



## The Revolt of the Object

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## THE REVOLT OF THE OBJECT

Animated Drawings and the Colonial Archive: William Kentridge's *Black Box* Theatre

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*When South African visual artist William Kentridge accepted the yearly assignment of the German Guggenheim Foundation, he decided for that occasion to thematize the link between Germany and Africa's colonial histories. In particular he decided to highlight the under-researched history of the genocide by the German colonizers of the Herrero tribe in South-West Africa (now Namibia). This resulted in the multilayered and impressive installation Black Box/Chambre Noir, staged in Berlin in 2005.*

**Black Box/Chambre Noir**

**colonial archive**

**Herero genocide**

**Jewish Historical Museum**

**Kentridge, William**

**multidirectional memory**

*On many levels the performance realized an encounter between German colonial history and the histories of anti-Semitism and Nazism. In this essay I lead the reader on a virtual tour through the installation, highlighting the multidirectional materialization of colonialism, modernism and fascism as staged in the multimedia environment of Black Box. The issue of commissioning from the German Guggenheim Foundation and the subsequent exposition of Black Box in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam will be explored in order to elaborate on the significance of the intersections of different histories of violence for the reconfiguration of European postcolonial consciousness.*

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In 2012 South African visual artist William Kentridge exhibited the multimedia installation *Black Box* in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam. This digitally controlled puppet theatre was originally commissioned by the German Guggenheim Foundation in Berlin, where *Black Box* was exhibited in October 2005. Through the *Black Box* installation, Kentridge confronts both the African history of the producer, and the European history of its client. Utilizing techniques such as the projection of historical documents, military decrees, death rolls, edited maps, colonial photographs, film footage, animated drawings, shadow play and mechanical puppets, a multimedia monument is actualized that memorializes the first European genocide of the twentieth century: the merciless extermination of the Nama and Herero tribes at Waterberg in South-West Africa by the German colonial army.<sup>1</sup> The staging of projected historical material, mechanical puppets and animated drawings is framed by a miniature Baroque Proscenium theatre and accompanied with samples of European and African music. Specifically, in the *Black Box* performance, Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) is juxtaposed with Herero laments (*outjina*).<sup>2</sup> In this way, some of the best and most beautiful classical music that German history has produced is simultaneously mixed and contrasted with its exceptionally cruel colonial history; a cruelty that, according to Kentridge's interpretation, is already anticipated in *Die Zauberflöte*'s libretto (Kentridge 2005, 51).

In the opera, the utopian ideals of progress and enlightenment are voiced while the high priest Sarastro, motivated by feelings of charity, leads Pamina, the daughter of the Queen of the Night, from darkness (symbolizing captivity) to light (symbolizing freedom and reason). Kentridge (2005) argues, however, that this utopian enlightenment is not a real enlightenment because Sarastro's emancipatory project is realized through the use of violence. In accordance with this, Adorno might have suggested that here progress employs reason like a predatory beast employs its claws (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). The parallel between *Die Zauberflöte*'s discourse of light as vision, progress and truth and that of many colonial missions – the enlightening of a dark continent to be carried out, if required, with the use of violence – is overtly present in *Black Box*. However, if *Die Zauberflöte* embodies the utopian aspects of enlightenment, *Black Box* embodies the other side of the coin and performs the insights to be drawn from darkness and shadows. In his deployment of *Die Zauberflöte*, Kentridge therefore deliberately opted for, politically speaking, a historically significant recording of Mozart's opera: the performance that was played for the entire Nazi elite in Berlin in 1937.

No matter how layered and intertextual this introduction to Kentridge's artefact may already sound, this is still the most basic interpretation of the ways in which *Black Box*, through the use of multimedia, evokes the memory of different legacies of violence within the museological contexts of Berlin and Amsterdam.

1 Between 1904 and 1907, under the command of General von Trotha, tens of thousands of rebellious Namaqua and Herero were driven systematically into concentration camps and/or killed. An estimated ten thousand of the twenty thousand Namaqua and sixty-five thousand of the eighty thousand Herero died. Of the fourteen thousand German soldiers, about fifteen hundred died in battle or of disease (Conrad 2012, 201). In 1985 the UN Whitaker Report formally acknowledged the murder of the Herero and Namaqua as genocide (Whitaker 1985).

2 *Outjina* are laments and songs of praise that are part of Herero oral culture. In the songs, the history of the Herero people is sung of, as well as the fall of a large part of their

people due to the colonial war with the Germans (Coumans 2011, 65).

Starting from this specific museological context, in this essay I will further trace Kentridge's view of (post)colonial Europe. To that end, I shall lead the reader on a virtual tour through the installation, highlighting the multidirectional materialization of colonialism, modernism and fascism as staged in the multimedia environment of *Black Box*. As I will demonstrate, Kentridge's artistic deployment of archival documents, as well as his working through of Europe's iconographical and overdetermined imagery, inevitably force the viewer to 're-categorize' the key events of Europe's history while simultaneously working through the details of its legacies. By embodying both the structure and a particular content of memory, *Black Box* performs a contribution to postcolonial theories with regard to an alleged continuity with theories about the claimed discontinuity of the legacies of violence within and outside European borders.

