

Memories of Europe in the Art From Elsewhere

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At a time when the boundaries of European citizenship are challenged from both the inside and the outside, those boundaries cannot be equated with the imaginary boundaries of European memory. The rights to citizenship are usually defined administratively and politically. European memory cannot be. It cannot be culturally fortified. For what is European memory if it does not include memories of Europe's role in the world at large? It must reciprocally acknowledge the memories of Europe as they circulate elsewhere, and now even inside Europe itself.

Some years ago, conference titles such as "Europe and its others" abounded—still fundamentally Eurocentric in spirit, with its possessive pronoun and the globalizing discourse of othering. Then the language changed, acknowledging the implicit problem and turning to phrases such as "Europe in other cultures." The altered phrasing recognizes counterstrategies of writing back to Empire: Europe itself was being othered by "its" others, or as Dipesh Chakrabarty has called it, provincialized.¹ From my point of view both perspectives are inadequate today in capturing how the imaginary relationship between Europe and non-European parts of the world is structured in the work of contemporary artists. It is particularly the transnational and by now globally extant discourse of political memories of violence, state terror, and genocide that has produced artistic memory practices in which the European and the non-European are indissolubly folded into each other. Neither the discourse of othering nor that of provincializing makes much sense any longer.

Of course the national has never lost its hold in the world of politics and cultural imaginaries. Identitarian thinking is still alive and well. Theodor Adorno, over half a century ago, gave a succinct analysis: nationalism today is both obsolete and up-to-date. At a time when we experience a delusional renationalization of politics in Europe and elsewhere, it is all the more important to take account of practices in the arts

which can open up an alternative horizon—practices that can teach us to be in the world in a non-identitarian way—to be European and planetary at the same time in our practices of remembrance. This involves crossing the borders of Europe in both directions.

William Kentridge and Doris Salcedo, two contemporary artists whose work originated outside of the Western art world, but has become exceptionally successful within it, both in the United States and in Europe, are the topic of this essay. Both artists are exemplary in that they weave together two separate strands of memory: memories of local histories of violence (in South Africa and Colombia, respectively) and emphatic memories of European modernism, which they appropriate and transform in creative ways. Both tell us a great deal about how memories of Europe, including colonialism, are an integral part of the very texture of artistic work from elsewhere.

Among other artists who deploy similar strategies, I would mention the feminist work by Nalini Malani on the Partition of India and its poorly managed, violent end to British imperialism, or Vivan Sundaram's work on contemporary Hindu-on-Muslim violence and the slow violence of urban immiseration, exacerbated in the Indian metropolis since the country's embrace of neoliberalism and globalization. In Australia it might be Brook Andrews, who works on settler colonialism and the violence perpetrated on the Aborigines. All of these represent political art practices that draw creatively on the archives of Western modernism in their attempt to make us conceive of an alternative planetary future, without providing utopian blueprints.

Kentridge and Salcedo work in multiple media and genres: from gallery sculpture, performance, and public event to black box film, theater, and opera, not to mention painting and drawing. Installation and *mise-en-scène* are central to their work, which is deeply embedded in local histories—South African apartheid in Kentridge; Colombian *violencia* in Salcedo. Their political memory work is also self-consciously informed by an appropriation in reverse, as one could call it; a transformative appropriation of major moments of European and North American modernism. For Salcedo it is minimalist sculpture, installation art, and hermetic, post-1945 German poetry (Paul Celan); for Kentridge, German expressionism, Soviet avant-gardism, and early techniques of stop-motion animation film. Their relation to a much broadened understanding of modernism is anything but derivative. They prey liberally on European modernism as global heritage. What makes this work different from much of what goes for contemporary art in the international art markets is that political and aesthetic issues are being worked through without apology, at a time when the successful linking of aesthetics and politics seems more like a rumor of the past than a reality in the present. Their work remains resolutely local, but as successful artists from the periphery immersed in transnational trends, they cannot be treated merely as local informants. The work thus poses

important questions pertaining to transcultural reception and global effect beyond borders.

