

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

EDUCATORS' GUIDE AND
SCREENING COMPANION



art21

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William Kentridge: *Anything Is Possible*

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the film

William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible is a one-hour documentary that provides an intimate look at the creative process, political and artistic philosophies, and personal background of William Kentridge. Kentridge is a South African artist whose acclaimed charcoal drawings, animations, video installations, shadow plays, mechanical puppets, tapestries, sculptures, live performance pieces, and operas have made him one of the most dynamic and exciting contemporary artists working today. The film features Kentridge working in his studio and discussing his artistic philosophy and techniques. *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible* premiered on PBS stations nationwide on October 21, 2010.

the guide

This Guide is designed to accompany the film and website for *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*. It offers suggestions for facilitating discussions and activities, as well as screening the film with classroom and community audiences. We encourage you to use the film and online content in tandem with the Season Five Art21 Educators' Guide from the *Art in the Twenty-First Century* broadcast series and other resources found on Art21's websites.

art21, inc.

Art21 is a non-profit organization that illuminates the creative processes of today's visual artists through the production of documentary films, interpretive media, and live programs that stimulate critical reflection as well as conversation. Based in New York, with a global reach on television and online, Art21 projects also include workshops for teachers, public screenings and lectures, and social media initiatives.



**Born**

1955, Johannesburg, South Africa

Education

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Johannesburg Art Foundation; L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, Paris

Lives and Works

Johannesburg, South Africa

Having witnessed first-hand one of the twentieth century's most contentious struggles—the dissolution of apartheid—William Kentridge brings the ambiguity and subtlety of personal experience to public subjects often framed in otherwise narrowly defined terms. Using film, drawing, sculpture, animation, and performance, he transmutes sobering political events into powerful poetic allegories. In a now-signature technique, he photographs his charcoal drawings and paper collages over time, recording scenes as they evolve. Working without a script or storyboard, he plots out each animated film, preserving every addition and erasure. Aware of myriad ways in which we construct the world by looking, Kentridge also uses stereoscopic viewers and creates optical illusions with anamorphic projection to extend his drawings-in-time into three dimensions. While Kentridge's youthful notion of becoming a conductor was never fully realized, music has always played an important role in his art. In 2005, he both directed Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (2007) and created *Black Box/Chambre Noire* (2005), a combination of miniature mechanized puppetry, animated films, kinetic sculptures, and drawings set to various pieces of music, including some from *The Magic Flute*. After being approached by the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, Kentridge staged Dmitri Shostakovich's 1928 opera *The Nose*, which premiered in March 2010.

William Kentridge cites many historical, literary, cinematic, and performance sources in relation to his work. These provide a rich collection of ideas, topics, and themes to discuss and explore.

- The history of South Africa and Johannesburg, including issues of segregation, apartheid, and violence
- Kentridge's family history, including the story of Jews in South Africa, their exodus from Lithuania during Czarist Russia, and an ongoing connection to Eastern Europe and Russia
- Kentridge's personal story about becoming an artist
- *The Magic Flute* and themes related to The Age of Enlightenment, including rationality and monarchy
- The early animation and drawing of Georges Méliès, particularly his 1902 film, *A Trip to the Moon*
- Vaudeville, cinema, and magic
- Russian history, literature, and poetry; Russian Modernism, Formalism, Constructivism, and Socialist Realist painting
- The story of *The Nose* was written by Nikolai Gogol in 1836, which inspired the 1928 opera by Dmitri Shostakovich



Invisible Mending, from *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès*, 2003. 35mm and 16mm animated film transferred to video, 1:20 min. Installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible presents a wide range of Kentridge's work—from his drawings and sculpture, to animations, films, and performances. The film also explores topics relevant to studio art, art history, and the humanities, as well as themes central to his artistic practice including:

- The role of the artist in society
- Narrative and storytelling
- Personal and social histories
- Process and play
- Collaboration

For educational purposes, the 10 chapters presented in the DVD version of the film provide opportunities to investigate a particular narrative or theme. Each chapter is five to eight minutes in length. This Guide provides discussion questions and activities relevant to each one.

Discussion questions that engage students prior to watching the film encourage active viewing. During viewing, there are many opportunities to pause and have students focus on particular images, quotes, or ideas to help facilitate understanding. After viewing, students and teachers can reflect on what they have seen, processing ideas and creating work based on a variety of suggestions related to each chapter.

On the film's companion website, Art21 provides resources and opportunities to connect themes in the Guide to online slideshows, videos, interviews, essays, and links to further contextual information. We encourage educators to learn more about these topics and to connect them with related discussion questions, activities, and screening ideas.

art21.org

Art21's website presents original Art21 films, complete episodes of the PBS series, artist projects, editorial content, and educational resources. It is a stand-alone site featuring more than 86 artists, 300 video clips, 2,800 photographs of artwork and production stills, 200 artist interviews, and interactive content for educators, as well as a growing archive of multimedia material focused on films, contemporary art, artists, and ideas.

art21.org/anythingispossible

The Art21 companion website extends the experience of the film by providing additional Art21-produced videos about Kentridge and his collaborators, background material about the film and artist, slideshows of Kentridge's work and working process, interview transcripts, and educational resources.

blog.art21.org

Art21's blog is a dynamic site that presents daily artist updates, weekly columns, in-depth discussion features, and more.

pbs.org/art21

Art21 on pbs.org chronicles the television series *Art in the Twenty-First Century*.

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"My job is to make drawings, not to make sense"

William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible opens with a montage of images of Kentridge's work, from drawings and sculptures to films, projections, and live performances, including his staging of Dmitri Shostakovich's opera *The Nose* (written in 1928), commissioned in 2005 by the Metropolitan Opera.

In Chapter 2, Kentridge recounts his early career, which began with a series of false starts as he meandered through exploratory pursuits in drawing, acting, and production design for film and television. In his late 20s, he followed the advice of a friend and devoted himself to making art. Kentridge is shown in his studio working. He discusses his early films, in which he began animating his charcoal drawings using an unusual technique. He draws, erases, and redraws, photographing each step of the process, animating an entire film on one sheet of paper. The effect, shown in a clip of *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991), is that every movement leaves behind faded, ghostly traces: making the process a visible part of the work itself. He explains how this reflects his belief that life is about "understanding the world as process, rather than fact."



9 Drawings for Projection (1989–2003), 2005.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- How do artists become artists?
- What is the role of the artist in society? Are there multiple roles he or she can play? What contributions can an artist make?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of having a plan—versus play or spontaneity—when creating a work of art?

