

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

I am not me, the horse is not mine

Arsenal Gallery in Białystok

24.10.2024–19.01.2025

curator: Monika Szewczyk

I am not me, the horse is not mine is a large-scale video installation by the acclaimed South African artist William Kentridge, composed of eight six-minute films, each accompanied by a soundtrack by Philip Miller. The films — *His majesty comrade nose*, *Prayers of apology*, *A Lifetime of enthusiasm*, *Country dances I (Shadow)*, *Country dances II (Paper)*, *That ridiculous blank space again (A one-minute love story)*, *Commissariat for enlightenment*, and *The horse is not mine* — weave a narrative linked to the Soviet avant-garde, tracing its evolution from the films of the 1920s and 1930s to its catastrophic demise in the mid-1930s.

Kentridge's characteristic blend of techniques, including stop-motion animation, live-action sequences, archival footage, moving collage, and shadow play, underscores his intellectual depth, creativity, and artistic freedom. His work, deeply influenced by the social and political events he witnessed during apartheid in South Africa, has sharpened his ability to keenly examine the intricate dynamics of Soviet identity. Created in 2008, this installation holds particular relevance amid the current discourse on the decolonization of Russia.

I AM NOT ME, THE HORSE IS NOT MINE

William Kentridge

HIS MAJESTY COMRADE NOSE

Freud referred to the megalomania of an infant in the terms of “his majesty the baby”: an idea of childishness and self-importance that the nose assumes for himself also.

I needed to have the nose, separated from Kovalyov, trying to make his way up the social ladder. It is a Sisyphean task. No sooner does he get to the top of the ladder than he disintegrates and falls down – only to pick himself up and try again. In a 1920 American experimental film *The Death of a Hollywood Extra* there is a scene of the extra trying to make his way up the corporate studio ranks in Hollywood endlessly climbing a flight of concrete steps. When I started the sequence I searched for suitable steps in Johannesburg on which to stage the scene. But before I found the right steps I lost patience, and (as often is the case) staged the scene in my studio using the studio step-ladder.

As with many of the fragments in *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, the filming was done twice: once to get the basic action (someone climbing the stairs in a variety of different ways and with different degrees of energy and determination); and then a second time, this time filming the projection of this first filming frame by frame and adding to the projection a paper nose that forms the character. A projector is suspended above a sheet of paper. The man climbing the steps is projected and a frame frozen. The paper nose is placed on top, and a camera next to the projector photographs this image. The first film is advanced by one frame, the paper nose is moved the few millimeters to the right place on the projection, and the projection plus nose is photographed again. It is a collage of paper and projection.

In climbing and collapsing endlessly I was thinking not only of the difficulty of social climbing, but rather, as in the game *Snakes and Ladders*, that rising to the top (going up a ladder) is no guarantee of staying there. The nose enacts his own attempts and failures but also stands in for all of those who, having risen to the top of the party in Russia (and not only there), suddenly found themselves hurled down from the top – sometimes to rise again, but in the case of many, shattered and shot and their corpses abandoned.

PRAYERS OF APOLOGY

Nikolai Bukharin was an early member of the Bolshevik party. He became a member in 1906, just after the failed 1905 revolution. He was one of the leading theoreticians of the party and right hand man to Lenin. He became part of the Central Committee of the party in 1918.

His rise and falter and fall and humiliation and death are emblematic of the self-destruction of the Bolshevik party and the ideals of the 1917 revolution.

In 1928 he split with Stalin on economic policy, and when the purges began following the assassination of Kirov in 1929, his position came under attack. But he remained a loyal member of the Communist Party and Central Committee right through the 1930's when many around him were denounced and purged. When his turn came in the late 1930's, he was powerless to resist. Reason and language were both powerless against a decision once made. The tragedy of his situation resides in the impossibility of reconciling his need to believe in the party and cause to which he had given all his life, and the new world of illogic, of line, of strategy which he had embraced for the sake of his party. The tragedy of him lies here, but also the comedy. There is a comedy of a world so at odds with itself. A comedy of inversion, where things mean their opposite – where logical argument is a sure sign of duplicity and lying is explained away as strategy. A gasp of surprise at the inversions. In the transcripts of meetings of the Central Committee, not only the words of the speakers are recorded, but also the reactions, a kind of stage direction: 'noise in the room'; 'consternation'; 'prolonged laughter'. As if a script for a mordant comedy is writing itself. As if only a dismayed laughter is appropriate to understand, or continually fail to understand, what is going on.

