



Seeing Beside *The Great Yes, The Great No*
William Kentridge's Collaborative Chamber Opera

Field of Inquiry, Artwork, Thesis and Ideas:

In this essay I intend to explore William Kentridge's *The Great Yes, The Great No*. This most recent chamber opera is a transmedia visual poetic matrix of dynamic images and spinning words (see [The Centre for the Less Good Idea](#)).

To situate the textured aesthetic forms that configure the opera, I begin with outlining the collaborative terrain of the theatrical production—choral conductor and dancer Nhlanhla Mahlangu and theater maker Phala Ookeditse Phalal are Kentridge's co-conspirators in the fictionalized historical project. Poetic locutions, montage verse, sculptural costumes, masks in motion, animated drawings, and a quasi-shamanic choir of women (reappropriated Greek chorus) configure the project. It is an ideal work of art for ekphrastic practice.

As an archive (even auto-referential *oeuvre*) of both surrealist art and a historic transatlantic sojourn, *The Great Yes, The Great No* retells a salient 20th century moment of exile, liberation, and creative freedom: the scene is the 1941 sea voyage from Marseilles to Martinique, wartime escape from Vichy France. The setting and set are a ship of fools, and the performance and narrative in tandem aim to reinvent this remarkable moment and milieu: the cast of characters include Josephine Baker, Andre Breton, Aimé Césaire, Josephine Bonaparte, Wilfredo Lam, Frantz Fanon and others.

Kentridge's 'The Centre for the Less Good Idea' (HOW series, lectures and demonstrations) was the incubating nexus of the work; however, as a kind of anti-hierarchical avant-garde production, the operatic form also continues to take on new inventiveness as it transforms in venues across the globe through its own act of making: in other words, *stasis* does not exist in the cosmos or enacting of the work. In this way, *The Great Yes, The Great No* applies pressure to the oft-stationary and discreet category of art works.

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The three original guiding pillars of Kentridge's work likewise configure my own interpretative practice: one, "the world is leaking;" two, "the dead report for duty;" and three, "the women pick up the pieces." These phrases guide my meditation.

Thinkers, Scholars in Dialogue:

Kentridge's radically open-ended collaborative artwork calls for a disparate range of thinkers. While I have an array of writers and artists in mind as I draft this pitch, here I note a few in brief. In some way, Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) and Eugenio Barba's *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology* (1995) exemplify my own approach to the method and practice of ekphrasis. Their poesis and engagement situate the fluid dynamism of language, image and performance. Diaz's attention to tactile memory and palpable experience—for example, her descriptions of a snakeskin shedding, the rattling **enunciative** letter 'S, as well as the forms of sound and the shape of the mouth—interweave to create an inexorably bound map of meaning. Barba's work on theater and the universal expressiveness of gesture, feeling and the actor-artist are in parallel dialogue with Kentridge's most recent comprehensive work of art, *The Great Yes, The Great No*. Most recently too, the academic scholarship of Irene V. Smalls—her book *The Organic Line* (2024)—performs the interpretive work of ekphrasis. Brazilian artist Lygia Clark is the most central artist in Small's project, and the book situates Clark's novel mid-20th century approach to art-making: the relations between spectator and picture, the thresholds of aesthetic practice, and the fluid definitions of art-making are disclosed through Small's brilliant descriptive tapestry.¹

Relevance:

As an historian, writer, and visual thinker, your current call for ekphrastic contributions is precisely the kind of salient intellectual and aesthetic work in such dire need during these times. As you can infer from my above description, the postcolonial imaginativeness and transdisciplinary episteme of Kentridge's work would fit well in the current issue of *Dilettante Army*.

Thank you for reading.

¹ For a short introduction to my own interpretation of ekphrasis and the myriad poet-philosophers informing my work, I note a few relevant thinkers and interlocutors here below: Walter Benjamin's arcade project—his apocalyptically-attuned and messianic historical sensibilities (as well as his essayistic mode of thinking through words and images in tandem); the modernist mystic Clarice Lispector, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Gaston Bachelard, Matthew Barney, Andrei Tarkovsky, Jan Elsner, Andre Breton. I would love to talk more with the team and find a set of terms and terrain that make sense. Even perhaps some version or an essence of Guy Davenport's methodically detailed and historically precise *Geography of the Imagination* has its own force here.