While Viewing:

- What might Kentridge mean when he says the "seriousness of play" is about "staying in the looseness of trying different things?" Why call the act of play "serious"?
- Choose one of Kentridge's drawings or a still image from one of his films and discuss how this image reflects both playful and serious elements.

After Viewing:

- Kentridge states, "It's always been in between the things I thought I was going to do that the real work has happened." Discuss what you think he means by "real work."
- How does Kentridge balance planning and spontaneity? How can students (and teachers) similarly incorporate both in their work?
- Discuss how Kentridge describes his relationship to society. What does his work do?

CREATE

- Compile a collection of materials, found objects, and tools for making art and divide them into two piles. In one instance, create a plan for making a work of art with the materials you have collected and give your instructions to someone else to complete. In a second work, instruct someone to instinctively play with the materials to create a work of art. How are the two pieces different? Interview your collaborators and ask how the experience of producing them varied.
- Reflect on the role of the artist in society. Research how artists past and present describe their ideas about what they create and how it relates to the world around them. Present these findings in visual and/or written form.



Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old, 1991. Production stills; 16mm animated film transferred to video, 8:22 min.



"An
incandescent
rage"



Porter Series: *Amerique septentrionale (Bundle on Back)*, 2007. Tapestry weave with embroidery, Warp: polyester, Weft and embroidery: mohair, acrylic, silk, and polyester, 122 7/16 x 90 15/16 in.

TOP: Drawing for the film *Weighing and Wanting*, 1998. Charcoal on paper, 47 1/4 x 63 in.

This chapter features excerpts from Kentridge's films, *Shadow Procession* (1999) and *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City After Paris* (1991), both of which are based partly on his own family history. In the late 19th century, his relatives fled Lithuania to escape the Russians' persecution of Jews, first arriving in Britain and later settling in South Africa. His grandfather served in the country's all-white parliament and his father was a prominent lawyer who advocated on behalf of black Africans. Kentridge describes how the division between races, the tension that resulted from these imposed hierarchies, and the passion with which his father fought against this injustice affected him deeply. The experience shaped the political and social themes that are woven throughout his work. Kentridge's animated films blend biographical and fictional elements depicting the conditions provoked by apartheid and the brutality of this period in South African history.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- Discuss examples of works of art that have been inspired by personal history and social history, for instance Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* series (1810-1820), Kathe Kollwitz's print series, *The Peasant's War* (1903-1908), or Carrie Mae Weems's photographic series, *Constructing History* (2008). How and why do artists translate personal, familial, social, or historical experiences and events into art?
- How does art investigate the past? How do artists interpret history in new ways?
- How do films and animation lend themselves to storytelling and narrative differently than a drawing, painting, or sculpture would?

While Viewing:

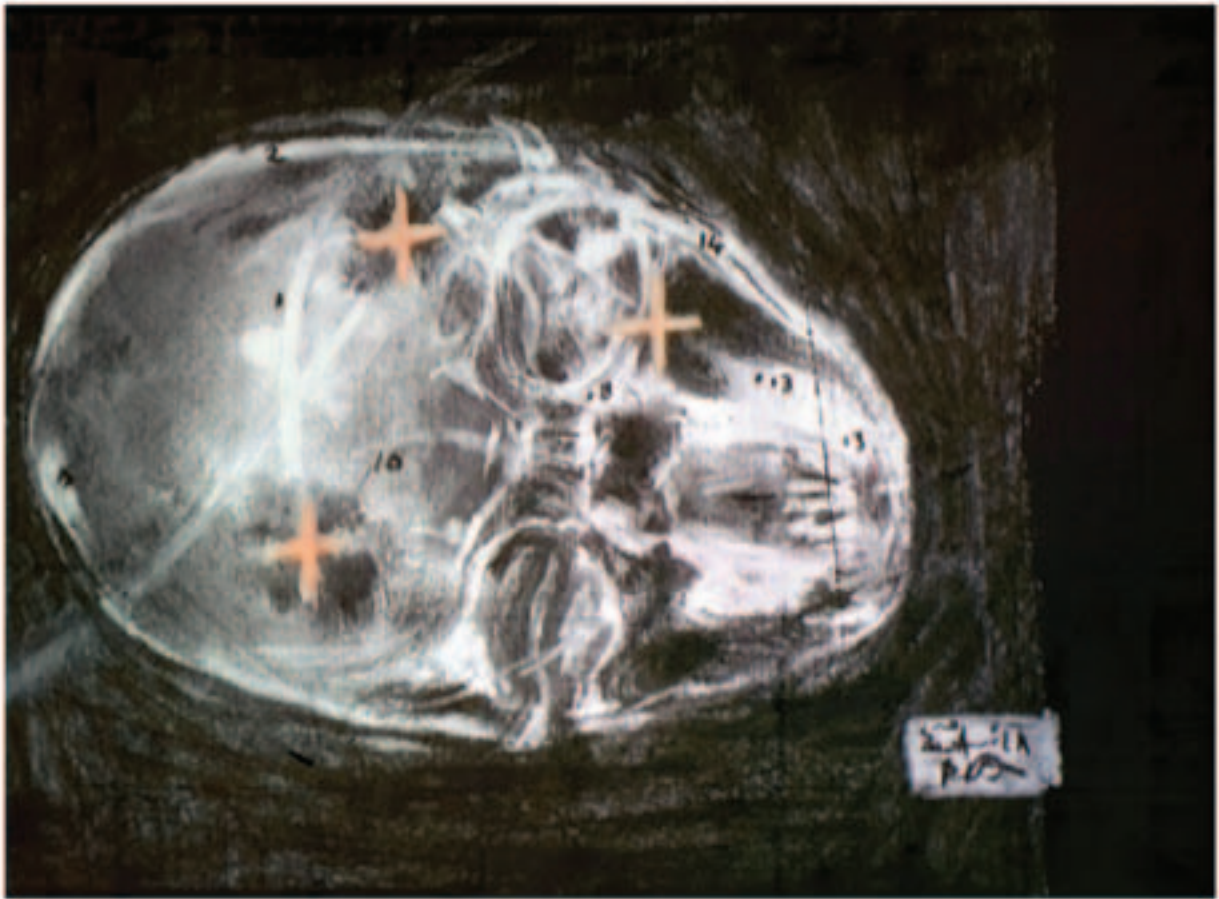
- How does Kentridge "re-evolve" that initial shock he experienced as a boy when he saw what people were capable of doing to one another? How does he express this?
- What reasons might he have for making work through erasure, rather than making multiple drawings or even animating his work on a computer? Why might Kentridge use this process over other animation methods? Why show the process?