The text used in this fragment is edited from three stages of Bukharin's downfall. The first is a meeting of the Central Committee in 1932, when he first came under suspicion and attack. The bulk of the text comes from a meeting of the Central Committee in 1937, and some fragments from a letter he wrote to Stalin from prison in the days before he was shot, begging for mercy and trying finally (in vain) to rescue himself by rescuing language from the labyrinth into which it had fallen. ("Finally I need to know. Did you really believe what was said?") Was he himself, was the horse actually his?

A LIFETIME OF ENTHUSIASM

To live in Stalin's era was to be condemned to a lifetime of enthusiasm. The marches, the May Day parades, the Five-Year Plans fulfilled in four or three years. These were the symbols and proofs of the success of the Soviet experience.

But what I am interested in is that part of the enthusiasm that could not be extinguished even as from the 1920's on, the cost, the casuistry and terror of that enthusiasm became clearer. So that Shostakovich could shift throughout his life between an irreverent, absurd view and pleasure in the world, and at times play the trumpet for the edifice as loudly as anyone. And with a conviction that is more than simply being self-preserving or strategic. The need for belief and the power of that belief is not about foolishness or self-service. It is also about hope.

"Comrade Mauser, you have the floor," Mayakovsky wrote in the early years of the revolution (sharing with Franz Fanon a deluded belief in the purifying effect of violence). His suicide by shooting seven years later was the clearest demonstration that once it had the floor, the Mauser would keep its place.

The question is how to take the misjudgements and misapprehensions, and while aware of their faults, not account them as nothing. If one holds onto the discoveries, risks and inventions of the Russian *avant garde* in the years until they were crushed, one has to also find a place to not simply acknowledge, but to house the beliefs animating their work – a belief in a transformed society. This holding onto their beliefs even as we are aware of their contradictions, their sophistries, is the task of the figures walking on the ramp in *A Lifetime of Enthusiasm*. Well, not their task, but the sense behind them. A procession determinedly going towards an uncertain destination.

The procession was made in different stages: first by a group of acting students taking part in a workshop for the production of the Shostakovich opera; then by additions to their images with scraps of paper and text placed over a projection of the first filming; and some sections were animated separately, and edited into the film.

COUNTRY DANCES I (SHADOW) / COUNTRY DANCES II (PAPER)

A dance, a shadow of a dance. A shadow of the shadow of the dance.

I had been working with students and actors in a workshop for the production of the Shostakovich opera *The Nose*. We had filmed the actors walking up a ramp against

a brightly lit backcloth, so in fact we were filming their silhouettes. I asked them one by one to improvise a dance for one of the transitional sections of the opera. Which became improvisations of African imaginings of Russian dances. But instead of placing the light for the backdrop between the performer and the screen, I lit the dancer and had a double image, the dancer and his shadow.

A shadow is superficially like a silhouette, a dark two-dimensional trace of a being, its movements directly connected to the movements of the dancer. But there is a big shift. A shadow is a silhouette with attitude. As the light source is moved in relation to the subject, the shadow changes. It is still of course directly connected to its source, but elongations, compressions occur. The light was placed at an oblique angle to the dancer, so that the shadows of limbs would extend three or four times the size of the dancer. The usual animation language of exaggeration, of stretching and compression, was given by the light source. The dancer danced his own animation. In *Country Dances I (Shadow)* you see the shadow, but also from time to time at the edge of frame, the dancer, looking ridiculously small and weak in comparison to his shadow. This was not thought out in advance. It was a chance discovery amongst a range of different improvisations and changes of strategies. But as the version of the exercise started it jumped out for the surprises it gave (and for the wonderful dance done) and for the lines of associations the dance and its shadow suggested.

The second dance, *Country Dances II (Paper)*, removes the image from the original dancer one stage further. The shadow is now replaced with torn or cut fragments of paper and text. The movement of the paper (adjusted frame by frame under an animation camera) was loosely based on the timing and movements of the shadow. The swirling of the coat was approximated by using larger sheets of paper, pages of a Russian encyclopaedia.

