

Time After Time: William Kentridge's Heterochronies

William Kentridge's *The Refusal of Time* was first conceived for documenta (13) in 2012 in collaboration with the film editor Catherine Meyburgh, the composer and sound artist Philip Miller, and the American historian of science, Peter Galison. It has since been exhibited in Johannesburg, Berlin, London, and many other cities; I saw the version at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester in 2019. In an essay for Documenta adapted from his book *Empires of Time*, Galison explains the inspiration for this work in the invention of universal standards of weight, length, and time in the late nineteenth century (Kentridge and Galison 2-3). He describes a ceremony that took place in Sèvres on the outskirts of Paris in 1889, in which the universal metre — a specific physical ruler — and the universal kilogram — again, a specific weight, chosen from a number of near-identical specimens — were literally buried in a vault, to exist for evermore as Platonic incarnations of the ideal of abstract measure (though it was recently reported that the universal kilogram has started to lose weight (McKie)). These measures were part of the larger effort to standardise time, in a set-up known as the metre-kilogram-second system.

At the centre of Parisian time stood a master clock in the Control Room of the Paris observatory, distributing time through pneumatic technology under the streets of Paris. In the final of his *Six Drawing Lessons*, a collection of essays originally delivered as the Norton Lectures at Harvard, Kentridge cites this history as an early impetus for the form of *The Refusal of Time* (partly because this pumping of time resonated with Joseph Beuys's pumping of honey at Documenta in 1977). Snatches of this essay/lecture are broadcast within the space of the installation, as Kentridge explains how a "network of pipes and tubes" was constructed under the streets of Paris, transmitting the "breath" of a "mother clock," made with a powerful bellows, to its "daughter clocks" across the city. Every minute, this "breath" or

“pant of air” would travel through the pipes and tubes to shift the time of the “daughter clocks” forward. An entire city is breathing in unison, in harmony with the idea “of perfect time, of perfect order” (167). The city becomes a coherent organism, or a perfect machine, insofar as it is bound together by a single and centrally administered order of time.

At the centre of global time, in this picture, stood the Royal Observatory in Greenwich. The Greenwich Observatory was the centrepiece of the Eurocentric regime of temporal calculation which, in direct collaboration with cartographic space, “subordinated all regions of the globe to Greenwich Mean Time.” Kentridge explains:

The perfection of chronometers had long been the aim of geographers, to fix more precisely the positions of islands and continents in relation to Europe. With the spread of cables under sea and over land, that followed the development of electric telegraphy, time was taken from the master clocks of London and Paris and sent to the colonies.

Strings of cables, birds’ nests of copper, turned the world into a giant switchboard, for commerce and control. The world was covered by a huge dented bird cage of time zones, of lines of agreement of control, all sent out by the clock rooms of Europe. (167-9)

Time, in this sense, is a real-world installation on the planetary scale. Just as the lines of maps in the history of imperial relations instituted a new “space discipline” in J B Harley’s classic analysis (Harley 285), so the lines of cables that traversed the ocean floors instantiated a time discipline that was equally essential to the workings of imperial domination.¹ It is under the signs of the clock and the map that colonial modernity became a system of simultaneity, gathering a world of difference and incommensurability into a regime of the same. There is thus a clear line to be drawn from what Peter Sloterdijk calls the epoch of “terrestrial globalization” to the “third globalization” of networks, virtuality, and technological exteriority, which hinges on the invention of spatio-temporal equivalence (*Bubbles* 66). The point is that this epoch of space relies upon a historically novel systematisation of global time.

Under this regime, time appears as the ultimate example of what Charles Perrow calls a “tightly coupled system,” as it is peculiarly vulnerable to the breakdown occasioned by a “normal accident.” It is as a system created to apprehend and calibrate different tempos and rhythms that modern time exhibits a heightened vulnerability to accidents or acts of sabotage which no amount of planning can dispel (*Normal Accidents* 5). Any breakdown is in a sense irreparable because time will always have passed; if the machine of time breaks down, time itself is exposed in its nonidentity with this time. It is for this reason that Homi Bhabha’s famous idea of the “time lag” of enunciation is so fitting for the colonial context: Bhabha’s reading of the subversion of colonial authority has a great deal to do with the time it materially takes for a communication to travel from the metropole to the colony (*The Location of Culture* 135). This regime of time is absolutely opposed to the heterochronic: to another, unpredictable or incalculable manifestation of time. Time also, in this context, crucially becomes a target of revolt. Andreas Malm has claimed that hymns to our arrival in a post-historical epoch of space are emphatically subverted by the Anthropocene (*Fossil Capital* 6-7), and indeed the epoch of space from the perspective of the dominated has always been an epoch of temporal subjugation and resistance: “Local suns were shifted further and further from local zeniths” (Kentridge et al xiv).