After Viewing:

- Discuss the work of other artists who make their working process visible—for instance, Janine Antoni, Tim Hawkinson, or Richard Tuttle. How does this affect the viewer's understanding of the work?
- How does Kentridge's art investigate the past? What new stories is he depicting?

CREATE

- Select an article or story from a periodical that provoked a strong personal reaction and research additional information about the events that took place. Re-present the story from a new vantage point, such as from an imagined participant or witness, in order to give more information about the event and to present an alternative perspective.
- Find an image of a public gathering, such as a parade, march, protest, concert, classroom, or form of public transportation. Alter the image to suggest a new reason for why the people depicted have gathered—perhaps one that reflects a personal concern or cause. Animate your image to show the gathering take action.



History of the Main Complaint, 1996. Production stills; 35mm animated film transferred to video, 5:50 min.



“The ability to play and experiment”

In his Johannesburg studio, Kentridge records music for his film, *Breathe* (2008). An opera singer, “Kimmy” Skota, sings into a cell phone while composer Philip Miller, in another location, records her voice onto a tape recorder as he plays the piano. The effect is an ethereal, distant voice singing over an image of floating paper scraps. The pieces magically fall into place to reconstitute the image of the singer on the phone. Kentridge also describes his early interest in working with music, theater, and opera. We see excerpts from his adaptations of theatrical and operatic works, including the chamber opera, *Il Ritorno d’Ulisse* (1998), *The Magic Flute* (2007), and *Black Box/Chambre Noire* (2005), a mechanized sculptural model of a theatrical experience based on the form of *The Magic Flute* and the story of the genocide of Namibia’s Herero people by a German colonial army expedition in 1904.



ABOVE & RIGHT: *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, 2005. Model theatre with drawings (charcoal, pastel, collage and colored pencil on paper), mechanical puppets, and 35mm film transferred to video, duration of 22 minutes, 141 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 55 in. Commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG in consultation with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation for the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin.

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Magic Flute*, 2005. Performance at Le Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels. Opera with back and front projection.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- How have visual artists incorporated media and sensory experiences into their work—for instance, sound, animation, music, performance, and theater?
- Why might a visual artist be interested in working with opera or theater? Discuss precedents for visual artists working with other artistic disciplines, such as Robert Rauschenberg’s collaborations with dancers Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown.



- Research the story of *The Magic Flute*. What themes and philosophies drive the narrative and how might this work connect with contemporary themes or philosophies?

While Viewing:

- Compare and contrast Kentridge’s charcoal drawings and his process for making the film *Breathe*. Discuss similarities and differences between the two methods of working and their results.
- How are elements of play and experimentation incorporated into the process of making the film *Breathe*? How many different forms of media does Kentridge utilize in the work?
- What is Kentridge’s role as an artist when he stages his plays, operas, or other performance works?

After Viewing:

- How is music a “natural adjunct” to Kentridge’s visual work?
- Compare Kentridge’s early films with his operatic productions. How are they related? How do they diverge?
- Discuss Kentridge’s work as an accumulation of forms — visual, auditory, and performative. How does he combine these to create a cohesive whole?
- Discuss the themes in Kentridge’s work, whether based on historical narratives, such as those in *The Magic Flute*, or more contemporary ones, like apartheid.

CREATE

- Develop a multimedia installation that combines a found object, a projection of that object in motion, and a soundtrack for the object.
- Select a music video or movie trailer and re-create the different components (music, singing or voiceover narration, dancing or acting, visual setting and design, costumes) using everyday materials and found resources or talent.





"Transformation always has to do with understanding the world as process"



Invisible Mending, from *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès*, 2003. 35mm and 16mm animated film transferred to video, 1:20 min.

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Drawing for What Will Come (has already come) (Two Heads)*, 2007. Installation view from *Seeing Double*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 2008. Charcoal on paper, cold rolled steel table and mirrored steel cylinder; paper diameter: 47 1/4 in., cylinder higher: 11 1/2 in., diameter: 6 1/2 in.

Kentridge discusses his experiments with "machines that tell you what it is to look" and how the very mechanism of vision is a metaphor for "the agency we have, whether we like it or not, to make sense of the world." Kentridge experiments with stereoscopic viewers to create three-dimensional images out of flat drawings. In the work *What Will Come (has already come)* (2007), the viewer is confronted with the duality of distortion and order. The artist explores visual perception, particularly through optical illusions, to address our desire to create coherence out of the distorted, from images to social conditions. Kentridge also talks about the artist as a magician and explains the influence of the nineteenth-century cinema pioneer Georges Méliès on his work. We see excerpts from the film series *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès* (2003), which playfully investigates Kentridge's own studio process and pays homage to this influential early filmmaker.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- What are illusions and where can they be found in daily life? What are examples of illusions in art? Consider the work of artists such as James Turrell, Vija Celmins, or Paul Pfeiffer.
- Can artists help us see differently? How and when?
- Who was Georges Méliès and what were his contributions to early cinema and animation?

While Viewing:

- Kentridge says that he is interested in "machines that tell you what it is to look, that make you aware of the process of seeing." How does his work communicate this awareness?
- How does Kentridge's work make you more aware of what and how you see?
- Discuss how science and magic come together in one of Kentridge's stereoscopic works.

After Viewing:

- Describe some of the illusions that Kentridge creates and discuss the relationship between the subject matter and the way it is represented.
- Research the history and physics of stereoscopic viewers and the way the eye translates two separate images into a single image. How has the science of seeing informed visual art? How does art change how and what we see?



William Kentridge in his studio, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2003.

- How does Kentridge translate the idea of "the world as process" in his art?
- How is the studio an "engine room" for Kentridge?

CREATE

- Gather a collection of tools or devices that alter our vision: binoculars, camera lenses, viewfinders, phone cameras, magnifying glasses, or eyeglasses. Looking through several different devices, create a drawing or video that represents multiple ways of seeing.
- Select and practice a magic trick. Turn this sleight of hand into a drawing or create an animation that presents the transformation achieved.





“Studio as engine room”

Kentridge is seen in his studio working on the video installation accompanying his live performance of *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008), which features Kentridge himself performing. As we see him creating a horse animation by arranging torn-up pieces of black paper, he says that he must think with his hands and have something to fidget with, “as if there’s a different brain that’s controlling how that works.” The title of this work, a companion piece to his opera *The Nose* (2010), is taken from a Russian peasant adage about the denial of one’s own guilt. As Kentridge notes, the work references both early Soviet artmaking and the Communist Party purges of the 1930s. Kentridge closes by discussing the importance of performing in the studio and also the role of his own family in his work—exemplified by the activity of making puppet shows with found objects for his children.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- Talk about the function of an artist’s studio and what happens inside the space. What do you expect to see in there? How do different artists set up their space? What are some of the most important elements one might find?
- What does it mean to “think with your hands?” What kinds of professions ask you to do this?