It is a broken telephone: each version of the dance is further and further removed from the original, even as the first dance is removed from the imagined Russian original by time, distance, and the creative misunderstandings these bring.

THAT RIDICULOUS BLANK SPACE AGAIN (A ONE MINUTE LOVE STORY)

Daniil Kharms was Russian writer. Most of his work was unpublished in his lifetime (he died of starvation in a Leningrad prison in 1941). His violent fragmentary stories are full of malice, misanthropy, incoherence – without the inventive optimism of Mayakovsky (who had shot himself ten years before Kharms was writing.)

But the dystopian world that Kharms portrays is the dark underside of the optimism of Mayakovsky and the constructivists and Shostakovich.

The one-minute love story that makes up this fragment is not based on a specific story of Kharms, but sues his idea of love turning to violence – or gratuitous violence as the norm, as a principle of the history of two figures.

The figures were constructed out of fragments of paper based on actors in a 1925 Bauhaus theatre production. The pieces of the paper were not joined together

(as most animated paper puppets would be), but left disconnected, so the figures can disintegrate and reconnect in terms of their own laws and logic. On the one hand it is a simple series of scenes of attraction and violence, on the other the initial attraction is incidental. The violence is all that remains.

COMMISSARIAT FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

There is a four LP set of a speech of Stalin. The first 20 minutes of the recording consists only of applause. It is said that when Stalin spoke at Party meetings, buckets of salt water would be placed next to the chairs of members so they could dip their hands, inflamed from clapping. In this fragment the nose is he who applauds, and he who is (or wishes to be) applauded.

He is also Shostakovich playing the piano, and the people's commissar for music (the head of the composers' union) who denounced Shostakovich. (*MUDDLE NOT MUSIC*, was the headline of *Pravda's* review of his opera *The Nose*). He is the heroic Soviet athlete leaping hurdles or pole-vaulting or diving.

He is happy to occupy any position, undertake any task, make any recantation if glory is in sight. (Only after working on the nose for many months did I realise the great many attributes he shares with Ubu, the subject of other films and drawings of mine.)

The raw footage in this fragment comes from many sources: footage from Russian archives; fragments of French and American films made in the late 1920's; even two or three second from Dziga Vertov's 1928 film *Man with a Movie Camera*. (The film was made the same year Shostakovich wrote *The Nose*.)

The fragment takes material from the '20's and '30's but relooks at it from a later perspective. Formally there are things in the films from the time (particularly Vertov's masterpiece) which have never been bettered or even repeated – and the task or the intrigue is not to separate the brilliance of filmmaking from the ideology, but to understand how the film was dependent on the strength of the beliefs. To lose the possibility of the direct belief and hope is to lose the possibility of some of the brilliance. So that mixed in with the critique of the disaster waiting in the whole system of actions and belief is a sense of loss. Of inevitable jadedness, of distance.

THE HORSE IS NOT MINE

The nose acquires a horse. The nose's horse comes from three directions. The statue of the *Bronze Horseman* in St Petersburg is a symbol of the city, and the attempt of the nose to make himself into an equestrian hero is one of his attempts to rise above his origins. A second prompt for the horse was the presence of horses (and their heroic riders) in Soviet socialist realist images of Stalin and other Soviet heroes – the horse is an extension of the rider, a way of making him taller and larger than life, as if the energy of the horse is not only under the control of the rider, but is his (the rider's) own power. The third starting point was the ongoing project of examining how little we

need to see. How specific do scraps of paper have to be for us to recognise what we see? In the end very little. A head, a curve for a neck, some straight lines for legs, and a flourish for a shape of a tail, are all we need. Not only to convince ourselves we are seeing a horse, but for us to imbue the horse with the attributes both of the live animal and the attributes associated with their images.

So while I was trying to make minimal or residual horses, I was also trying to make anti-heroic horses. Horses that would have the least right to be on monuments. I discovered this was not easy. Even the most ill-shaped, hollow-backed beasts with the most distorted neck and heads still claimed and held their space.