The Refusal of Time explores how the master time of colonial modernity was installed as a planetary system, under which the variable, lived, local temporalities of the earth were subordinated. But it is also about the processes and practices by which this time may be resisted or refused. Kentridge speculates that all revolts against colonial rule are revolts against the pervasiveness of European time:

The resistance to colonial rule—the Chilembwe revolt of 1915, the Herero revolt of 1906, the movement and actions against Europe, that spread through all the continents and colonies, while articulated in terms of cattle and land, were all attempts to resist the weight and control of Europe. GIVE US BACK OUR SUN. (*Six Drawing Lessons* 169)

[insert: image 1 Ann Masina in performance version, *Refuse the Hour*

Image file : Refuse the hour Ds01099bfsimon118

Image credits: *Refuse the Hour*, Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg

Photo: Friedemann Simon]

This resistance is reflected in Kentridge's excavation of a history of time's refusal, including the case of Martial Bourdin, the anarchist immortalised in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* who wanted to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, or in a different register Einstein in his refusal of Newtonian time: the piece concludes with a meditation upon relativity and quantum mechanics. They also include the capacity of the artistic installation itself to refuse any one time as it instead parades an irresolvable series of entangled and antagonistic temporalities, borrowing from this history of resistance to offer "a calibration of the cracks and fragmentations" (*Six Drawing Lessons* 169). This is a counterinstallation of time, in which time as a systemic construction is exposed and unworked.

Heterochronies

My aim in this essay is to explore Kentridge's project as a particular thinking of time. First of all, the concept of the "refusal of time" expresses a philosophical, political, and formal resistance to the planetary regime of temporal domination that emerged out of the age of European empire. The installation taken in its entirety, though, extends beyond this purview to confront the workings of a range of systematised temporal domains (colonialism, manual and artistic labour, industry, cinema, physics, music, dance). While time emerges materially in these domains via rhythmic inter and intra-actions mediated by power, the installation draws on a history of anticolonial revolt against time and estranges these temporal systems through its very form, releasing dizzying heterochronic energies and disrupting habituated experiences of time's homogenous neutrality. Kentridge's title also exhibits a

suggestive ambiguity. For Kentridge, the refusal of time is in part time's refusal to listen to our resistance to it — at the end of the day, we die anyway. If time here appears to be an inhuman force that resists every refusal of it, then this point can be pushed in a different direction: time may not only refuse our resistance, but every administration, systematisation, instrumentalisation of it: the measures of the end of the day, the human life, the historical epoch. I suggest that Kentridge's counterinstallation of time activates this refusal as a force of affirmation: insofar as time falls short of or exceeds the regimentation of the clock, it expresses the possibility of a different and more just reality. In what follows, I place this installation into dialogue with contemporary thinkers of the politics of time, to approach a mode of heterochronic thought (encompassing theory, art and politics) that insists upon time as potentialising force. The task of politics, or of the politics of art, is to force this witness, to push time to affirm and reveal its potential. It is in pursuit of this argument that I now want to introduce the idea of the heterochronic.

The relevance of the concept of the heterochronic to critical theory can be traced back to Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces." Foucault introduces the term in outlining his fourth principle of heterotopias: he states that heterotopias are "most often linked to slices in time" and that they open onto "heterochronies" (26). Foucault states that he has chosen to speak of the heterochronic for the sake of symmetry, and so we can imagine that, like heterotopias, heterochronies have "the curious property of being in relation with all the other [times], but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24, my edit). Foucauldian heterochronies seem to inherit the enigmatic character of their loosely defined sister term, but are treated even more briefly: like the heterotopic site, we can perhaps say that heterochronies appear to be linked to all of the other times and to contradict them. Foucault's first example is the cemetery, in which "men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time"; indeed,

the heterotopic intensity of the cemetery seems to emerge out of the “strange heterochrony” of individual death and the “quasi-eternity” of “dissolution and disappearance.” More generally, Foucault states that heterochronies appear first within heterotopias of “indefinitely accumulating time,” such as museums and libraries, which belong to an idea of western (colonial) modernity, to

the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages

Standing opposed to these heterotopias are those in which time appears in its “most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect”: this is the time of festivals and fairgrounds, of “stands, displays, heteroclitic objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers.”

Since *The Refusal of Time* is an artwork that is usually installed in a gallery or festival space (as at Documenta), it would seem to belong to the time of heterotopias, equipped even to bring the “transitory, precarious” aspect of time into the accumulative project of the museum. But this could be said of any temporary installation, and rather than follow Foucault I want to mobilise the heterochronic outside of this heterotopological framework. I am more interested in connecting this artwork to other readings of time’s otherness that focus on its material emergence out of a conflict among times. My aim is to think the heterochronic and the *chronic* together, not to distribute and separate these elements in space but to approach the inherence of other times within every (apparently) homogeneous space and time.

It is here that I want to invoke Jacques Rancière, who has mobilised the idea of the heterochronic in a way that resonates more directly with the concerns of Kentridge’s work. In an essay published in 2012, “In What Time Do We Live?,” Rancière develops a critique of the postmodern idea of the end of grand narratives, suggesting that the “time in which we live” is just a rearrangement of the main narrative elements of a sense of historical evolution,

of the intelligibility of the world, and of its possible transformation.² The end of history is fundamentally an account of historical necessity which even inherits the Marxist commitment to the intelligibility of the lived world (in the form of the postmodern “loss of belief”): all that is new is a disconnection from the “sense of the possible” to which historical necessity and intelligibility, in the Marxist account, were linked. The modernist grand narrative is still with us, and in whatever contradictory ways it may appear tells “the same storyline about time,” with the same result: “the impossibility of resisting the law of time.” For Rancière, there are two crucial aspects to the time these storylines construct. On the one hand, they construct a “global one-way time,” “unique and linear,” “homogeneous,” but they also generate an “inner differentiation” of this time, which renders those who live in it “unable to understand how it proceeds and where it leads”: these individuals are always moving “too quickly or too slowly to find themselves contemporaneous with its intelligibility.”