Salcedo's early post-minimalist sculptures from the 1990s consist of heavily worked wooden furniture: tables cut and jammed into each other, chairs, dressers, and armoires filled with concrete and pierced by steel beams, wooden doors unhinged, and a bed's headboard embedded in a concrete-filled armoire (fig. 1). Traces of violence such as human bones, tufts of hair, and fragments of clothes are inserted, almost imperceptibly, in the sculptures. The titles are telling: *Casa Viuda*, with its double meaning of "Widow's House" and "Widowed House," or *Unland*, meaning radical negation of the land as space of a community (fig. 2).² The violence made palpable in the meticulous cuttings and distortions of domestic furniture conjures up the Colombian *violencia* that has consumed hundreds of thousands of lives over the past half century, and has only recently leveled off with a much-disputed political agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government. The widowed house is the house of desaparecidos—men, women, and children, all victims of Colombia's multi-front civil war involving the military, death squads, guerrillas, and narco gangs. The sculptures point to the absent human bodies that lived with the furniture, slept in the beds, or sat on the chairs and around the tables. The meticulous weaving of hair and silk fabric across the table in *Unland: the Orphan's Tunic* points to the fragility of life, present only in its remnants. The material object is never just sculpture in the traditional sense, but it is worked uncannily in such a way that it articulates memory and gives witness, offering a trace of the past that will slowly unsettle the consciousness of the viewer. It thus opens up an extended time-space, challenging the viewer to move beyond the material presence of the sculpture and to enter into dialogue with the temporal and historical dimension implicit in the work. At the same time these sculptures do not fall for the delusion of authenticity or pure presence. In the use of (often old or discarded) materials and their arrangement, they display an awareness that all memory is re-collection, re-presentation. As opposed to much avant-garde artistic practice in the last century, this kind of work is not energized by an emphatic notion of forgetting. Its temporal sensibility is decidedly post-avant-garde. It fears not only the erasure of a specific (personal or political) past, but also works against the erasure of pastness itself which, in its projects, remains indissolubly linked to the materiality of things and bodies in time and space.

In more recent years the geographic horizon reflected in Salcedo's work has considerably broadened beyond Colombia, toward Turkey, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States.³ Simultaneously, her work has moved increasingly from the gallery and museum space into public space and site-specific urban installations, both in Colombia and abroad. The meticulous attention to laborious detail has remained. For instance, the use of empty chairs, symptomatic of disappearances from the private domestic sphere in her early work, is turned toward public urban



Fig. 1. Installation view Doris Salcedo at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2015. Photograph: David Heald.

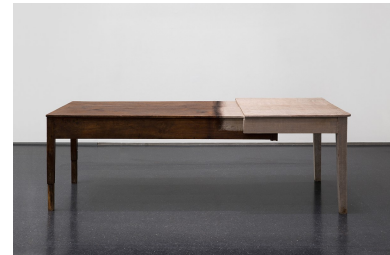


Fig. 2. Doris Salcedo, *Unland: The Orphan's Tunic*, 1997. Photograph: Patrizia Tocci.

space in one gorgeous public project entitled *November 6 and 7*. It commemorates a guerrilla siege of Bogotá's Palace of Justice that was violently ended when the army stormed the building in November 1985. On the seventeenth anniversary of the siege, some 280 wooden chairs were lowered from the roof of the Palace of Justice, one each for each of the victims. Salcedo remained faithful to the forensic reports and sequenced the chairs according to spatial and temporal coordinates of the siege itself. The images of chairs dangling outside the facade of the government building and casting their shadows for all to see in that central square in Bogotá received major attention and triggered a public debate on a conflict that, seventeen years after the event, was still not resolved.