While Viewing:

- Note the steps you see Kentridge take to create his work and describe the skills he employs.
- Write down what you learn about Kentridge’s work in his studio. What does he share about himself through this intimate view of his art-making process and workspace?

After Viewing:

- How has Kentridge organized his studio space to support his working process?
- Discuss how his process reflects a sense of play, or working without a plan.
- How has Kentridge’s family inspired and contributed to his work? How does his studio support those contributions?

CREATE

- Visit three or more local artists in their studios. As you visit and talk with them about how they design and use their space, take notes and make sketches that describe how you would design your own ideal studio for the things you like to make.
- Interview different teachers or other professionals about how they design and use their working spaces. Compare and contrast how classrooms or other workspaces are both similar to, and different from, artists’ studios.
- Design a floor plan for your ideal studio or workspace. What would you include? How would the layout facilitate your working process?



THIS SPREAD: William Kentridge creating video animation for *Breathe* (2008) in his studio, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2008. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, 2010.





Projection & Performance



"There is no hierarchy"

We see Kentridge and his collaborators on various projects and performances—including women weavers in a tapestry workshop outside of Johannesburg, shown singing gloriously as they weave—at work on one of his tapestries related to *The Nose* (2010) (one of the many “satellite projects” he has created around the opera). He talks about the autonomy each of his artistic mediums retains: “the tapestries aren’t a sketch for a projection of the opera; the opera is not a staging of what exists in the tapestry.” Each iteration of an image, whether in the form of a drawing, film, tapestry, or performance, is part of his interest in transformation and opening up possibilities for the work, both in terms of its formal qualities and how it is understood by the viewer. We also see Kentridge’s performance, *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008), which he describes as a footnote to or an essay on the operatic performance of *The Nose*.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- How does a story change when it is told in different formats, such as a book, photograph, painting, film, or newspaper article? Consider this question in relation to different narrative forms such as myths, poems, or contemporary news articles.
- How can humor, or satire be used to address serious or political subjects? Share examples of art forms or artists that use humor in serious ways.

While Viewing:

- Discuss the idea of translating an image from brushstrokes to pixels. How does Kentridge’s work change when presented in another media or material? How does it change when it is interpreted by another person like a tapestry weaver or set designer, or translated by a stage actor?
- Pay attention to how horses, processions, and noses are represented in different ways throughout this chapter from the tapestries to the film projections and live performance of *I am not me, the horse is not mine*. How do these elements change in each new visual presentation?

After Viewing:

- How does Kentridge tell stories in multiple ways throughout his work? How do these stories reveal different messages or change in relation to the format or media that they are told in, whether film, sculpture, tapestries, or live performance?
- What skills does Kentridge employ while working both in and outside of his studio? Compare and contrast his working process for the animated films with his live performance of *I am not me, the horse is not mine*.
- Discuss how Kentridge’s interest in “multiplicity” and an “excess of images” informs the stories he presents in his work.

CREATE

- Think back to a previous artwork you created and write out each step you took to make it. Illustrate these steps in the form of visual instructions without using text and ask several people to carry them out. Document and share the results.
- Illustrate a single object or concept using a variety of forms (drawing, photography, sculpture, animation, or film) and sensory experiences (touch, sound, movement, smell). Present your collection as a performance or exhibition with descriptive text and labels.



Performance of *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, 2008. Lecture/performance with front projection, DVICAM and HDV transferred to DVD, live performance, duration of 45 minutes. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, 2010.



A weaver translates a drawing into a tapestry. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, 2010.



The motif of a nose riding a horse appears in multiple forms: drawing, sculpture, tapestry, animation and set design. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, 2010.

Making of *The Nose*



"The absurd is always a species of realism rather than a joke"



William Kentridge with baritone Paulo Szot (as Kovalyov) rehearsing for *The Nose* (2010) at The Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2009. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, production still, 2010.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Behind the scenes of the production of *The Nose* (2010) at The Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2009. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, production stills, 2010.

This chapter follows the artist backstage at New York's Metropolitan Opera for the pre-production and rehearsal phase of *The Nose* (2010). We see Kentridge at work with collaborators—including singers Paulo Szot and conductor Valery Gergiev—and witness the construction of the elaborate set pieces, costumes, and projections created by Kentridge and his team. When approached by the Metropolitan Opera, Kentridge explains how Dmitri Shostakovich's 1928 opera, *The Nose*, was his first choice. *The Nose* is based on the satirical short story published by Nikolai Gogol in 1836 and tells the story of a 19th-century Russian government official, Major Kovalyev, whose nose escapes his face only to secure a government position higher than his own. Gogol's story, which critiques the absurd nature of a highly bureaucratic government state and the "terrors of hierarchy," resonated with Kentridge. Tying in ideas explored in earlier, related works, Kentridge describes his interest in the theme of the self as divided or contradictory.

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- Why and how do we collaborate with others in our daily lives?
- What actions might one have to take in order to work on a large-scale project that requires outside help or expertise? What are some of the collaborative steps artists might take in order to make work that they themselves cannot create alone?
- Review the story of *The Nose*, as originally written by Gogol, as well as the synopsis of Shostakovich's opera, as staged by the Metropolitan Opera. Discuss and define the terms: 'social hierarchy,' 'bureaucracy,' and 'the absurd.' Consider why Kentridge might be interested in working with the story of *The Nose* and this opera today.

The Metropolitan Opera's synopsis of *The Nose*: <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/stories/synopsis.aspx?id=332>

While Viewing:

- Describe the different roles that Kentridge plays in order to create this opera and other multimedia performances. How does he act as critic, storyteller, observer, and inventor?
- Discuss how it might feel to experience a live performance of *The Nose*. How might viewing a film of it be different than seeing the opera in person?

After Viewing:

- What does Kentridge do as an artist in this chapter? How does his position as director compare to his methods of working in his studio?
- Discuss how Kentridge's production of *The Nose* reflects elements of chaos and structure. How else might you describe this production?

CREATE

- Collaboratively produce a short film or performance. Assign each contributor a role such as director, writer, set designer, actor, or choreographer. How did allowing creative suggestions from each person involved influence the process? How did the original vision of the film or performance change over time?
- Create two different collaborative drawings with a group of classmates. In the first, provide no expectations or rules for how it will be completed, what it should look like, or what the subject should be. For the second, establish a set of rules, procedures, and expectations for each person's contribution and the goal of the finished work. Compare the process and the end result of the two works. What issues and solutions arose in each scenario?