### ***Black Box* as a Critical Multidirectional Memory Discourse**

The stated mission of the Jewish Historical Museum (JHM) in Amsterdam is, according to their website, primarily to bring attention to the religion, culture and history of Jews within the Netherlands and its colonies. To further that aim, the museum, in addition to its permanent collection in Amsterdam, holds worldwide expositions related to the work of Jewish artists. William Kentridge possesses a complex personal heritage – not only third-generation South African, but also a Jewish artist of Lithuanian descent. This heritage, taken within the context of the JHM, therefore presents an unproblematic frame for an exhibition of his work. In addition to his Jewish background, Kentridge's choice of thematizing German colonial history could, in any case, have led the postwar postcolonial European museum attendee to question the relationship between the genocidal politics of the Nazis and our understanding of what came before it; that is, the extremely violent colonial wars in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Ever since Aimé Césaire, in *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), and Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), attempted to link anti-Semitism and colonialism, the idea of a relationship between both legacies of violence has resulted in continuing disagreements and debates among historians.<sup>4</sup> A key player in surveying this debate, Michael Rothberg, coined the term 'the colonial turn in Holocaust studies' (Rothberg 2009, 101). This turn has been key to our understanding of postcolonial Europe ever since. In other words, the basic infrastructural framing of Kentridge's installation alone invites one to reflect on the relation between differing legacies of violence. The exhibition of *Black Box* within the context of the Jewish Historical Museum therefore marks – as such – an important step towards a disruptive reanimation of the Holocaust as Europe's *Deckerinnerung* and as Europe's primary memory investment *par excellence*.

In this essay, however, I will only touch upon the details of this discussion among historians<sup>5</sup> where necessary, and will focus particularly on the

3 See Chambers et al. (2014) and Skartveit and Goodnow (2010) for the transformation of museums as transcultural spaces in the light of global migratory movements and repressed histories, voices and memories.

4 Briefly summarized, this debate is about whether or not the Holocaust and/or the German quest for living space (*Lebensraum*) in

Eastern Europe can be understood, at least in part, as a result of the abominable aspects of German colonialism and imperialism (continuity thesis), or whether the politics of the Second World War should be regarded as another singular catastrophe in world history (discontinuity thesis) (see Langbehn and Salama 2011).

5 That discussion concerns such questions as whether it is fruitful to suppose that both practices are motivated by the desire for racial superiority and living space and governed by the logistics of race and paranoia (Moses 2011), or whether it is better to contextualize the detailed differences in the underlying ideologies of fascism and colonialism and in the logistic machinations that have been brought into action (Kundrus 2011).

medium-specific ways in which Kentridge makes present and materializes both the particularity and the interweaving of those legacies within and outside the borders of Europe. Such a process of remembering the specificities of one history without silencing those of another has been captured by Rothberg (2009) with the concept of ‘multidirectional memory’.<sup>6</sup> Joining this line of thought, I employ an approach to Kentridge’s work that springs from the emergent field of critical memory studies, in which politically engaged or trauma-related artefacts are studied as history seen through affect. Affect, from within that context, is understood as a residue of an event reactivated through the reiteration of that event by something equivalent to it, for instance by means of art. The historical event is thus studied in connection to the medium that gives access to the experience of the event. Affect, in this sense, is therefore related to cathexis: the power to relate. As historian Jay Winter (2010, 12) claims: ‘History is memory seen through and criticized with the aid of documents of many kinds – written, aural, visual. Memory is history seen through affect... Therefore it is difficult to examine the claims of memory in the same way as we examine the claims of history.’ He goes on to explain that history is a discipline of which we learn and teach the rules and methods. Memory is a faculty: the faculty to be affected. It is thus a claim of critical memory studies that contemporary artefacts dealing with traumatic events should not so much be studied only for their representation of history or reality, but even more so for their production of affects and deep thought.<sup>7</sup> Critical memory discourses thus link micro-stories to macrostructures. Critical memory studies scholars, consequently, are interested in the ways in which artefacts, as critical memory discourses, counteract the threat of socially produced amnesia. They concentrate on the analysis of artefacts as inventions of techniques for transmitting and storing information, that are deemed vital for the constitution or continuation of a specific group or a specific constellation of groups (Assmann 2010; Rothberg 2009; Huyssen 2003).

### Doing the Colonial Archive

6 With the development of this concept, Rothberg intended to transform the national or transnational competition between histories of violence into processes of productive cultural exchange: ‘Against

In the *Black Box* installation the tension between historiography as a methodology and critical memory as a faculty is performed through an explicitly mediated return to the colonial archive. This return to the archive is, on a most literal level, materialized by a classic exhibition that consists of an archive. As it is, before we can take a seat in front of the Proscenium theatre, we first walk through a displayed archive. The archive consists of a collection of separate elements that are utilized in the central performance.

In the display, we first behold the rather awkwardly written extermination order from General Lothar von Trotha:

the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory – a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources – I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional, as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg 2009, 3).