One year later, in 2003, in her contribution to the 8th International Istanbul Biennial, Salcedo chose an empty space between two buildings in Istanbul, filling it with approximately 1,550 wooden chairs stacked tightly between the two buildings, which framed the installation on either side (fig. 3). Again site-specificity was key. Once there had been a building here in this formerly Greek and Jewish neighborhood, now rather derelict and spotted with similar empty lots and ruins. Again the empty chairs conjure absence; absence in this case related to migration, displacement, and violent expulsion that took place over many years. The spectator is struck by the precision with which the chairs are arranged to suggest a flush facade, when looked at from the side, and a chaotic disorganized jumble if viewed frontally. As in the earlier work, the human body is absent, present only in the trace. The installation lasted only for three months once the biennial closed, different from that other missing house installation created in Berlin's Grosse Hamburgerstrasse, center of Eastern Jewish immigration around 1900, by Christian Boltanski. This installation from 1989 is still visible today, and certainly one of the canonical works of site-specific installation in Germany. As opposed to Salcedo, Boltanski has left the space of the missing house empty, but through painstaking research found the names, professions, and dates of birth and death of the Jewish and non-Jewish renters who had lived in the building during the Third Reich, before it was destroyed in a bombing attack in 1945. These names and data were then put on signs fixed to the outside walls of the adjoining buildings at the appropriate level where the renters' apartments would have been. Boltanski and Salcedo demonstrate two very different yet resonating ways of mobilizing absence in urban space, to give testimony of its hidden history, its submerged social memories. The comparison of Istanbul and Berlin points to the multidirectionality of artistic memory projects today, a crossing of European borders in both directions.

Site-specificity also characterizes *Shibboleth*, a work from 2007, executed in the Tate Modern in London. Overcoming initial opposition by museum officials, Salcedo cut a deep crack—at points widening, at others bifurcating or narrowing—into the floor of the huge Turbine Hall, now the entrance space to this vast museum building which formerly



Fig. 3. Doris Salcedo, *1550 Chairs Stacked Between Two City Buildings*, 2003. Photograph: Sergio Clavijo.

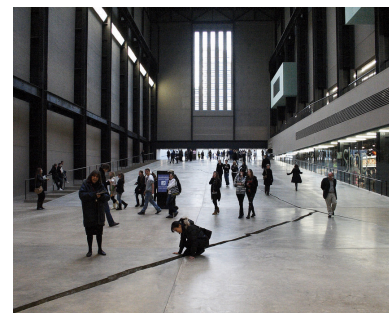


Fig. 4. Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2017.



Fig. 5. Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007 (detail). Photograph: Marcus Leith and Andrew Dunkley.

served as an energy plant (fig. 4 and 5). Like Gordon Matta-Clark cut and split houses in his architectural experiments in the 1970s, Salcedo split one of the major sites of contemporary art in Europe in two. The gesture was more than merely architectural. The title gives a clue. “Shibboleth” is the biblical word from Judges 12 that cannot be pronounced correctly by foreigners trying to cross the Jordan River to safety. Recognized as “other” by their pronunciation, they are killed on arrival. The theme of immigration as exclusion and a denial of rights is articulated in the Tate’s Turbine Hall. It reverberates not only socially but also aesthetically, as a mark in the museum, in that it points to a structure of exclusion in the canonization of modern European art itself. It conjures up a history of European modernism which, until very recently, has refused to acknowledge modernisms in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Inserted into the concrete sides of the crevice, and only perceptible by bending over the crack, is steel mesh fencing—not the barbed wire of Nazi or Serbian camps, but the steel mesh of today’s border fortifications. Concrete walls are of course intended to keep the barbarians outside, whether in Israel or at the Mexican-American border. The pronunciation of a word divides the world into friend or foe with deadly consequence. Biblical past and the contemporary present clash in this work that reflects on the continuities between colonialism, racism, and immigration in powerful visual and architectural language. What better place to do this than that major London museum of contemporary art, on the banks of the River Thames? Today the crevices are no longer there. They have been filled with cement. Only the outline of the crack is still visible, all along the Turbine Hall. It is like a scar of the wound Salcedo inflicted on the Tate Modern; a wound, however, that is really a wound in Europe’s constitution itself, as daily reports of migrants fleeing Africa or the Middle East remind us.