William Kentridge with cast member (as a policeman) rehearsing for *The Nose* (2010) at The Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2009. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, production still, 2010.





"The artist understands that the optimistic and the pessimistic future unroll together"



"Gallop," Act I, Scene 6 of *The Nose* at The Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2010. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, production still, 2010.

During the spectacular premiere of the opera — amid a dancing papier-mâché nose, dozens of performers, and enormous, meticulously crafted set pieces referencing Russian modernism and based on Kentridge's drawings and newspaper clipping collages—we observe Kentridge's artistic vision on a breathtakingly grand scale. He muses on the contradictory nature of identity, evidenced both in the characters who populate his films and drawings, as well as by the elements of chaos, absurdity, and fragmentation that cohere in the opera itself to form a compelling whole. With its playful bending of reality and observations on hierarchical systems, the world of *The Nose* (2010) provides an ideal vehicle for Kentridge. The absurdism, he explains in the documentary's closing, "...is in fact an accurate and a productive way of understanding the world. As Gogol says, "in fact, the impossible is what happens all the time."

DISCUSS

Before Viewing:

- How might one's personal identity reflect changing or contradictory impulses? How does a person change over time or in response to new experiences or influences?
- Discuss examples of superheroes or other fictional characters who grapple with a contradictory identity. How do the stories created around these characters address these contradictions? How are the contradictions reconciled or endured?
- How would you define "the absurd"? What are examples of the absurd in contemporary life or historical events?

While Viewing:

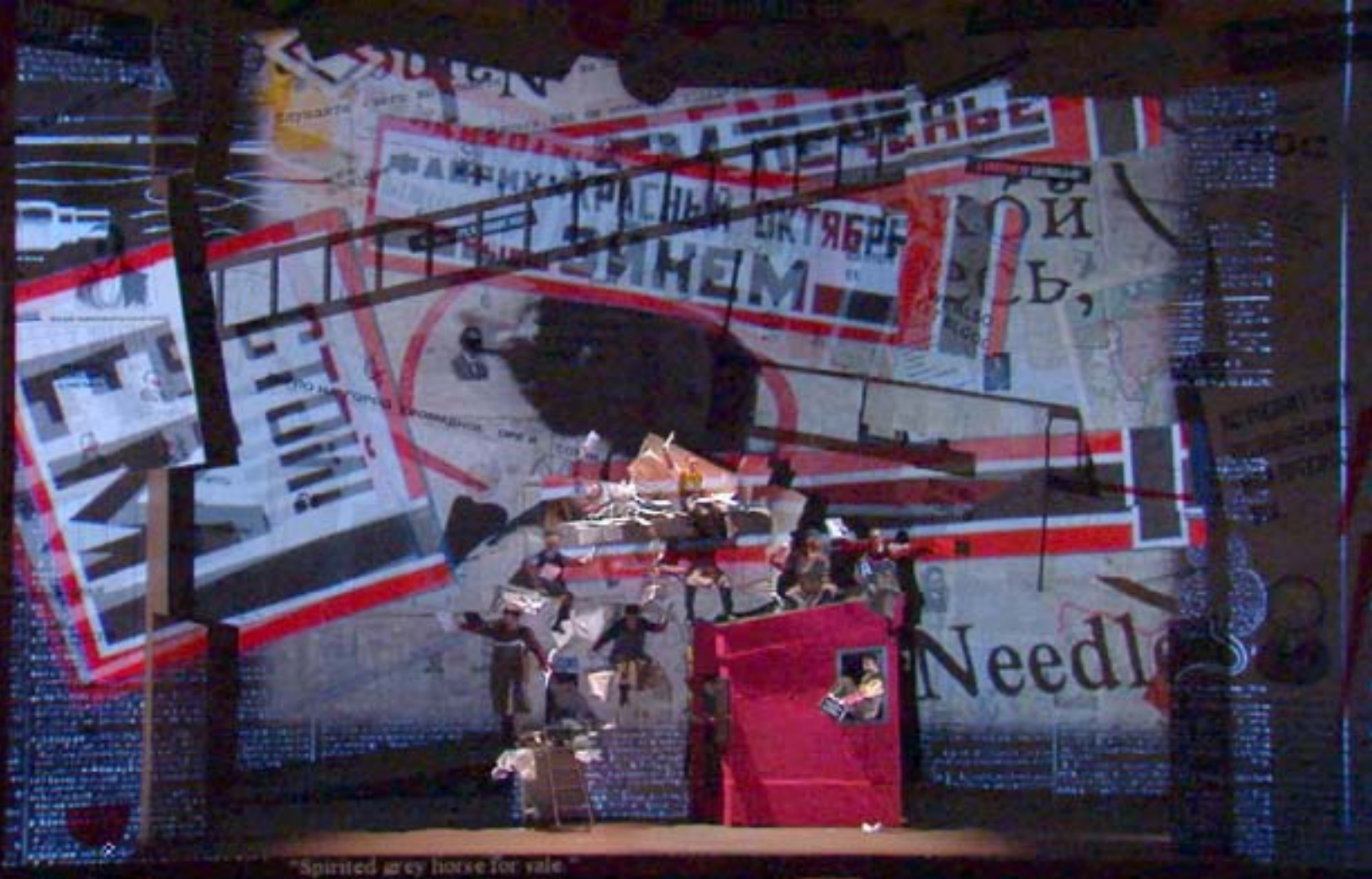
- Who are the characters that populate Kentridge's films and *The Nose*? How would you describe them? How does the element of absurdity inform what they do and how they are depicted?
- How do the characters of Felix and Soho from Kentridge's animated films, or Major Kovalyev in *The Nose* reflect his statement that, "every self is a series of contradictory impulses, held together and given a sense of coherence?"