7 The methodological discussion between historians and memory scholars is mirrored in the way in which the reception of Kentridge's work has developed in the last decade. On the one hand, critics emphasize that Kentridge's work must be understood within the geopolitical context of accountability politics and the history of (post-) apartheid South Africa (Godby 2000; Christov-Bakargiev 2004); on the other hand, there is growing interest in Kentridge's work as critical memory discourse (Krauss 2000; Breidbach 2005; Chapuis 2012; Tone 2013; Rothberg 2012; Huyssen 2013) – that is to say, as a research after the *ex officio* always-mediated entrée to the (experience of the) historical event (Krauss 2000, 27).

I, the Great General of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero. The Herero people must leave the land. If they do not do this I will force them with the Groot Rohr [*Cannon*]. Within the German borders every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall spare neither women or children, I will drive them back to their people or I will let them be shot at. These are my words to the Herero people. Signed: The Great General of the Mighty Kaiser, von Trotha. (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 139)

The explicit showing of this crucial text, one that motivates the performance, is in itself a geopolitical statement that evokes rather concrete questions. The complex and multidirectional constellation of memory and forgetting, barbarism and culture, light and darkness, the human and the inhuman, tradition and modernity, that is soon to be shown in the central mechanical performance is documented here in an exemplary colonial pamphlet. Spectators are inevitably led to ask themselves: what is the backdrop of such a text? Who is fighting whom and why?

Therefore, a short account of the facts and figures of the catastrophe is needed to grasp the point of Europe as articulated in *Black Box*:<sup>8</sup> South-West Africa, present-day Namibia, became a German colony in 1884. To end the conflict between the Herero and the Namaqua tribes over cattle and land, the colonial army entered into treaties of protection with both tribes from 1884 onwards, which were supposed to suppress infighting and endeavours to achieve independence. These treaties, however, only increased dissension and colonial tensions. At the end of the nineteenth century, the 'rinderpest' led to a further destabilizing of relations. Countless impoverished Herero were forced to hand over their land to the German colonizers and apply as workers to German farms. There, they were often treated as slaves, beaten, raped and lynched. The colonial army, directed from Windhoek and Berlin, translated the weakened position of the Herero into a commitment to the task of forging a viable German colony in Africa, and began to claim land more and more violently. The Nama, led by Hendrik Witbooi (ca. 1830–1905), initially supported the German troops against the Herero. On the initiative of Herero leader Chief Samuel Maharero (1856–1923), the leaders of the Herero tribes that were spread over the area eventually decided unanimously to break off the treaties. In 1904 the Herero and the Nama, led by Samuel Maharero, rebelled collectively. From 1904 onwards, the Nama waged a guerrilla war against the Germans that lasted for two years. The Herero openly opposed the colonial occupying forces and gathered at the Waterberg Plateau. That legendary revolt ended in extremely violent bloodshed, under the command of Trotha.<sup>9</sup> When a part of the Herero people turned out to have escaped from the massacre, Trotha wrote to his superior in Windhoek, Governor of South-West Africa Leutwein: 'The eastern border of the colony will remain sealed off and terrorism will be

8 A summary of these facts is displayed on the museum walls. The JHM bookstore stocks a few items on German colonialism next to the documentation of Jewish cultural heritage.

9 General von Trotha was recruited by Kaiser Wilhelm II for this particular mission, and had already acquired a reputation for cruelty and violence in Northern China during the Boxer war, where different European powers cooperated in an effort to subdue the anti-German revolt (Conrad 2012, 189), and in East Africa. When he was asked to put things right in South-West Africa, his response was: 'I shall destroy the rebellious tribes by shedding rivers of blood and money. Only then will it be possible to sow the seeds of something new that will endure' (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 139).

10 Although Germany was a latecomer on the colonial stage, its colonial politics were driven by the same principles as those of the other European empires of that time. Under the umbrella of the promise of modernization, national and socioeconomic

employed by the Herero showing up. That nation must vanish from the face of the earth. Having failed to destroy them with guns I will have to achieve my end in that way' (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 155). To give notice of this policy to the Herero themselves, Trotha issued his infamous Extermination Order (*Vernichtungsbefehl*) quoted by Kentridge. Thus, the conflict degenerated into unadulterated genocide, a practice fuelled by the ideology according to which the German people needed to expand their living space at the expense of lower races (Baranowsky 2011, 57; Conrad 2012, 27).<sup>10</sup> The tens of thousands of Herero who had escaped the Battle of Waterberg were in the following years driven systematically into concentration camps. There, the Herero people were forced to walk about with metal plates around their necks showing the emblem of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Men, in every kind of way, were humiliated, beaten and lynched. Women were raped with great regularity, with the result that about half of the remaining Herero people have a German great-grandfather (Gewald 1999).<sup>11</sup>

In an interview, Kentridge tells just how necessary it is to produce indexes to the multidirectional historical facts and figures in critical memory discourses and thus evoke the basic questions concerning what has happened. When, in preparation for *Black Box*, he visited the Waterberg memorial site in Namibia, he was baffled by the absence of such a multidirectional perspective on Germany's colonial history:

The site is now a national park in Namibia. At the bottom of the mountain, there's a German war cemetery where 23 German soldiers are buried. It's well maintained with a visitor's book, where German tourists write things like: 'thanks for keeping such good care of the graves' and 'please can there be no more wars in our times and you do such honor to these people.' In the campsite dining room there are photographs of the Kaiser and his wife and of German troops, but nowhere is there any word of what happened there. It's as if you had Auschwitz and a few Germans who died of dysentery while they were working there and then had a sign where they were buried, but not a word else about what happened in Auschwitz ... The big thing was the invisibility of the story in Namibia. It would be very hard to imagine our relationship and the history of World War II in the absence of records, books, writings, films, memorials, museums, debates. (Coumans 2011, 95)

However, the displayed archive is a combination of both fact and fiction. Drawn puppets and objects made by the artist are situated next to and between historical documents, but as with the archive material, these objects seem *objets trouvés* put together within a frame, just like disparate memories can be significantly connected within a dream. Visually, the fabricated pieces are almost indistinguishable from the original archived pieces. It seems as though, by means of the exhibition that surrounds the central performance in the puppet theatre, we are invited to examine the collected data

interests were hidden, such as the desire to fight out social conflicts outside of one's own borders and the aim to found new settler communities

that have led to the reconstruction of the catastrophes to be remembered before we let ourselves be enticed by the montage of a staged history. We are given insight, as it were, into the flight information. We are looking into the black box of an aircraft and witnessing crucial fragments from historical reality, which could lead to answers to questions: what has happened here? What hidden knowing is lurking within the colonial archive?

### Cross-referencing the Colonial Archive

overseas. In the case of German colonialism, two distinctive features have to be added: the degree of racial segregation – only the German Empire introduced prohibitions against interracial marriage – and the extreme violence (Conrad 2012).

11 In 2004 the German Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul visited Namibia and apologized for what she explicitly described as genocide (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 December 2004; *Trouw*, 26 November 2004). In keeping with postcolonial accountability politics, in 2006 the von Trotha Strasse in Munich was renamed the Herero Strasse. In 2007 a meeting of reconciliation took place between Trotha's descendants and a couple of Herero leaders at the invitation of Chief Alfonso Maharero,

As a consequence of the above, the exhibition shows maps and original death rolls, covered with meaningful words such as *Berlin*, *Waterberg*, *Windbuk* and *Vernunft*. The mechanical puppets and the shadow figures torn from black card are both covered with paper, variously drawn upon and otherwise inscribed to carry and narrate the story later in the performance.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, the base material used for the drawings of the objects, animated later in the performance, consists, besides the death rolls and maps, of pages belonging to old books such as encyclopedias and other references to nineteenth-century taxonomies and scientific beliefs – among others, a French textbook, *La Merveille de la science*, from about 1868, an edition of *Index and Gazetteer of the World*, and photocopies of advertisements featured in the German journal *Simplicissimus*.

This consistent reworking of existing texts, by which the traces of the old are visible in the new text and which, as such, epitomizes a materializing of the presence of the past, is known as the trope of the palimpsest. The palimpsest as a medium-specific return to the archive is one of the tropes that, in addition to including *Black Box*, characterizes Kentridge's work in general (Rothberg 2012; Krauss, Malbert and McCrickard 2012). The palimpsest in Kentridge's work underlines that returning to the historical source is always already a deconstruction of the possibility of a tale of origin. Historical meanings, continuities and discontinuities do not 'grow on trees' but have to be made and remade again and again, and are therefore always already multi-directional, always in motion as it were. Next to this significant stylistic trope, the particular drawings as such evoke different traumatic histories at the same time.

One of the most obvious examples of Kentridge's deployment of European iconography is offered by the many skulls that feature in the exhibition. In *Black Box* the countless skulls drawn on the original death rolls refer in a multi-directional way to the scope and range of the remembered catastrophe. Anthropologically speaking, skulls – iconographically referring to the vulnerability of life – are overdetermined signs not just in reference to German colonialism in South-West Africa, but in many European–African colonial tragedies that happened in light of the utopian ideals of progress and



Samuel Maharero's grandson (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 359). To this day, however, Berlin refuses compensation (*Guardian*, 23 October 2012). Granted, the Herero territory does receive a large portion of German development funds (Claus 2003; *Die Zeit*, 19 March 2010).

12 There is a narrator, the Megaphone Man, carrying the task of *Trauerarbeit* on his chest; there is a Herero woman defined by her headdress, a spring with a piece of transparent gauze on her head; a mechanical running man, that is, a cut-out piece of paper that runs; a pair of dividers measuring skulls and geography in the performance; a skull in the armature of a globe; and a second Herero woman based on a German postal scale from 1905 – a scale for weighing letters, as Kentridge explains in an interview (Rosenthal 2009, 163).