An analogous structure of weaving the local into the transnational or global emerges in Kentridge’s work. Of course, significant differences pertain between postcolonialism—and thus the image of Europe—in Africa by comparison with Latin America.⁴ Kentridge addresses issues of colonial rule much more directly than Salcedo. Central to his work on the media of memory is the shadow play, as in *Shadow Procession* (1999), a three-part stop-motion animation film which evokes apartheid and post-apartheid times in South Africa (fig. 6). Over a decade later he created another shadow procession in *The Refusal of Time*, a stunning black box installation first shown in a dilapidated former railway building at Documenta 13, in 2012 (fig. 7). In this project South African memory politics broadened into an investigation of modern regimes of time (International Meridian Conference, Washington, D.C., 1884) and of space (Berlin Conference, 1884–85). These regimes of time and space still rule our world. Kentridge, inspired by Einstein’s special theory of relativity of 1905, evokes the instability and reversibility of time itself. As Einstein argued against earlier physics, there is no universal absolute time, no “universally audible tick-tock,” as Kentridge’s collaborator, Peter Galison, quoting Einstein, once put it, only a multiplicity of times.⁵ This multiplicity,



Fig. 6. William Kentridge, *Shadow Procession*, 1999 (still).



Fig. 7. Installation view William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

politically theorized by Ernst Bloch as non-synchronicities within modernity, is enacted in *The Refusal of Time*, and it has far-reaching implications for art and politics in our still very modern age.

It is well-known how, in a deliberate anti-Platonic move, Kentridge has always challenged his viewers to learn from shadows, from the black that opposes and pervades the white, the darkness that comes with the light. All memories are plagued by shadows and by the insecurity of remembering. They can be fleeting, elusive, subject to metamorphosis; they often border on the invisible and the forgotten. To be articulated in art they will need embodiment in objects and media: visual, verbal, musical. Their embodiment cannot be solid and fixed, nor can it be limited to one medium. Memorized events cannot be represented in a mimetic fashion. They are inherently haunted by the limits of representation. Realism as an effect has to flow from the construction and manipulation of objects, as in Salcedo's sculptures and installations or in Kentridge's shadow plays. Kentridge works on invisibility even more radically than Salcedo, not just on the invisibility or fading of events to be grieved, but on the invisibility and instability of time itself. That is why *The Refusal of Time* as an anticolonial act directed against an imposed European time regime is central to all of his work, and why its narrative montage culminates in another shadow procession at its end.

The installation is a black box with projections moving from left to right on three walls. Spectators entering the black box first encounter a huge breathing machine (Kentridge calls it the "elephant") in the back of the room. The rhythmically moving machine, made up of mechanical wooden parts, resembles a pump or a large loom, and it fills the black box with its clanking noises and its ever louder exhalations. It embodies both the breath of the human body and the pneumatic pumps used in late nineteenth-century Paris to coordinate time among the city's clocks. Bellowing like an elephant, it combines the organic and the mechanical dimensions of time regimes and their measurement.

Several image sequences of *The Refusal of Time* remind us of Georges Méliès's early film techniques and their visual trickeries, which were already explicit in some of Kentridge's earlier work. Reiteration is, after all, one of his major creative techniques. In clear reference to Méliès's melodramatic shorts, Galison called the installation a "metaphysical melodrama about time, reversibility, and fate."⁶

The image sequence begins with a ticking metronome that is then multiplied on the three walls of the black box and increasingly loses its beat, either speeding up or slowing down. The spectator wonders whether the multiple metronomes tick at different speeds, but then recognizes that the film is sped up for some and slowed down for others. The effect, at any rate, is loud chaos as the metronome goes out of control, a first instance of the refusal

of an orderly progression of time. It is film itself as a medium that reveals how time is out of joint. As a medium, it makes the relativity of time visible.

