‘self’ as ‘a series of contradictory impulses held together and given a sense of coherence’.
  - Do you think this is true? Explain.
The principle of a world awry is the basis of all comedy: you think something's going to be one thing but it's something else.’

How is this idea explored in the works that form this section?

CREATE

What other part of the body might get separated from its ‘owner’?
Write a brief story about this wandering eye, arm, toenail...
Explore this idea in an artwork.


Kentridge’s designs for the opera production of The Nose allude, in particular, to the work of the Soviet artists who practised an experimental and doomed form of art known as Constructivism.

The Russian Constructivists were initially known for their three-dimensional sculptures but later for collage and poster art. Kentridge describes I am not me, the horse is not mine, as a tribute to these artists who considered their work to be contributing to a new and fairer society.

EXPLORE

Find out more about Soviet Constructivism. Why did it become a forbidden form of creative expression under Stalin?
What are the origins of the title I am not me, the horse is not mine?
How does the title contribute to our understanding of the work?

RESPOND

Describe each of the eight films that make up I am not me, the horse is not mine.
Consider the title of each piece and what it contributes.
How do the separate projections form one work?
What is the effect of the man chasing his nose while it keeps escaping?
Describe the animated horse. How does its jagged edges and uncertain movement contribute to the work as a whole?
How does the music contribute to this work?

This piece has been described as exuberant and anarchic.
Make a list of words that describe your response to the work.
What is the place of the viewer in a multi-screen work like this one?
Do you agree that the viewer does not simply watch this work but participates in it, to form a kind of collaboration with the artist?
TELEGRAMS FROM THE NOSE (2008)

The works that make up the series *Telegrams from The Nose* also draw on the energy and directness of Constructivism. These works demonstrate Kentridge’s fascination with the layers of experience.

CREATE

- Using the idea of the collage, create a work made up of layers: combine text, paint, found objects and/or anything else that you can think of.
- Make a series of works that explore a particular theme.
- Give your works titles and consider how this changes them.
ENDNOTES


3 Millar, Iain, “It wasn’t a choice, being an artist was what I was reduced to”, The Art Newspaper, Issue 217 October 2010. http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/it-wasnt-a-choice-being-an-artist-was-what-i-was-reduced-to/21635


9 Christov-Bakargiev in Rosenthal, p. 119.


16 For a more nuanced discussion of this idea, see Micchelli.