13 In October 2008 the Namibian government formally requested the repatriation of all South-West African remains held in German universities. In 2011 Germany returned twenty



**Figure 1** Projected images with mechanical prototypes for *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

enlightenment. All over Europe, skulls have been displayed in museums within the context of racial theories, but also as trophies of war. In recent years, skulls and even preserved heads of prisoners from the South-West African concentration camps have been found – in particular, in the medical collections of a number of German universities.<sup>13</sup> The connection between these three – the drive for knowledge, colonial practice motivated by conquest and the racial theories of the Nazis – has been substantiated in great detail by a variety of historians of German colonialism (Olusoga and Erichsen 2010, 358).

The deployment of both the colonial archive and the artist's studio in *Black Box* thus results in a dialectic of fact and fiction that inevitably activates the spectator. The trace that can be drawn by diving into the stories told by skulls on archival documents that underpin modernity falls apart into different geopolitical histories of violence. Similar to every critical multidirectional memory discourse, *Black Box* is here addressing the working of memory, the dynamic between seeing and knowing, remembering and forgetting, the possible connections that can be made and the meanings that are simultaneously possible through differing perspectives. The rewriting of source material, the process of erasure and construction, fact and fiction, already go hand in hand in opening up these sources. Access to the ongoing process of remembering history as both a continuity and a discontinuity, as *Black Box* demonstrates, is always mediated, and therefore dynamic and productive in relation to the forever-changing meaning of present and future. This

Herero skulls that had been seized during the genocide (*De Volkskrant*, 8 October 2011; *Die Zeit*, 18 October 2011).

process of construction and reconstruction takes place from generation to generation and is never finished.

### Performing the Colonial Archive

<sup>14</sup> I suggest the reader takes time to watch the twenty-minute performance displayed in the centre of the exhibition space: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6COnGRIFsw>; and in particular <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd2q9XkVt3c> (both accessed 14 September 2014).

Centrally placed within the intimate exhibition space of the Jewish museum, we then finally lay eyes on the miniature theatre.<sup>14</sup> Even at first glance, the construction in natural wood evokes in the spectator the fascination that is inherent to these objects: simultaneously intensely familiar and yet tantalizingly unfamiliar. The bare wooden construction, within which photographs, film projections and mechanically operated paper dolls perform a play of light and shadow, simultaneously returns us to the peepshows of our childhood, and reminds us of a traditional chamber-play stage that we know from the baroque: the black box theatre. A crucial signifier effected within that familiar viewing experience is the backdrop stage, framed with a series of *coulisses* and canopies that add depth and context to the spectacle. The players in the performed tragedy appear from and disappear within those wings. As a consequence of the intentionally visible architectural construction of Kentridge's *Black Box*, the theatrical object seems at once, not just familiar, but also rather disconcerting. We see, as it were, too much at the same time to experience the reassuring and well-organized working of the peepshow. The visibility of the mechanism, through seemingly simple means, reveals a complex yet usually hidden environment that not only transports the spectator, in both a baroque and Brechtian way, into the illusion of the staged world, but also allows the spectator to view the hand that constructed that world. The mechanisms, visible both adjacent to and beneath the stage, give the installation, which appeals to our primitive innocence and imagination, the ominous appearance of a torture device. As such, creation and destruction here immediately capture the gaze and therefore force the spectator into a choice of where to direct that gaze. Through *Black Box*, no matter how we reconstruct history and which connections we would prefer to substantiate, our attention is, from the very start, drawn to the engineered nature of the production process as an inextricable and inescapable part of any performance of memory or truth – or of any erasure of histories of violence from human consciousness, for that matter. Whereas in the exposition that surrounds the performance the leading role is monopolized by the historical and manipulated documents, in the actual animation the viewer is confronted with six mechanical dolls that carry the different storylines (see note 12). These protagonists appear, however, as temporary manifestations of the morphing, projected drawings.



**Figure 2** Miniature theatre model for *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, installed in artist's studio, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

The opening scene of *Black Box* presents to the spectator a drawing of a pair of dividers transforming into a drawing of the Herero woman whose drawing then becomes an insect. The second appearance is an animated drawing of a typewriter, the typewriter that we now immediately associate with a machine producing extermination orders; that is, letters that have to be weighed by history; that is, the Herero woman (see note 12). Those



**Figure 3** Projected images with mechanical prototypes for *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

preceding images are immediately followed by the animated drawing of a rhinoceros, after which the drawing of a nineteenth-century camera appears. With these drawings, a couple of central powers and players are immediately situated in a visual continuum. Drawings of dividers transform, in *Black Box*, into executioners, swastikas, guns and gallows; drawings of well-dressed people into insects; globes into exploding skulls and vice versa. Every emblem of instrumental rationality (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987 2002) is in constant flux, is multiplied, is sucking in histories, then bursts apart and rises again, becoming its counterpart. Fascinating as this may be, as a viewer watching this spectacle, one is inevitably confronted with the question: in what process of seeing and understanding am I actually forced to engage; what is it that I am watching exactly and why is this transposition of the familiar and the strange, this merging of tradition and avant-garde, so effective and confusing at the same time?