Ticking metronomes and clocks of all kinds are projected throughout onto the walls, with clock hands moving chaotically forward or backward, representing time at the most palpable and unpredictable level. Then there are several repetitive, slapstick-like sketches of a love scene, a man in a vestment like a globe, and Kentridge himself, doubled up and messing farcically with reality (fig. 8). As in early cinema, reverse projection is used to make things run backwards in time—thrown books flying back into the hands of the thrower; the shattering of objects being undone as they are restored to their original wholesome state (the coffee pot). Drawing liberally on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century experiments to discipline, measure, and control time, time is revealed not just in its relativity, but in its ability to wreak havoc.

Greenwich Mean Time and the measurement of the world are presented as European techniques of domination, calling forth active anticolonial resistance in Africa. In one of the sequences of projections that cover three walls of the black box, a primitive bomb cocktail is mixed in a laboratory that features various objects recognizable from Kentridge's earlier films. In this visual narrative the actual anarchist bombing of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich in 1894 is fictionally transposed to colonial Dakar in 1916. Here the homemade bomb blows up the laboratory itself, which simultaneously functions as the artist's studio. The revolt against Greenwich Mean Time is coded as an anticolonial refusal of an imposed regime of time, and simultaneously as an aesthetic project. The refusal of the linearity and one-directionality of time, as characterizing ideologies of progress, has always been a central principle of modern artistic practice, but in Kentridge it is mobilized in direct relation to colonialism and its imposition of a new regime of time and space.

In another sequence Kentridge ironizes the "white man's burden" with a film projected onto the wall showing him carrying a black woman on his shoulders. It appears together with African maps interspersed with newspaper headlines announcing revolt in Burundi, revolt of the Hereros, etc., pointing to colonial violence. Then, as beneficiary of white rule in a self-critical gesture, he arranges a sequence of chairs in such a way that an African woman can step comfortably from one to the other while he frantically brings the last chair she stepped on to the front, so that she can continue her march ahead. Female African figures play an important role in this installation, as in Kentridge's earlier films, and they deserve more attention. One highpoint in the bombing scene is the exuberant dance of an African woman in flowing white gowns right after the explosion, a dance that proceeds in reverse motion and with white pieces of paper rising around the dancer. This exuberant dance in white offers a life-affirming counterpoint



Fig. 8. William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012 (still). Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

to the shadow procession at the end of *The Refusal of Time*, which culminates with black confetti whirling upwards until it covers the whole screen. Though here the procession consists of real human figures, rather than black paper cutouts in the *Shadow Procession* of 1999, they also carry objects of everyday life with them as they trudge forward. Several musicians leading the procession play an anarchic rhythmic tune on wind instruments—tuba, trumpet, trombone—accompanied by drumming as they march to the rhythm in the procession. The wind instruments join the bellowing of the mechanical elephant. Rhythms and sounds come alive in accordance with human breath, which can never be subjected to a strict metrical regime. And yet this shadow procession does not end in open-ended surreal anarchy, as does the 1999 film, but in black confetti covering the whole screen until everything has been swallowed up, as if by a black hole.

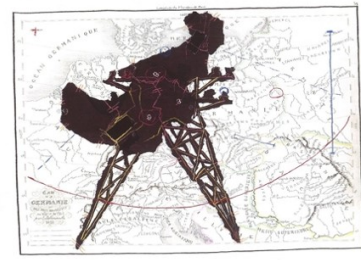


Fig. 9. William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012 (still).
Courtesy of The
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In an earlier reading of Kentridge's *Shadow Procession* of 1999, I emphasized the indetermination of this procession, which simply breaks off at the end.⁷ The viewers do not quite know whether its purpose is mourning, supplication, flight, or protest. It was also indeterminate in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Today, when worldwide refugee flows and migrations have reached unprecedented proportions, who will not think of the contemporary situation? Taken together with Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, we confront an art that registers the political earthquakes and enforced dislocations of our time without pointing fingers and apportioning blame. Yet the questions linger, as does the need for a post-national civic politics to be affirmed by the European Union.