Rancière’s reading of the dominative regime of time is less concerned with its technological installation than with the political effects of storylines about time, but these effects and these storylines are expressions of the same history of the temporal colonisation of life that concerns Kentridge and Galison. Rancière’s argument makes even clearer how the imposition of time is also a tool by which the very capacity to grasp time *as* imposition is diminished. A similar point emerges in Jonathan Crary’s book *24/7*, which offers a clarifying explanation of how neoliberal time has been emptied of the possibilities of “repose or regeneration,” in particular of sleep or daydream (27). The time of 24/7 is a time at once of “mass synchronization,” in Crary’s invocation of Bernard Stiegler, and a time of fragmented and parcellised experience that undermines the capacity to resist, reimagine and recreate time. People are caught within a regime of mass synchronisation but are moving “too quickly” (in this instance) to find it intelligible, to become “contemporaneous *with*” this intelligibility, to apprehend its tempo. Rancière, for his part, identifies certain institutions that

are dedicated to questions of temporal coincidence and non-coincidence, such as elections, which reduce the time of the political to the time of the state, supranational institutions of temporal harmonisation, which organise the long-term convergence of times, and mass media which, rather than disseminating spectacles of eventual immediacy, on the contrary constructs a divergence of times, separating those who know from those who do not. These can be considered further specifications of the fundamental character of modern time as a planetary system. But this is all a plot; these institutions create reality but are at the same time fictions designed to incapacitate people. In summary:

There are several times in one time. There is a dominant form of temporality, for sure, a “normal” time that is the time of domination. Domination gives it its divisions and its rhythms, its agendas and its schedules in the short and long run: time of work, leisure, and unemployment; electoral campaigns, degree courses, etc. It tends to homogenize all forms of temporality under its control, defining thereby what the present of our world consists of, which futures are possible, and which definitely belong to the past—thereby indicating the impossible. This is what consensus means: the monopoly of the forms of describing the perceptible, the thinkable, and the doable. But there are other forms of temporality, dissentious forms of temporality that create distensions and breaks in that temporality. (26)

As this paragraph makes clear, this essay’s reading of time coheres with Rancière’s broader theory of the distribution of the sensible, referring to the sociopolitical rules that determine what can be “apprehended by the senses,” to the procedures of inclusion and exclusion that separate the visible from the invisible, the audible from the inaudible, regulating what can be “said, thought, made, or done” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 85). The “distribution of times” works in an analogous way: it creates and constrains social capacities by reproducing temporal homogeneity, or by reproducing a consensus which monopolises the organisation of the different tempos that compose a given (dominative) temporal regime. In the terms of Rancière’s thought, the “police” names the force for reproducing this temporal regime, and the “political” for that “dissentious” temporality which distends or breaks up and

redistributes time.

It is in this context that Rancière recovers the concept of heterochrony, understood as a manifestation of the politics of time, since it is “a redistribution of times that invents new capacities of framing the present” (“In What Time Do We Live?” 36). The significance of heterochronies for Rancière is that they provide a way out of dominative time, a way out of what he calls “the plot of the homogeneity of time and of the incapacity of those who live in it” (26). The heterochronia is not a site, then, but a force of politics, an expression of dissensus, an emancipatory subjectivisation — one that operates in, through and against time. Rancière outlines two main arenas of temporal politics: intervals and interruptions. The former denotes “the construction of another time *in* the time of domination, the time of equality *within* the time of inequality” (my emphasis). It is about, for example, the re-appropriation of the intervals provided by the temporality of work, intervals that are afforded within the “divisions and rhythms,” accelerations and decelerations, of domination. Interruptions, by contrast, name moments of breakdown in the “social machines” of dominative time, from the banality of late or cancelled trains or buses to street protest. Rancière mentions the insurrections of the Arab Spring and one should add the more recent examples of Black Lives Matter demonstrations or Extinction Rebellion — both of which are forms of insurgency against the times of domination, state murder and ecocide, and both of which use time, blocking up the urban avenues of spatial and economic circulation and asserting, in the most material way, a *standstill*. As Ananya Roy writes of resistances to slum evictions and neoliberal development in urban India, blockades “encircle” the movements of capital, shutting down the imagined dynamism of the “world-class” city: such blockades conjure the Benjaminian law of “dialectics at a standstill.” They are also a lived experience (Roy 259-60). The standstill forces the revelation of a time outside of the measures of time: time passes on the blockaded street in defiance of the signals of the clock and the traffic light,

beyond the rhythms of extractivism and state violence. Street protest announces, from the perspective of the larger system of time, a burst of *arrhythmia*, as a single renegade rhythm introduces a stoppage or internal estrangement into the temporal dynamics of late capitalist violence. This internal estrangement is time in a new heterochronic guise: the blockaded street is nothing other than a heterochronia. As Roy asks, “at such a site...is a different politics possible? At such a site, can alternative futures be imagined?” (276)