The beginning of an answer to these questions might have to be sought in the explicitly baroque framing of the spectacle; a framing which in modern thought leads to a critique of modernism. When Walter Benjamin, in his discussion of the baroque tragic drama, tried to expose the shaky foundation of modern rationality, he went back to the era of the baroque in which, for the first time in history, disenchanted reality became articulated and the loss of faith in the transcendent led to a return to objects, which was understood as a descent *into* the object and its possible meaning (Benjamin 1972, 344). This descent into the object is what Benjamin calls the nature of the

allegorical gaze. Every object, no matter how insignificant, can be impassioned by the allegorical gaze and, as such, can therefore be a bearer of knowledge and wisdom. The allegorical gaze forces objects to retreat from their conventional context. It denotes and deepens, uses the one image as material for the next one, destroys and crushes, only to then bring it back to life. The object, under the allegorical gaze, becomes an emblem of hidden knowledge. Distinctive of the Benjaminian allegory is the so-called loyalty to the world of things. Unlike the symbol, by which the image may stand in for or may be substituted by an idea, in the allegory, as in the palimpsest, an accumulation of meanings is present at the same time, and the traces of the old forms remain visible along with the new. The old is told or visualized along with the emergent new. Every object within this frame of thought is the key to a transcendent domain of hidden knowledge and unimagined relations. As such, the traditional avant-garde critique of modernity is transformed for a postcolonial globalizing world, as Andreas Huyssen has also noticed talking about Kentridge's 'avant-gardism from the periphery' (Huyssen 2013, 74). The uncertainty about the seeing and the seen here counteracts the mass media's monumental, capital-driven and amnesia-producing exhibition of the past, as witnessed by Kentridge's visit to Waterberg. *Black Box* forces us to negotiate the blind spots of vision and knowledge, to dive into the knowledge that can be coaxed and drawn from the in-betweens, the dark and the differences that lie within the shadows. As charcoal drawings transform into shadow figures of torn paper, so do the projected shadows of human hands create a bird that transforms into the projection of an eagle torn from paper and so on and so forth. In this way, both the content and the very structures of memory and forgetting are here performed. In this overdetermined deployment of early modern forms and techniques – strikingly described by Huyssen (2013) as a 'revolt of objects' – the experience of the simultaneous erasure and eruption of the past imposes itself on the present. This revolt of objects is an alternative name for that which, according to Walter Benjamin, happens to objects in the context of the allegorical gaze.

In *Black Box* the narrator of the story, the Megaphone Man with the sign *Trauerarbeit* on his chest, seems to be the most literal embodiment of this allegorical gaze. While the Megaphone Man watches from the wings, the skull, which already carried significant prominence in the exhibition, becomes allegorical, bursting apart into different wind directions. This performance by the skull conducted under the watchful eye of the Megaphone Man reinforces the palimpsestic appearances of the skulls on the documents from the colonial archive. As one of the main mechanical protagonists the skull, moreover, is caught in the changing structures of both a globe and measuring equipment, both further manifestations simultaneously performing different histories of violence. Not just the skull, but also almost every other object in the

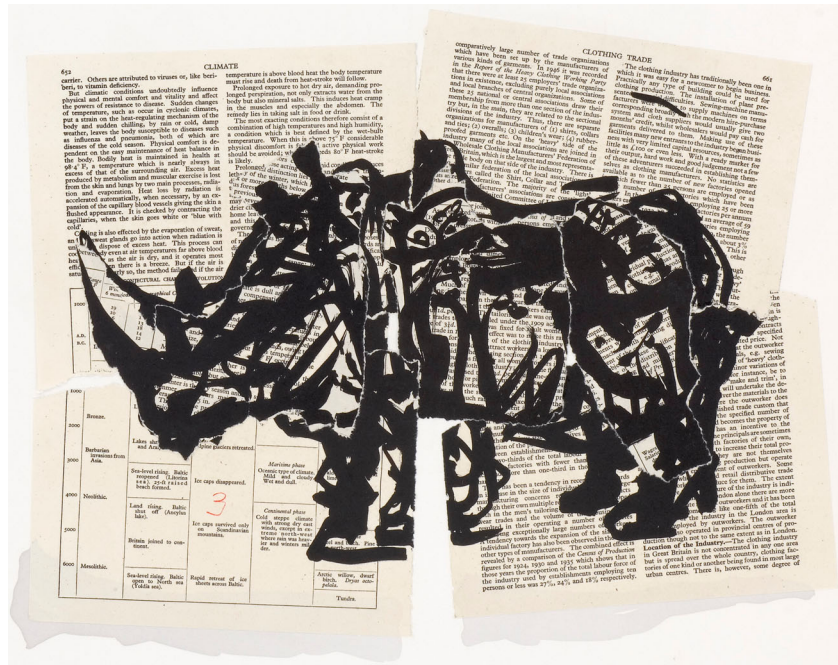


Figure 4 The Rhinoceros as the Black Box of Postcolonial Europe

performance opens onto a similarly multilayered and ongoing geopolitical narrative, remembering one history without silencing another, involving the negotiation between continuity and discontinuity.