After Viewing:

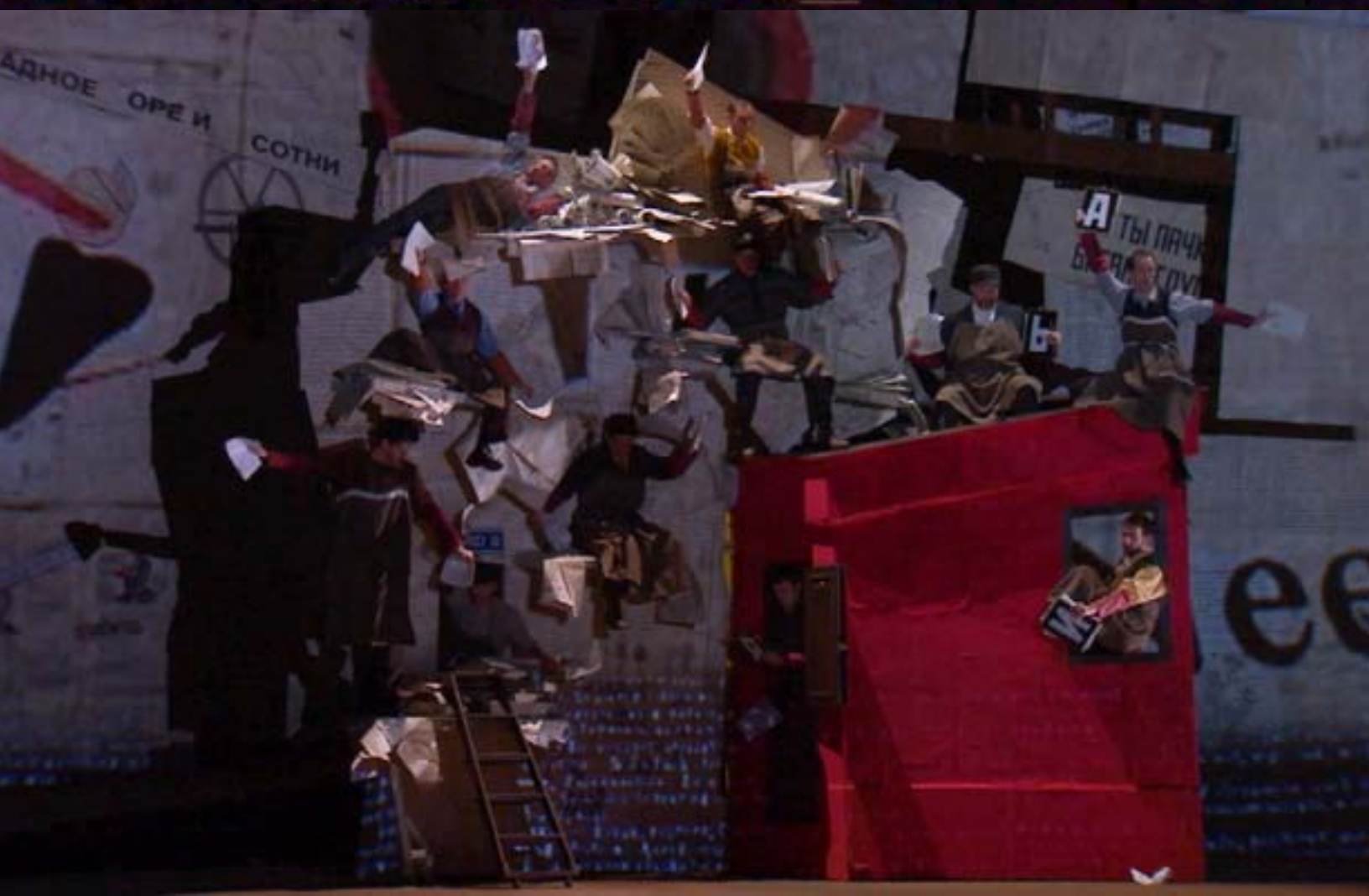
- What do you think Kentridge means when he says, "The artist understands that the optimistic and the pessimistic future unfold together"? How is this sentiment reflected in his work?
- Kentridge states that, "the absurd, with its rupture of rationality and conventional ways of seeing, is in fact an accurate way of seeing the world." What truths or accuracies is he addressing in his art? How does absurdity help him describe or communicate these ideas?

CREATE

- Choose an "absurd" story from the newspaper, a history book, or real life experience. Retell the story visually by adding new fictional elements. Compare the stories and decide which one is the most absurd.
- Discuss a number of ways of representing the contradictory nature of identity: how you perceive yourself and how you might be perceived by others, as well as the mundane self and an imagined or exaggerated self. Create a self-portrait that combines these contradictions.



"Spirited grey horse for sale."



screening the film



William Kentridge rehearsing before the premiere of *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008) at the 16th Biennale of Sydney, Australia, 2008. From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, 2010.

Overview

Organizations and individuals are encouraged to host independent screenings of *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*. Art21 strongly recommends that partners incorporate interactive or participatory components as part of their screenings, such as question-and-answer sessions, panel discussions, brown bag lunches, guest speakers, and/or hands-on art-making activities. The following screening suggestions focus on particular themes, questions, and quotes to help facilitate audience engagement and dialogue around the film.

"I ended up as an artist. It wasn't a decision I made. It wasn't a choice. It was what I was sort of reduced to. There was part of me that only knew I existed if I made some kind of external representation of it on a sheet of paper."

Overview

William Kentridge's story of becoming an artist exhibits many universal qualities. At the beginning of the film, he recounts his early career and traces his path from drawing to acting and working in film and television production before finally deciding to pursue art exclusively in his late twenties. In the process of becoming an artist, Kentridge was informed by his interest in theater, music, and film. These influences make their way into his work and inform his artistic collaborations. Refer to **CHAPTER 1 PROLOGUE / CHAPTER 2 DRAWINGS & ANIMATION** on page 5 for more information on this topic.

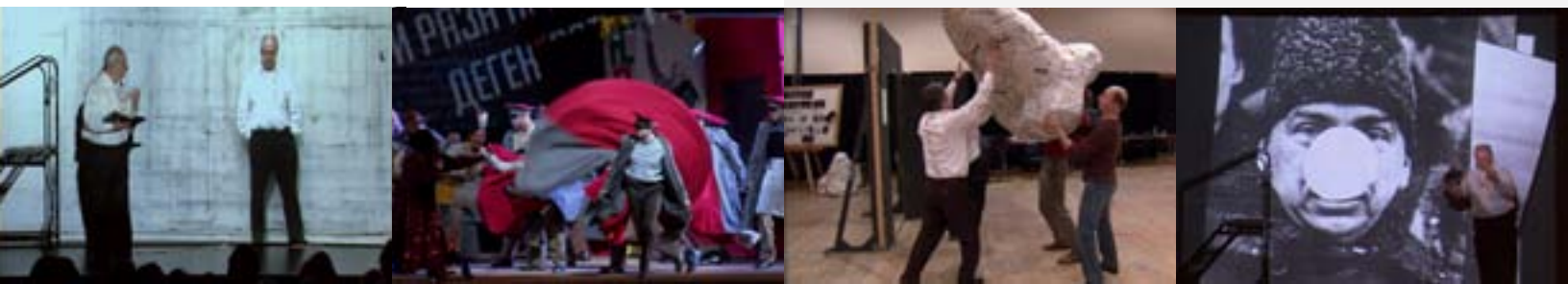
"When I was about fifteen, people would ask me, 'What did you think you are going to study?' Or 'What did you think you are going to be when you are an adult? Lawyer? Engineer? Deep sea diver? Marine biologist?' I think I actually foolishly wrote down once in some survey that I wanted to be a conductor. Somebody said, 'You know you have to be able to read music to be a conductor.' And I said, 'Oh, you actually have to read [music]? No, okay, then we'll change that one.'"