In a reading of time and worldliness that references Kentridge and takes in Marx, Heidegger, Arendt, Fanon, and Derrida, the postcolonial theorist Pheng Cheah writes the following:

Capitalist accumulation needs and takes time. Capital is augmented by rational technologies and calculations that appropriate and manage time for the maximal extraction of surplus value. But capital can neither give itself time nor destroy it and, moreover, does not want to destroy it. This means that an irreducible principle of real messianic hope is always structural to capitalist globalization. The persistence of time is infrastructural to capital and cannot be destroyed. (*What is a World?* 11)

Cheah argues that the world in this sense has a “literary” structure, but this is only in the sense that literature stands for, or reveals and enacts, the radical potential embedded in time’s persistence. The promise of time is given within the regime that seeks to regulate it, to eliminate that promise: to refuse this regime is to discover time.

The de-activation of the order or the regime of time — clock time, imperial time, urban time — involves the opening of time: time can be experienced outside of the orders that appropriate it, and as such is infused with new possibility. Cheah calls this process “temporalization” (“World Against Globe” 321): the time that actually subtends the operation of a given temporal order may be revealed, because in the unworking of that order such time continues to give itself. This is the resonance of the words adorning a famous Kentridge placard: IN PRAISE OF BAD CLOCKS. Time is glimpsed in bad clocks rather than in those

that *keep* time, that in essence refuse to give it. If bad clocks temporalise, temporalisation accordingly “worlds a world,” where worldliness is conceived as the “sheer force of opening that inheres in the giving and coming of time” (“World Against Globe” 322). This temporalisation or worlding expresses the normative dimension of the *world* in world literature in Cheah’s larger critique, which is embedded in literature reinterpreted as a technology of time. World literature is literature that worlds: it confronts and counteranimates the systematically detemporalised (non)worlds of coloniality. My reading of *The Refusal of Time* borrows the affirmative spirit of Cheah and Rancière’s arguments, rerouted through the specificity of the heterochronies that animate the installation space and the viewer’s experience of it.

Time Machines

The Refusal of Time is a multimedia installation that uses sound, music, and five-channel video projection, and it runs in a loop of about thirty minutes. The videos are projected onto unevenly positioned screens that circle the perimeter of the space. Steel megaphones project the sound, and there are small wooden chairs and stools dotted around. In the centre of the room is what Kentridge calls the “engine” of the piece, the “elephant,” a “kinetic sculpture,” which is in effect a giant, continuously pumping machine of time (Whitworth Gallery, Brochure). It is also described as a lung, a breathing machine, and a bellows, while recalling an accordion and so resonating with Philip Miller’s musical score.

[insert: image 2, the elephant

Image file : [Elephant_NFF3806](#)

Image credits: *Refusal of Time Aalborg 2018* photos Niels Fabaek

] The “elephant” alludes to Charles Dickens’s description of the factories of Coketown in

Hard Times, “where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.” Dickens’s description of Coketown continues: “It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next” (27). Kentridge’s elephant borrows from Dickens’s satirical spirit, since it does not power anything and instead stands as a kinetic monument to the mad and melancholy labour of making and marking time. The idea that systematic time underpins industrial production is subverted, as if industrial production is merely the brainless, automatised expression of this temporal logic, this unrelenting rhythm.

In referencing the steam-engine, the “elephant” indexes the inception of fossil modernity, linking what Malm and others have seen as the inaugural moment of the Anthropocene with the birth of this particular form of mechanical time. This is a master time that emerges out of the histories of industrial capitalism and European imperialism, as the time of the factory is globalised in order to create what Galison calls the “planetary machine” of time (Kentridge et al 158). The location used for the first version of the installation at Documenta was a warehouse in an old train station.³ The station is a significant location. It is precisely not a temporal refuge or heterotopia, as we might imagine the space of a gallery to be, but a place governed by the force of an abstract time that waits for no one. On the other hand, it is a place where the materiality of time is liable to be felt, and most palpably in the malfunctioning of this abstract order: when the train is delayed or cancelled, for example. Heterochrony here appears to be a threat internal to the temporal system. More precisely, it is a threat that is introduced when this abstract system is materialised, incarnated by potentially faulty machines (bad clocks, broken signals, or absent train drivers). In such instances, time

refuses to comply with the order of time; it continues to give itself even as its mechanisms of mediation break down. The station is a monument to temporal order and temporal breakdown, then: *The Refusal of Time* is interested in the history of the former and the experience of the latter.