The descent into the object, under the allegorical gaze of the mourning Megaphone Man, in the performance eventually leads to *Black Box's* moving final scene: the dance of the rhinoceros and the Megaphone Man.<sup>15</sup>

It is this encounter between the Megaphone Man and the rhinoceros that I consider to be the most affective and meaningful moment in the entire impressive and rich performance. As argued at the beginning of this essay, being touched by an artefact can be a very productive incentive to engage critically with the nexus between art and thought. As Jill Bennett (2005) puts it, trauma-related art is best understood as transactive rather than communicative – its transactive nature being its ability to produce an affect in the audience that works as a catalyst for critical inquiry. Experiencing a trauma-related artefact here is compared to a destabilizing encounter of some sort that forces us to interpret. More specifically, such an experience might evoke a reflection on what exactly it is in the artwork that leads to thought and to the assignment of meaning (Bennett 2005). In her seminal work on affect, trauma and contemporary art, Bennett subsequently makes clear that affect and politics are intrinsically intertwined in the sense that trauma-related art always works on the intersections of the sayable and the unsayable,

15 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd2q9XkVt3c> (accessed 14 September 2014).

the visible and the invisible, the political and the personal, the global and the local. We might add, in anticipation of the concluding discussion of *Black Box*, that critical memory discourses dealing with trauma-related art always work on transition and movement.

Throughout Kentridge's work, the megaphone and the rhinoceros assume roles in diverse constellations and combinations. Both figures refer again to archaic and outdated forms and practices that, in their isolated and newly contextualized appearance, perform an avant-garde critique on the cruelties of modernism and colonialism. The prehistoric palimpsestic skin of the rhinoceros anyway reminds us of times long gone. Through the allegorical gaze of the Megaphone Man, however, this general critique becomes very concrete and mingles on the level of the narrative with some of the grotesque details of the encounters between Europe and its colonies, i.e. between Germany and South-West Africa.

Iconographically speaking, the drawing of Kentridge's rhinoceros leads to a *topos* in European art history, the oft-cited woodcut by Dürer entitled *Rhinoceros*. In an interview with Sandra Coumans, Kentridge, on being asked, briefly referred to the exemplary colonial history of the specific rhinoceros that stood as model for the woodcut that Dürer made in 1515 (Coumans 2011, 141). The recorded history of this animal includes its shipping from India to Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The animal, having disappeared from Europe since the third century, was supposed to be a gift from the Portuguese King Manuel to Pope Leo X, to make the latter favourably disposed in reference to the fixing of the boundaries between Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the so-called New World. During the journey from Lisbon to Rome, however, the rhinoceros died and reached the Vatican stuffed with straw. The woodcut, produced as a result of this grotesque history, has influenced European references through visual art to the rhinoceros by Dali and contains, in a broad sense, the presence of the colonial history of Europe as an ongoing destabilizing encounter.

Politically speaking, the seemingly unbeatable rhinoceros has become an endangered species that, due to the predilection for progress and the longing for fortune, has been nearly exterminated today. In some ways mirroring the Herero and Nama, the number of rhinoceroses on the African continent is also dramatically reduced. The significant parallel between the Herero genocide and rhino hunting is visualized throughout the performance by the clearly traceable triptych that is observed by the Megaphone Man. The triptych consists of fragments from the film *Nashornjagd in Deutsch Ostafrika (Rhinoceros Hunting in Africa)*. These images were produced around 1911–1912 by adventurer and big game hunter Robert Schumann and were shown in Germany as a form of colonial propaganda. The first panel of this imaginary triptych consists of a projection of a fragment from this colonial film footage – the empty African landscape – along the front of which the

Herero woman moves against an audio backdrop of traditional Herero sounds. The central panel consists of the projection of a film fragment in which colonial settlers kill a rhino mother and her young under the sounding of Sarrastro's aria 'In diesen heil'gen Hallen', after which the third tableau mirrors the first scene and the Herero woman, once again, sings her lament (*outjina*). However, the backdrop of the empty African landscape is here substituted by the projected death rolls.

With the Megaphone Man watching from the wings, the spectator has thus become a witness of how Africa, in the early twentieth century, functioned as the playing field of Europeans. The eye of the camera and the barrel of a gun converge in the framing of *Black Box* and form vital parts of the instrument of appropriation of colonial politics; a politics that initiated a transformation of light into darkness. While the colonial settlers are enjoying themselves hunting rhino, Sarrastro sings of the triumph of light over darkness, the disappearance of hate and feelings of revenge and the love from human to human ('wen solchen Lehren nicht erfreuen, verdient nicht ein Mensch zu sein'). Simultaneously, we learn that the entire Nazi elite listened to the same performance. Following this scene, the drawing of the rhino emerges from a charcoal drawing of an eagle, only to then morph into a terrifying (within the context of the Second World War) spurting shower-head. The rhino, the Herero and the other European genocides thus become associated with one another while representing different levels of violence at the same time.