Program Idea

Explore the narrative of becoming an artist alongside other professional trajectories, comparing and contrasting the career of an artist with other careers. Invite local artists to participate in your event. Tailoring this event to your audience, select one of the two program formats suggested below.

- Select an artist and a professional from a different field. Ask each of them to draw connections between a particular aspect of Kentridge's creative process and their own, citing specific examples or sharing anecdotes. Directly following the presentations, use a question-and-answer-format to encourage audience members to discuss connections or distinctions between the experiences of the two speakers.
- Invite three creative professionals who do similar work to that of Kentridge's collaborators presented in the film—such as a set designer, weaver, actor, musician, singer, composer, dancer, or studio assistant. Ask each presenter to lead the audience in an activity that teaches a skill important to his/her profession, and then explain how this activity relates to his/her work and experience in that field. Examples of possible activities include: a singer leading voice warming exercises, a weaver or textile designer introducing basic pattern design, etc.

THIS SPREAD: From the film *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible*, 2010.



interpreting history

"The amnesia of which what South Africa was and where we come from, on the one hand, is a willful amnesia but on the other hand, it does correspond to such a quick naturalization of the circumstances that we live in. It is kind of hard to remember what that world was."

Overview

Aware of a frequent "willful amnesia" concerning contentious events in history, William Kentridge explores the intimacy of personal experience in his art. His work addresses issues of segregation, apartheid, and violence from the distinct perspective of both witness and artist. In Chapter 3 of the film, Kentridge describes the exodus of Jews from Czarist Russia and the period of apartheid in South Africa, discussing how both have influenced his familial and personal history as well as his art. Refer to **CHAPTER 3: SOUTH AFRICA** on page 6 for more information on this topic.

"The history of the 20th century is that many people's downfall does not have to do with their own weaknesses but through being completely smashed by huge forces around them. And sometimes the universality of laughter rather than the particularity of tears is...a better way of approaching these huge social shifts and changes."

Program Idea

- Focusing on William Kentridge's approach to addressing the socio-political history of South Africa, encourage dialogue about the different methods people use to interpret and reflect upon significant historical moments. Organize a panel discussion with historians and artists who address the legacy of apartheid or other contentious historical events. Invite each participant to explain his/her own process of constructing history from archival documents, personal experience, or other sources.

- Collaborate with a local historical society to provide new insights into the history of your community. Consider hosting a discussion addressing current human rights struggles or political issues, similarly focusing on memory and awareness like Kentridge. Invite a historian or archivist to choose an important local, regional, or national event and give a short presentation about what one can learn from archival resources. To complement this perspective, ask a local artist to discuss his/her interpretation of the same event using records, documents, or photographs.

optics and cinematic illusion

"I'm interested in machines that make you aware of the process of seeing and aware of what you do when you construct the world by looking. This is interesting in itself, but more as a broad-based metaphor for how we understand the world."

Overview

Kentridge experiments with machines that reveal and question the process of seeing. In his work, the physical act of creating coherent visual distortions becomes a metaphor for our ability to make sense of the world. He also explores the concept of illusion — the disparity between what the eye perceives that it sees and what is actually there.

In a series of films that take place in his studio, *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès* (2003), Kentridge pays homage to the magician and early cinema pioneer Georges Méliès. Kentridge's work reflects the magical qualities of Méliès's early cinematic experiments and their theatrical origins in vaudeville. Both Kentridge and Méliès's films reveal the playful illusions made possible by the medium and the element of play. Refer to **CHAPTER 5: ILLUSION** on page 8 for more information on this topic.

"You see how a magic trick is done. But if it's done well, it remains magic. Cinema started as vaudeville, making these even more fantastic. In one frame, you can change your costume. You can dissolve two pieces of film together and turn a cat into a telephone in a way that no magician could, so it became a high point of exercises of transformation. And transformation always has to do with understanding the world as process."

Program Idea

- Create a panel discussion on the experience of viewing from both scientific and artistic perspectives. Invite participants who can speak to the physical aspects of vision or provide a scientific understanding of visual perception (i.e. doctors, physicists, science professors), as well as artists who are interested in exploring issues of visual perception in their work, including visual artists, photographers, filmmakers, or graphic designers. Invite each speaker to discuss his/her own expertise in a conversation about how the science of seeing has informed visual art and vice versa.

- Focus on the influence of early cinematic experimentation on Kentridge's work, using these quotes as a platform to discuss film, performance, and illusion. Topics of the conversation might include: the connection of early cinema to vaudeville theater, magic in cinema, and the work of experimental film pioneers such as Méliès and the Lumière brothers. Invite film historians, filmmakers, and/or artists to explore these topics in greater detail through short presentations or a panel discussion.



the nose and the absurd

"I don't see The Nose as a parable for our time, except in its form or its principles, which have to do with learning from the absurd. It's a story about the terrors of hierarchy. That's not a specifically South African phenomenon. At the moment, I think it applies everywhere."

Overview

Kentridge describes two themes (social hierarchy and a self divided) that inspired him to select Shostakovich's opera, *The Nose* (1928), for production at the Metropolitan Opera. The story of *The Nose* (1836), as written by Nikolai Gogol, employs the absurd as an important literary strategy to develop the plot and articulate these themes through the use of hyperbole. For Kentridge, the absurd is not just a comic device; rather, it opens up the possibility of challenging conventional ways of seeing the world. In the last chapter of the film Kentridge states, "And why should we be interested in a clearly impossible story? Because as Gogol says, 'in fact, the impossible is what happens all the time.'" Refer to pages 11 and 12 and consider some of the corresponding questions to inspire additional event ideas.

"The extraordinary nonsense hierarchy of apartheid in South Africa made one understand the absurd not as a peripheral mistake at the edge of a society, but at the central point of construction. So the absurd always, for me, is a species of realism rather than a species of joke or fun. And that's why one can take the joke of The Nose very seriously."