I should note the deliberate ambiguity of mechanical and organic metaphors in Kentridge's description of the lung or breathing machine that dominates the installation: does it pump in a cold rigour or pulse in a comfortable resonance with our own breathing and heartbeat? Is it a figure for the de-animation of the time that regulates our bodies, or for the disturbing animacy of the industrial machine, its possession by spirit, by breath (where *anima* originally means "breath")? Kentridge describes the meeting of the idea of "the clock as body" and "the body as clock," where time's finitude may be measured by how many breaths we have. But this is also where the refusal of time enters: "If we could know the number of breaths in our lives, the 490 million, the 530 million we will take, and then — breathe more slowly, hold our breath — in our very bodies resist time coming toward us" (*Six Drawing Lessons* 167). This mad resistance reflects Kentridge's investment in the possibilities that inhere in the dilation of the intervals afforded by mechanical, social and even physiological rhythm. And it raises the question of what happens to *our* breathing as we inhabit this heterochronic space. If the installation refuses and discloses time by de-activating, aesthetically, any single temporal order, then this can happen in an embodied way, as the rhythms that animate our bodies interact with the polyrhythmia of the installation. This can also feel like a decentering of the self, as if one's body is paced by some external measure, as if one's breathing and heartbeat is caught within the choreographed fragmentation of the rhythms of the installation.⁴ Such experience is an intensified version of the relationship between social and physiological rhythm that people live every day, in ways that figures such as Foucault, Rancière, Crary and most recently Hartmut Rosa have explained;⁵ the difference

is that *The Refusal of Time* draws attention to these rhythmic (un)workings and de-naturalises them.

[insert: image 3, elephant and metronomes

Image file: metronomes_Kentridge_15(SET_2013_IM)

Image credits: *Refusal of Time*, Sao Paulo, Pinacoteca Octógono, 2012

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The thirty-minute loop begins with the projection of a metronome ticking at sixty beats a minute. Its sound dominates the space but it is also shadowed, visually and aurally, by the slower pulsation of the elephant. Soon we hear snatches of song — the voice of South African singer Ann Masina — and then brass and wind instruments: the tuba, trombone, and saxophone. Thus there is a sense of layered sound and a kind of palimpsest of temporal logics: two synchronising beats that are out of sync with one another — the elephant and metronome — a repetitious but by no means synchronised song, which pulses, exclaims; a tuba that sounds like it belongs to a marching band, until it does not. The metronomes soon fall out of sync with one another, some of them continuing their regular keeping of time, others accelerating madly. Then the metronomes disappear, the room gets quieter, and Kentridge himself appears, climbing over a chair, the same chair, repeatedly. This is the first of the piece's processions, as Kentridge circles the room, and also a vision of mechanical reproducibility, as it is the same short clip of a couple of seconds playing on loop. The piece develops from here: a map appears in the background to the video of Kentridge, its pages turning — linking these temporal logics to the conquest of territory — before the dancer and choreographer Dada Masilo makes her first appearance. Masilo is a long-term collaborator of Kentridge's and her later reenactment of Loïe Fuller's *Serpentine Dance* provides one of the most memorable video sequences.⁶ The map-book closes, Masilo disappears, and the accordion begins.

[insert: image 4, Dada Masilo's Serpentine Dance

Image file : [Serpentine_Dance_DSC_2737](#)]

As this précis of the opening five minutes of the installation indicates, *The Refusal of Time* invokes and interlaces different modes of temporal order and experience in order to create a space not so much of multitemporality, which implies some stable coordination of the different temporal scripts, but of what I have been calling heterochrony, as it refuses, estranges, or deranges the measurable linear time that organises social life and distributes political power. As Christel Stalpaert explains, for example, the metronome was invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a tool for the standardisation of musical tempo, but its rhythmic perfection was seen as mechanical rather than human, undermining the role of music as a form of organic expression (378). Metronomes converted living time (expressive, affective) into dead time (mechanical, standardised), and stand for the prior infiltration of the planetary system of imperial time into the emotional core of the human body. Mieke Bal writes that no clock (and no metronome, presumably) “can regulate [heterochrony] away” (“The Time It Takes” 37). *The Refusal of Time* performs this truth: the metronomes are possessed by the heterochronic power they seek to subdue. What Henri Lefebvre in the language of *Rhythmanalysis* would call *eurhythmia* — the brief resonance of all of the metronomes as they beat as one — quickly gives way to *arrhythmia*, as the elephant insists on its own incompatible pulse, and as the metronomes suddenly start to follow this alternative cue. The piece’s *polyrhythmias* only become more elaborate, expansive, and exhilarating from here, as they exploit the temporalities of video (looping, reversing), of the procession and the march, of the dancing body, of the errant music of Miller’s score. The motif of the procession, which begins with the Kentridge chair sequence, is later connected both with the abjection of enforced labour and the ecstasy of anticolonial revolt, as time is put beside itself. If we follow Lefebvre’s claim that “polyrhythmia” implies the activation of a rhythmic autocriticality, of a rhythm that “analyses itself” (25), we can think of *The Refusal of Time* as an immanent performance of rhythmanalysis (though in some sense all rhythmanalysis is

performed immanently, with rhythms analysing themselves through collisions and divergences with other rhythms, since there is no space outside of rhythm for analysis to unfold). *The Refusal of Time*, furthermore, offers its viewers the glimpse of an experience of a decolonised time, in the sense that the historical fact of the triumph of imperial clock time is offered within a framework that refuses the linearity within which this triumph would be legible. This is not a counterhistory or virtual history: it is a wild refusal of the temporal orientation granted by historical narrative.

Time's Ecstasy?