Pulling the performance to a conclusion, the final scene of *Black Box* consists of a relatively slow (compared to the preceding rhythm of the performance) and long dance between the mechanical Megaphone Man, bearing the *Trauerarbeit* on his chest, and the animated drawing of the *Rhinoceros* that takes place atop a sampling of indigenous music and the melody of Pamina's aria 'Ach ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden'. The killed and subsequently animated rhinoceros as a leading character in *Black Box* here reenacts one of the most prominent encounters of archive and imagination and embodies, as allegory, the overwhelming multi-directionality of memory. In the dance with the Megaphone Man, the rhino one last time falls apart into two letter scales, enveloping, as such, the history of the Herero massacre as well as the body of the Herero woman. The reassembled rhino, tumbling over the Megaphone Man, then dances, as if imitating the walk of the colonial rhino hunters, gracefully skipping over the stage towards the open ending of the performance. Mourning and remembering are ongoing matter, time and space transforming processes.

### The Folds of History

Thus, both the rules of history and the faculty of memory motivate Ken-ridge's return to the archive and contribute, in *Black Box*, to the projection



of the forgotten German–African history within the macrostructures of post-colonial Europe. While artistic representation by definition resists univocal interpretations of history, in *Black Box* alternatives are offered to a memory practice that, in Western Europe, has become so monolithic that it has made all other memories of violence close to impossible, partially invisible or, at the very least, subordinate. By foregrounding and making prominent the application of archive material combined with a multimedia reworking of the archive itself, Kentridge has actualized a number of destabilizing encounters between historical centres and peripheries, including Berlin and Windhuk, modernism and tradition, and lightness and darkness. Via animated drawings, shadow play and mechanical puppets, Kentridge leads the viewer to a transnational network of violent histories related to modernism, colonialism and genocide. Similar to how memories, in general, seem to be directionless at first glance, but are, on closer examination, significantly linked to other memories, in *Black Box* the instruments of enlightenment and progress are transformed, in the animated drawings that accompany the projections of the colonial archive material, into barbaric acts. The images, each carrying their own negation along with them, often end up as traces. Pairs of dividers traditionally linked to geometry and rationality become gallows that morph into terrifying spurting shower-heads.

Pairs of dividers also become human beings who then knock each other down, only to lift themselves up and turn into the shadow of a German eagle. Erasure and wiping out are visualized as part of the very structure of



**Figure 5** Drawing for *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, 2005, Charcoal, coloured crayon and collage on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

history and memory. In *Black Box* the viewer descends, together with the artist, into the depths of the archive until a point is reached where familiar material collapses into isolated objects. Throughout the performance, objects become animated and, under the eye of the spectator, are forced to rearrange and redefine themselves. During the performance the instruments of enlightenment gradually transform into the dark shadows of the victims of that same utopian ideal of progress and to those who once witnessed it. As a result of this process, these objects can never again be perceived as the inanimate neutral instruments they once seemed. However, these montages, which at first glance seem to refer to a thesis of continuity, cannot be dissociated from the earlier display of the to-be-separated players in this multi-layered and violent game. The viewer, next to the montage, also perceives the individual building blocks that destroy each other in the performance, only to rise again. Shadows serve as the preserved traces of the erasure, as Huyssen has observed: 'To remember means to read traces; it demands imagination, attentiveness of the gaze, construction' (Huyssen 2013, 39). We are continuously reminded that the connection between separate parts of a collected history of violence has been made within the *Black Box*. The separate scenes and tableaux are kept together by the *coulisses* of the theatre and, as such, form the folds of a history that is subjected to constant motion and change. The staged relationship between perpetrators and victims is possible and convincing but, simultaneously, not an indisputable reality. The scenes are, and continue to be, destabilizing encounters, similar to a camera that takes a snapshot but leaves other possible snapshots unseen.

In *Black Box* the weight of a suppressed history is brought into the light, it is mourned over and set in motion, as previously fixed positions become sequences of movement. As Kentridge puts it: 'On the one hand we say: Well, the Enlightenment is our last, our best hope. But my work also acknowledges the Enlightenment's imbrication with so many other disasters' (Kentridge and Morris 2014, 17). In light of the multidirectional history that has been documented and evoked by the *Black Box* performance – that is, the material metamorphoses, encounters and transpositions of the documents and protagonists – the dance of the *Rhinoceros* and the Megaphone Man evokes affects that inevitably lead to a reflection of those imbrications, here being the atrocities of the European–African encounter and its impact on the further vicissitudes of the German drive for expansion within Europe in the antebellum period. It is precisely the deployment of a seemingly premodern and innocent iconic figure that leads to a multidirectional critical memory discourse of the violence involved in modernity and progress. As Bennett also observes in her discussion of Kentridge's multimedia *oeuvre*, the arts in general (and the medium of animation in particular) can accommodate extremes of violence that would be unwatchable if performed by the rules of realism and/or live actors (Bennett 2005, 116). The continuous and

discontinuous stream of images and events that are projected in the theatre is therefore, on the one hand, an endless curve of light and darkness, conflict and *Trauerarbeit*, but on the other hand, a manifestation of distinguishable discontinuous figures and phenomena, each claiming a story. I have only been able to touch upon some of them here. As such, we can understand the multi-directional position of *Black Box* as a materialization that surpasses the discrepancy between continuity and discontinuity in the relation between European modernism, colonialism and Nazism and never fails to illuminate the histories of the deep and interrelated structures of conflict and domination in our postcolonial present.

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