

The South African artist opens a new space in which failure is fostered.

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William Kentridge

Failure is welcomed and doubt encouraged at The Centre for the Less Good Idea, William Kentridge's new interdisciplinary arts incubator in Johannesburg. For its inaugural season, artists, poets, digital designers, dancers, actors, and even boxers came together, in Kentridge's words, "to see the meaning made in the process of making" rather than focus entirely on any predetermined goals. This mission is characteristic of the South African artist, whose work—including charcoal drawings, stop-motion animation films, sculpture, opera and theater productions—is an open-ended accumulation of objects, people and ideas. This endless accumulation connects to his unwillingness to suppress the absurd, which he discusses here along with failure and the absence inside artists that inspires them to create.

What drives your suspicion of clarity? It's a matter of taking the category of the absurd seriously—saying it isn't just about the stupid or the joke—and demonstrating what it is to follow through with something that has a fundamen-

tal illogic to it. Apartheid in South Africa could be described as a system followed to its nth degree but based on fundamental illogic. It gave me the belief that the absurd was an accurate way of describing the world and, in some ways, is a form of naturalism. Working randomly, provisionally, and with doubt are techniques of the studio, but they have wider implications outside.

"To be an artist is to fail, as no others dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion," Beckett wrote. Biographies, you've said, could be written about being rescued from one's failures. If we must fail, what can help us persevere? It's easy to talk about failure after you've come through the other end, when failures can be seen simply as stepping stones. At the time, all failure needs to be felt as deep failure. It's extremely painful—a kind of annihilation of the self—but you somehow have to pick yourself up and find justification for it. This is very often dependent on outside circumstances: the support of a partner or friends; parental

interests; particular things you've read that give you courage. These engines help one get through failure into something different.

Does private art—meant only for its creator—exist? For me, it seems kind of inconceivable. Making art has to do with taking something from inside yourself and changing something in the world, whether it's the blank sheet of paper that now has writing on it or the clay that's changed its shape. It's about the insufficiency of the self. If you are enough in yourself, there'd be no need to leave outside traces to prove you exist. Being an artist addresses a fundamental sense of incompleteness. So, art that is entirely private is possible only in so far as you split yourself already, into the viewer and the maker—in which case you're still demanding there is an external viewer.

How necessary to life is erasure, such as forgetting? There's a scientific debate about black holes: whether, if an encyclopedia is dropped into one, everything is lost forever or every keystroke is held and exists as a string vibrat-

ing at the edge of the event horizon. It's really more of a psychological debate between people who need to feel the presence of a soul—something to continue, something that holds everything—and those who say, "let it pass" and have no hope for further transcendence. One of the terrors of the digital age is that nothing is lost.

The past is never fully removed in your work, especially your charcoal drawings and films in which the charcoal erasures are incomplete and visible as erasures. Would you consider yourself against minimalism? Anti-Zen would be my mantra, if I had to have one. The peripheral thinking that peripheral vision gives us is an important way of making sense of the world. It's obviously easier to pare down things and just have the main idea. But sometimes the mess at the edges—yesterday's newspaper, not just the perfect Ming vase—is the connection we need to see how things that seem fragmentary and at the edge are actually fundamental to our construction.



Photograph: Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery and William Kentridge.

Opposite: *Head (Brushwork I)*, Laser-cut steel painted with acrylic based paint, 2015.