The blowing up of the meridian is crucial here, as Kentridge retells the story of Bourdin's plan to destroy the Royal Observatory in Greenwich in 1894. In reality, Bourdin's bomb malfunctioned, exploding before he had reached the Observatory and killing him. In Kentridge's version, Bourdin hatches his plan not in London but in a relocated Club Autonomie in Dakar — in 1916. And in this version, when the sticks of dynamite explode they destroy not only the "Clock Room" in the Royal Observatory but also the Engine Room in the Colonial War Office in 1919 and the Map Room in the London Telegraph Office in 1902. There is a recircuited geography and temporality here and a reimagined temporal resistance, which has to encompass not one single node in the system of time but several of them, serving different functions at different historical moments. In the wake of the explosion, Dada Masilo appears dancing in the map room, and here time is inverted as the film plays in reverse. Her reenactment of the serpentine dance is thus doubly estranged. The room in which she performs is strewn with sheets of paper, and her movements seem to propel them impossibly into the air. As Kentridge suggests, "Maybe what we remember most

are these wonderful and bizarre backward dances and the paper going up in the air; and the dislocation of how one expects a rather ordinary world to turn.”⁷

Dance in particular is a key expression of Kentridge’s temporal poetics. Dance is deeply connected to metricality; according to neurobiological studies of movement and rhythm, musical metre is embedded in the prior (im)pulses of bodily movement.⁸ But in Kentridge and Masilo, dance is also the expressive alteration of time. It appropriates the systemic time of labour through embodied movements that serve no instrumental function (in this sense, the elephant in the room also dances). Within the framework of metrical order, dance may discover an alternative rhythm; more radically, it can break apart metrical order altogether, especially when allied with the techniques of video manipulation. Masilo’s dance is performed in the wake of the destruction of systematic time. In this sense, it enacts a time that is newly emancipated. But Masilo’s dance is also ineluctably caught up in the linear and cyclical progression of the overall installation. Later she appears as a member of the procession of figures in silhouette. Some of these figures resemble performers in a marching band, whose musical instruments fail to regulate Masilo’s movements, but this procession is overridingly a march of conscripted or enslaved labourers. It is ultimately a death march, recalling Kentridge’s 1999 film *Shadow Procession*, inspired in part by the imprisonment of the inhabitants of Plato’s cave (Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons* 26).

The dance is therefore interpolated within systemic time and its violence, as Masilo’s movements join the other movements of labouring, wounded, disabled and dying bodies. You cannot regulate heterochrony away, but you cannot dance human and social death away, either. What Kentridge writes of the figures in his *Shadow Procession* applies to these figures too:

They have no specific origin or destination, they pass across behind the viewers. This feels a completely contemporary phenomenon. The flickering projections we see in the news of people fleeing floods, civil war, refugees, migrations, refugees returning, displacements —

still, two and a half thousand years later, so largely on foot, individual human power still the central means of locomotion, handcarts, wheelbarrows, shopping carts the only aids. (28)

Time might be put beside itself, but the casualties of time reappear, reproduced through time, parading something like Walter Benjamin's wreckage of history, or what Kentridge has described as a "frontal assault" of all the images at once (52). If Masilo's movements are a practice of dissensus, then there is a melancholic charge to their emplacement within this panorama of futility and despair. But these bodies *also* refuse their fate: "what must be resisted," Kentridge writes, "is the passivity, the image of people waiting to be rescued" (28). This is a double image of revolt and despair, survival and destruction. This doubleness is expressive of the heterochrony's relationship to dominative time. As Rancière puts it: "The forms of subjectivation through which individuals and groups distance themselves from the constraint of the "normal" time are at once ruptures in the sensory fabric of domination and ways of living in its framework" ("In What Time Do We Live?" 32). To assume that these resistant ecstasies are subordinated to the closure of history is to miss this paradox of the heterochronic — that it thinks the closure and openness of time together; it glimpses the virtual power of the revolutionary behind every actual epochal image.

At this point it is necessary to account for the form of the installation itself. Kentridge has described the studio as a "machine for the alteration of time" (*Six Drawing Lessons* 90), but in a sense the video installation is a machine for the iteration of time. It creates a form of time reflective of the cyclical regime of labour and the repetitious violence of history. As Mieke Bal explains, circular time (or "circularity-in-linearity," since each repetition occurs later than the previous one) is embodied in the loop, the "constitutive form of exhibitionary video" ("Heterochrony in the Act" 220-21). As Bal also suggests, this circularity expresses the temporal experience of entrapment in oppressive social systems (221). Kentridge's studio process of temporal alteration is in tension with the prospect of an at least minimal

congealment in the gallery into a different form of time. Thus the problem of the heterochronic in the chronic, of virtual potentiality in the closure of actual history, is embedded in the installation's form: *The Refusal of Time* struggles to escape the seriality it resists within itself.