The horse behind these, behind all representations of horses is Don Quixote's Rocinante. A thin weak horse used as an ironic comment on the idea of heroic horses of chivalry. But even Cervantes's descriptions are not enough for us to stop seeing the horse as Don Quixote does, as a heroic noble beast (heroic for accepting and going through with Quixote's delusional actions). Now that I think of it there is a fifth origin (and perhaps the forgotten one is the real one.) In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the heroic, suffering, workers of the Soviet Union are represented by Boxer, the cart-horse willing to work till he drops ("I will work harder"). Only to be sold to a knackers yard when his usefulness was over.

William Kentridge, 2008



William Kentridge

I am not me, the horse is not mine, 2008

Installation of 8 film fragments

DVcam and HDV transferred to DVD

6 minutes

Courtesy Kentridge Studio, © William Kentridge

- 1. *Commissariat for enlightenment***
- 2. *The ridiculous blank space again (A one minute love story)***
- 3. *His majesty comrade nose***
- 4. *The horse is not mine***
- 5. *Country dances II (Paper)***
- 6. *Country dances I (Shadow)***
- 7. *A lifetime of enthusiasm***
- 8. *Prayers of apology***

Credits

Directing, animation, photography and performance: William Kentridge

Editing: Catherine Meyburgh

Composer: Philip Miller

Stage direction: Sue Pam-Grant

Animation assistants: Gerhard Marx, Naomi van Niekerk, Catherine Walker

Galop Music Composition: Philip Miller

Ngilahlekelelwe Ikhala Lami

Musical arrangement: Philip Miller

Music and lyrics: Richard Siluma and Thulani Manana

Choir: Thulani Manana and Abanikazi Bomkhalanga

The Galop Band:

Dan Selsick, trombone; Billy Middleton, tuba; Adam Howard, trumpet; Ntkozo Zunga, Castrol tin-can guitar; Bethuel Mbonani, percussion; Thulani Manana, vocal leader

EVENTS ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION:

24.10.2024 (Thursday), 6:00 PM

Double exhibition opening: William Kentridge *I am not me, the horse is not mine* and Alevtina Kakhidze *Plants and People*

10.11.2024 (Sunday), 12:00 PM

Curatorial tour of the exhibitions with Monika Szewczyk

24.11.2024 (Sunday), 11:00 AM

Creative text workshop. Led by: Anna Cieplak

28.11.2024 (Thursday), 5:30 PM

Authorial and curatorial tour of the exhibitions, preceding a discussion panel

28.11.2024 (Thursday), 6:30 PM

Discussion panel with Anna Łazar, Alevtina Kakhidze, and Kateryna Botanova
Moderated by Edwin Bendyk

30.11.2024 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Tour of the exhibitions with Agnieszka Tarasiuk

7.12.2024 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Guided tour in Ukrainian

14.12.2024 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Guided tour of the exhibitions in Belarusian

18.01.2025 (Saturday), 10:00 AM

Creative film imagery workshop. Led by: Katarzyna Zabłocka

Colophon:

Curator: Monika Szewczyk

Coordination: Eliza Urwanowicz-Rojecka

Visual identity: Szymon Szymankiewicz

Editing and proofreading: Ewa Borowska

English to Polish and Polish to English translation: Anna Bergiel

Exhibition realisation: Maciej Zaniewski, Kacper Gorysz, Michał Małeczek,
Mateusz Smorczewski, Tomasz Lelo, Zbigniew Świdziński, Ewa Chacianowska

Communication and promotion: Piotr Trypus

Education: Justyna Kołodko-Bietkał, Iza Liżewska, Katarzyna Kida

Exhibition supervisors: Maja MacKenzie, Małgorzata Kopciewska, Tomasz Lelo,
Mateusz Smorczewski, Piotr Trypus

Accounting: Marlena Maleszewska, Anna Olesiewicz, Katarzyna Wilimas

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municipal cultural institution



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Entrance fee 8 PLN, reduced 4 PLN. Free admission on Thursdays

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Галерея Арсенал у Бєластоку прапанує ўсім бежанцам бясплатны ўваход на выставы і мерапрыемствы

Arsenal Gallery in Białystok offers free entry to exhibitions and events to all refugee persons