Program Idea

■ Focus on the influence of the absurd in Kentridge's work and his production of *The Nose*, using these quotes as a platform to discuss themes included in the story and their relation to contemporary and historic events. Topics of conversation might include: the divided self in Czarist Russia, social hierarchy and race in South Africa during apartheid, or social conventions and bureaucracy in contemporary times. Invite historians, filmmakers, and/or artists to reflect on these topics, paying particular attention to Kentridge's interest in the absurd, through short presentations or a panel discussion.

■ Organize a reading based on Kentridge's belief that "the absurd, with its rupture of rationality, of conventional ways of seeing the world, is in fact an accurate and a productive way of understanding the world." Invite actors, poets, or novelists to read or perform sections from Gogol's original story of *The Nose* (1836) in relation to other material, such as poems, short stories, or excerpts from contemporary newspaper headlines. At the end of the reading, ask the presenters to engage the audience in discussion about how absurdity functions in each work.

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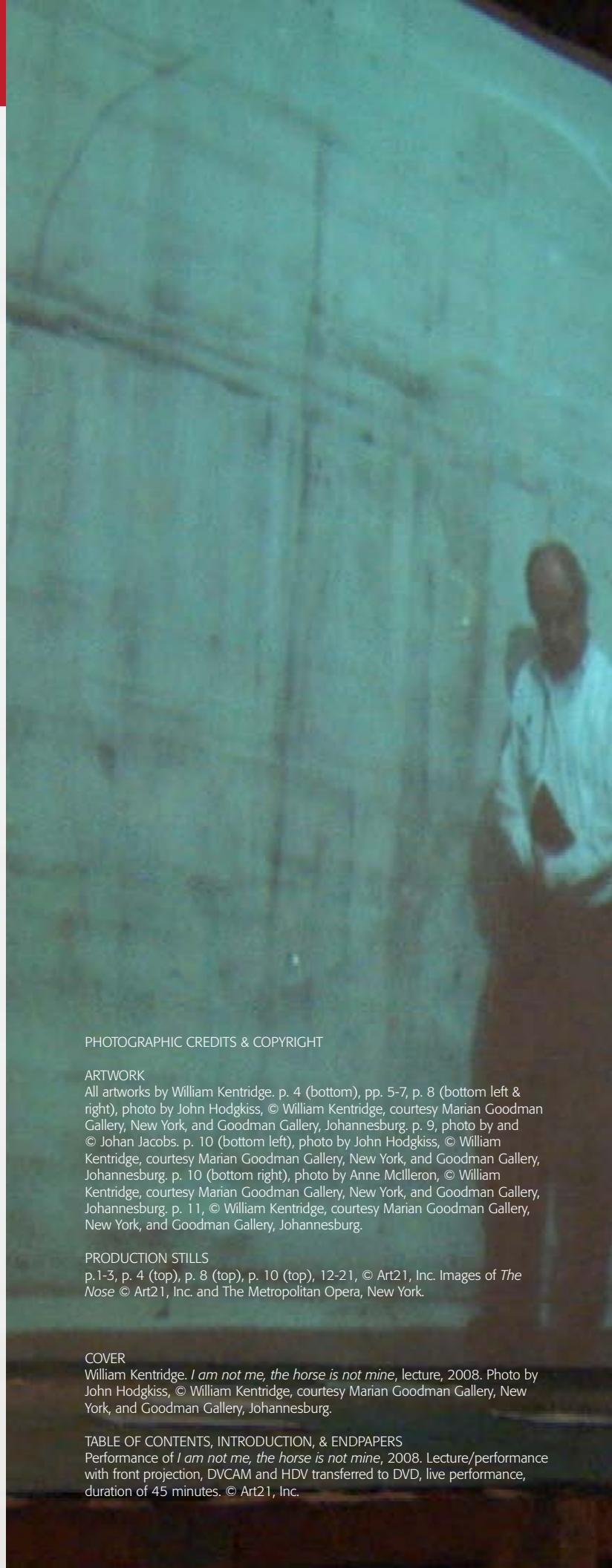
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COVER

William Kentridge. *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, lecture, 2008. Photo by John Hodgkiss, © William Kentridge, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

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Performance of *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, 2008. Lecture/performance with front projection, DVCAM and HDV transferred to DVD, live performance, duration of 45 minutes. © Art21, Inc.



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art21 films

2010

WILLIAM ANYTHING KENTRIDGE IS POSSIBLE

2009

ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
season 5

Compassion

William Kentridge*
Doris Salcedo*
Carrie Mae Weems*

Fantasy

Cao Fei*
Mary Heilmann*
Jeff Koons*
Florian Maier-Aichen*

Systems

John Baldessari*
Kimsooja*
Allan McCollum*
Julie Mehretu*

Transformation

Paul McCarthy*
Cindy Sherman*
Yinka Shonibare, MBE*

2007

ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
season 4

Romance

Pierre Huyghe*
Judy Pfaff*
Lari Pittman*
Laurie Simmons*

Protest

Jenny Holzer*
Alfredo Jaar*
An-My Lê*
Nancy Spero*

Paradox

Jennifer Allora &
Guillermo Calzadilla*
Mark Bradford*
Robert Ryman*
Catherine Sullivan*

Ecology

Robert Adams*
Mark Dion*
Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle*
Ursula von Rydingsvard*

2005

ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
season 3

Memory

Mike Kelley*
Josiah McElheny*
Susan Rothenberg*
Hiroshi Sugimoto

Power

Laylah Ali*
Ida Applebroog*
Cai Guo-Qiang
Krzysztof Wodiczko*

Play

Ellen Gallagher*
Arturo Herrera*
Oliver Herring*
Jessica Stockholder*

Structures

Roni Horn*
Matthew Ritchie*
Richard Tuttle*
Fred Wilson

**Commissioned
Video Art**

Teresa Hubbard &
Alexander Birchler

2003

ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
season 2

Stories

Trenton Doyle Hancock
Kiki Smith
Do-Ho Suh
Kara Walker

Loss & Desire

Janine Antoni
Gabriel Orozco*
Collier Schorr

Humor

Eleanor Antin*
Walton Ford
Elizabeth Murray
Raymond Pettibon

Time

Vija Celmins
Tim Hawkinson
Paul Pfeiffer
Martin Puryear

2001

ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
season 1

Place

Laurie Anderson
Margaret Kilgallen
Sally Mann
Barry McGee
Pepón Osorio
Richard Serra

Identity

Louise Bourgeois
Maya Lin
Kerry James Marshall*
Bruce Nauman
William Wegman

Spirituality

John Feodorov
Ann Hamilton
Beryl Korot*
Shahzia Sikander
James Turrell

Consumption

Matthew Barney
Michael Ray Charles
Mel Chin*
Barbara Kruger
Andrea Zittel

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