What is crucial about Kentridge's work is its special resistance to the temporal composure of artistic form. Kentridge's distinctive use of charcoal in his drawing and animation, for example, is rooted in the mode of "imperfect erasure" it affords (*Six Drawing Lessons* 95). He typically draws and erases then re-draws images, which bear the traces of the earlier images beneath, before taking photographs of the images and then drawing, amending, smudging, and erasing before another round of photographic capture. As Michael Rothberg explains, this results in films that even after their transfer to video preserve "layers of residual charcoal dust" and "palimpsestic images," traces of old drawings that remain on film long after the drawings themselves have disappeared (10). In one sense, the gallery is the heterochronic other of Kentridge's studio, in Foucauldian (rather than Rancière's) terms, insofar as the forms that typically populate it neutralise or negate the studio's flux. But the studio and the gallery need to be thought together since with Kentridge they are experienced together, with the studio entering into the gallery, via the medium of animation, and disturbing its serenity. What is at stake here from the standpoint of the politics of art is the capacity for things to be different, a capacity that inheres within time and which no history of disaster or triumph can overwrite. Kentridge reflects on how drawing may produce a spatialised presentation of time: "in the notebook, time becomes distance again"; "what stays invisible is the passage of time in the making of the image of time" (*Six Drawing Lessons* 91-92). But the dust and the traces of different versions of the image suggest a power of variation that shadows and conditions the animation we witness, carrying with them the memory of the image's capacity to be other than it is. Ariella Azoulay has recently

interpreted the shutter as an imperial technology of the “split second,” asserting the closure of the image and a rigid division between the before and the after (*Potential History* 2-8).

Kentridge’s mode of imperfect erasure exhibits a completely different sensibility, linked to the encoding of a force of potentiality within the artistic product. As Kentridge writes in his final Norton lecture:

A new sheet of paper. All the energy waiting in the arm, gathering for its decision. While the shards are in the air, there is the possibility of... of... of...

That this time, THIS TIME IT WILL BE DIFFERENT. (176)

It is worth comparing the mood of *The Refusal of Time* with the vision of an earlier Kentridge work, *Felix in Exile* (1994), produced on the cusp of South Africa’s transition into the post-apartheid era. *Felix in Exile* is also a videowork, which Bal directly discusses through the lens of the heterochronic. Bal explains how “the tool [Kentridge] uses to achieve heterochrony is the trace,” and this trace articulates a “slowness that competes with historical time,” an “inscription” analogous to the traces left by those who have been displaced, and a form of engagement in manual labour “in solidarity with workers.” I would add that *Felix in Exile* is a dreamwork: the associative form of the animation conjures the work of the unconscious, but an unconscious that is primordially connected to the other (in this case, Nandi, whom Felix, a figure who resembles Kentridge, sees in his shaving mirror, and whose drawings transport him from his room to the devastated South African landscape of “mining and massacre”). The piece is about war and labour, but the work of the artist, even though he is alone in his bathroom, is as Bal suggests conceived in such a labour-intensive way as to imply solidarity, “labour as solidarity,” even as “hope”: “making as building.” But *Felix in Exile* is a devastated film, with a mood that emerges out of its devastated landscape; the form of the installation in this instance seems an inscription of the cyclical violence of South Africa’s history and of the subject who receives this traumatic history (the work was

produced at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Since traces *are* the work, as Bal emphasises, Kentridge's resistance to the composure of the image is a direct expression of a need to find a form that would disinter the violence of apartheid. "Time and space must be kept alive in the present," Bal writes ("Heterochrony in the Act" 227-28), but I am suggesting that a different kind of temporal (in)animacy is to be found in *The Refusal of Time*.

What hope is there in *The Refusal of Time*? Or is hope a too overcoded and humanist affect to invoke in this work? If hope is something produced by labour in *Felix in Exile*, in the simple sense that the artist enacts and foregrounds the activities of making and building, then in this work there is something like hope — a force of openness and potentiality — embedded in the repetitiousness of time itself. I would suggest that the entire conceit of the installation is that the revolt against time carries within it the memory of its later repetition, in the same way that, according to Gilles Deleuze, Monet's first waterlily repeats all the others (*Difference and Repetition* 1). This principle of return is expressed in the form of the loop. While the loop from one perspective exploits a mechanistic repetitiveness, from another it embeds a principle of eternal return. In this sense, it is not only that the uneven metronome beats initiate and anticipate a further veering of time away from metrical order — that they look forward to a more intense conflict between the dominative regime of colonial time and a revolutionary affirmation of time's potentiality. It is that the metronomes already express these "later" refusals within them, as if these refusals are immanent to their capture within time, and as if the conflict between the closure and the openness of time is *what time is*. Furthermore, the metronomes carry this spirit of revolt within their very function: to make and mark time is to register time as a force of difference and variation (of difference *as* repetition; of repetition *as* the affirmation of difference).