One final image that demonstrates the imbrications of Kentridge's understanding of Africa and Europe as having always been intertwined is a black shadowy female figure walking on damaged stilts across a map of Germany from West to East, with the Latin names of Roman provinces inscribed on the map, itself a nineteenth-century chart representing Central Europe during the Roman Empire (fig. 9). Radical compression of time and space; the contours of the figure's upper body seem to suggest the contours of the map of South Africa itself. Map across map, black across white, an imaginary superimposition with borders deliberately crossed and denied. Kentridge calls her the "Pylon Lady."

What conclusions can finally be drawn from the preceding juxtaposition? I suggest the following: Kentridge and Salcedo's practices are no longer modernist in a traditional, canonical sense, defined by Europe's outer borders. Classic Northern Transatlantic modernism and avant-gardism appear in this work as memory, citation, and pointed bricolage. There emerges an alternative memorial art praxis that may strike us as surprising in its self-conscious coupling of aesthetics and politics. If it is avant-garde at all, it is an avant-gardism quite different in its temporal imagination from that of the European historical avant-garde. Avant-gardism

here not as a model of progress or utopia dependent on the experience of shock (as in Benjamin), or on the most advanced, cutting-edge state of the artistic material (as in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory), or, for that matter, on the disavowal of realisms (as in much French poststructuralism); rather, avant-gardism as a challenge to think politically through spectacularly sensuous installations that create affect both on the local and the global stage. Avant-gardism not as programmatic destruction of traditional notions of autonomy and the work, but as insistence on the "differential specificity" of aesthetic work.⁸ Given its embeddedness in social and political critique, this work is geared in its aesthetic construction toward disrupting the automatism of allegedly autonomous vision, transparent knowledge, and public opinion.⁹

Kentridge and Salcedo's work thus reinscribes and marks a boundary between artistic practice and all that is part of a presentist visual culture of quick consumption and careless forgetting. Whether in fleeting shadow plays or densely material sculptural installations, the remembrance of historical trauma and contemporary politics are aesthetically mediated in such a way that deep structures of domination and social conflict in our world are illuminated for the spectator. Seeing *Shibboleth* in light of *The Refusal of Time* reminds us how the history of European colonialism and its drawing of geographic and temporal borders continues in the contemporary crisis of migration. It points to the EU's political inability to create not a totally open, but a reasonably porous border regime in line with its propagation of cosmopolitanism and human rights. In this sense their work is political, through and through. In its formal and technical strategies it marks a refusal of a technological triumphalism that privileges only the digital and the social media. It is no longer a philosophy of history that anchors this kind of avant-gardism, but on the contrary, a sustained doubt in merely technological progress combined with a political critique of a failing present that has not redeemed the promises of modernity. This avant-gardism from simultaneously outside and inside European borders offers an intriguing paradox: it implodes the distinction between tradition and the avant-garde, because it transforms the critique of modernity, which was always already part of European avant-gardism itself, for a postcolonial globalizing world and its memories of Europe.

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and *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (2015).

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1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
 2. See Andreas Huyssen, "Unland: The Orphan's Tunic," in Doris Salcedo, by Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen (London: Phaidon Press, 2000), 90–103.
 3. The most comprehensive and incisive treatment of Salcedo's work can be found in Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
 4. Among the many recent publications on Kentridge, I have found the following most useful: William Kentridge and Rosalind C. Morris, *That Which Is Not Drawn: Conversations* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2014), and Rosalind Krauss, ed., *William Kentridge, October Files 21* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
 5. Peter Galison, "Time, Art, and Science," in William Kentridge: *The Refusal of Time* (Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral, 2012), 315.
 6. *Ibid.*, 311.
 7. Andreas Huyssen, William Kentridge, Nalini Malani: *The Shadow Play as Medium of Memory* (Milan: Charta, 2013).
 8. See Rosalind Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 56.
 9. On this question of medium aesthetics, see the incisive discussion in Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012); especially the chapter entitled "Medium and Form," 79–140.