In some sense, what Kentridge precisely does *not* offer is a vision of time

emancipated from the current regime of temporal domination: it is instructive that the elephant continues to pump throughout, including in the intervals between each thirty-minute sequence. Time assaults us in this work as an accretion or intratemporal bundle of violences: time appears as a privileged weapon of history and as the very medium of damaged life. But there is the definitive paradox of the heterochronic, whereby this emancipated time is somehow also internal to the time that cannot escape its own cyclical capture. In Kentridge, this paradox is thematised most forcefully by the final sequence, in which the silhouetted figures, this parade of damaged and ecstatic life, march towards a black hole. *The Refusal of Time* was initially conceived as a meditation on the evolution of ideas of time within physics, with the discovery of black holes signifying its final destruction (time becomes an illusion) (Kentridge, Galison et al 157). While the black hole could hardly constitute a more radical assertion of teleological time, something potentially lingers (Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons* 187). According to string theory, on the surface of the black hole some information remains, some residue of the objects that have been lost and of the time that has passed. In the installation, after the silhouetted figures have been swallowed, the sound persists for a few moments, and what appear to be drifting or pulsating segments of light, or “strings,” appear. This imagery directly invokes the temporal residues of string theory, as if, “carved on the event horizon,” a kind of “hologram” of the time that has passed persists (Kentridge and Galison 7). This seems truly a vision of time after time: it glimpses a radical “ancestrality,” to adapt Quentin Meillassoux’s usage, that persists in complete isolation from human intermediaries (*After Finitude* 7). It is a picture of the absolute, rather than of a world relative to human consciousness and language. One might straightforwardly read this as the end of heterochrony glimpsed not in time’s systemic capture but in its actual physical demise.

But while Kentridge and Galison only mention string theory in this context, the larger structure of the installation surely alludes to a different temporal scenario. To put this in the

terms of contemporary physics, the insights of loop quantum gravity, a competitor to string theory for moving beyond the standard model of physics, seem relevant here as well. Loop quantum gravity provides a different spin on the politics of this engagement with what would otherwise seem an absolutely extrapolitical form of time. In Carlo Rovelli's lucid version of the story, loop quantum gravity is the logical conclusion of the ancient insight into the granularity of the universe, a granularity that defines the nature of space and time themselves. Since there comes an absolute point at which things can get no smaller, loop quantum gravity postulates that at the moment of the black hole's final collapse, it bounces back: the cessation of time at the centre of the black hole is not final, but a pause (an interval?), before time explodes again (*Reality is Not What It Seems* 199-202). This is also the theory of the big bang as big bounce (the idea that the beginning of time in our universe was the end of time in another). The final scene of *The Refusal of Time* can then be interpreted in two ways: first, time lingers, in a residual and depleted if aesthetically entrancing form (string theory); second, time refuses this melancholic fate, and carries within it the most radical potential for explosive renewal.

This entirely inhuman or "ancestral" time seems to be part of a speculation about a radically non-appropriated form of time, completely immune to incorporation within Capital or Empire: it is a surplus that can neither be accumulated nor organised, time's *refuse* and its refusal. It implies the emancipation of time from every image and thought of its closure. But the viewer can linger in the room beyond this point to witness the beginning of another loop. In this sense, the final moments of the piece are also the clearest expression of Kentridge's interest in the internal estrangement of serial, repetitive time, in the productive undecidability of this time as repetitious loop or as eternal return. We return from an encounter with "time after time" to the experience of heterochrony, now conceived in its fully paradoxical nature. The heterochronic is articulated within the structure of the loop — of the cyclical time

common to the video installation and the neoliberal 24/7 — and yet this is not to say that this other time is incorporated, subsumed by cyclicity. It would be better to say that this other time, and the other “other times” with which it coexists, makes time restlessly different from itself.

Kentridge has spoken of the “disjunction” of the contemporary, of the fact that “daily living is made up of a non-stop flow of incomplete, contradictory elements, impulses and sensations.” But for him, what is arresting “is not this disjunction itself, but the ease with which we accommodate to it. It takes a massive personal shock for us to be more than momentarily moved.”⁹ Thus Kentridge is, as Yannis Stavrakakis has noted, alert to the promise and to the limits of his political art. My aim has been to explore *The Refusal of Time* as a powerful engagement with a set of political and artistic questions that may be gathered under Rancière’s phrase, the ‘distribution of times,’ and connected to Cheah’s concept of temporalisation as a process devoted to the unmaking and remaking of time. What the installation offers is a thought and an experience of time *as* heterochronic, such that any system of time necessarily carries within itself the promise or the menace of another time, of time *as* this “anotherness,” this prospect of variation and difference.

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¹ See also E. P. Thompson on time discipline as historically key to the synchronisation of industrial labour.

² Rancière also develops these ideas in his book *Modern Times*, first published in Zagreb in 2017 and forthcoming from Verso in 2022; see Verhagen's engagement with this text in *New Left Review*.

³ For an evocative description of the experience of stumbling upon this installation in its original location at Documenta, see Enrique Vila-Matas's wonderful novel, *The Illogic of Kassel*.

⁴ See Grosz on the body not as kernel of interior experience but as inscriptive surface, produced by rhythmic regimes among many other things.

⁵ Rosa, *Resonance*. See David Wills on "resonance" as a figure of inanimation, based on a reading of the heart in Jean-Luc Nancy's "Corpus." For Wills, inanimation names an undoing of the divide between the animate and the inanimate, as he notes that before the inanimate had any privative dimension it simply meant to en-animate, to give life. Kentridge's "lung" or breathing machine, and the entire affect of the installation, produces a directly comparable experience of inanimation, where automaticity and resonance are at play on both sides of the supposed living/non-living divide.

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of this re-enactment, see Stalpaert 375-96.

⁷ Quoted in Stalpaert 388-89.

⁸ Fitch 2. Fitch resists the historical disassociation of music from dance, as in the effacement of the dance origins of the gigue and gavottes of Bach or minuets of Mozart, or in the concertization of jazz.

⁹ Quoted in Stavrakakis 564.