

“In the Studio” with William Kentridge

-- William Kentridge

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This interview explores both the individual and collective creative processes of the prolific multi-disciplinary visual and performance artist, William Kentridge. It takes place in Paris where the artist has under thirty minutes to engage in a dialogue before the first performance of his Chamber Opera, *Waiting for the Sybil*, in a theater new to the troupe. The conversational manner is complicit and playful, drawing on common backgrounds and histories. The result offers up a new angle on what ‘Studioness’ has become for the artist. Exploring the inward-looking and outward-reaching movements within studio practice, the interview seeks to enlarge the notion of the studio to include remote and virtual practices. The impact of, and response to, the COVID-19 lockdown period is central to the discussion.

Keywords: Studioness, Parliament of Practices, center for the Less Good Idea, Johannesburg, *Sybil*, mark-making, studio group, process, lockdown

Introduction

I cannot give full credit to the COVID 19 virus for the serendipity of meeting members of the Parliament of Practices (PoP) in virtual space.¹ Like myself, they had been seeking to maintain practices that could be embodied online, to co-create in virtual space and to imagine new ways of doing so. Most of those I met were trained in physical theater and were researchers, grounded in the practices of Odin Teatret and NordiskTeaterlaboratorium (NTL), based in Denmark. This took me back to my early theater training in South Africa, then later in Paris. I was based at the Paris-Saclay University, where internationalization of the curriculum called for mobility, whether physical or virtual.² Theatrical techniques were also essential to my intercultural communication courses at the Institut Polytechnique de Paris (Telecom Paris).

With the PoP practitioners I had met online, we decided together to experiment with facing the unprecedented situation of lockdown. Practitioners of different creative disciplines based in six different countries, we joined as a working group of the PoP, calling our circle 'Embracing the Unknown.'³ These online meetings continued for six months, during which time we set a random date to meet up in Germany⁴ where we engaged in a physically present two-day workshop. After this exhilarating experience, we were sure we could offer virtual mobility workshops to the EUGLOH Alliance,⁵ made up of five Erasmus partner universities of which the Université Paris-Saclay is a member. With the SLAM Lab,⁶ I put forward a proposal to run remote workshops called 'eSpaces of Creative Encounter' which was accepted by the Alliance, with the University of Porto contributing a visual artist from the Fine Arts department.⁷

Between March 2021 and March 2022, students and staff from five countries and a wide variety of disciplines were led by six different artists, two per workshop, combining their disciplines and leading a three-hour session where, although English was the common language, it was not the basis for the exchanges, which were mostly physical, drawing even on gibberish and Dadaist practices. After co-leading twelve workshops, I was invited to join the core PoP embodied research group, Cross-Pollination,⁸ for a summer intensive workshop in Denmark.

Throughout all this experimentation, I realized how close we were to the working practices and aesthetic philosophy of William Kentridge, an artist and former colleague whose solo and collaborative work with the center for the Less Good Idea I was familiar with and truly appreciated. When I discovered they were soon to perform *Waiting for the Sybil* (2019) in Paris, I approached him for an interview for this issue of *Documenta*.

Waiting for the Sybil

The 2019 Chamber Opera, *Waiting for the Sybil*, directed by William Kentridge, won the 2023 Olivier Award highlighting outstanding achievement in Opera, following a performance at the Barbican theater in London, in September 2022. *Sybil* was also nominated for best New Opera. Kentridge speaks of this creation in detail during a podcast *To what end?* (2023).⁹ He refers explicitly to his way of working in the studio as a way of “keeping doubt and uncertainty about your first idea such that other things can come in and shape and inform it” (Kentridge 2023). He does not rule out contradiction in the creative process and values the unpredictable way in which ideas come together.

The idea started as a commission for the Rome opera house that had, in 1968, premiered *Work in Progress* by Alexander Calder. The original Calder mobiles are still at the theater, which he saw in motion, and the nature of the mobiles led to the idea, for the stage creation, of movements of circling and turning. Another source, this time at the Barcelo opera house in Florence, was a Phillip Miller performance with William’s video projections of prints of ‘predictions’ on encyclopedia paper making up the leaves of a tree, and a series of songs including the song ‘Waiting for the Sybil’, where the Sybil was born as a character. This led to his exploring the myth of the Cumaean Sybil in Naples, who could predict the future and answer your questions. You could write your questions on an oak leaf and she would answer them in her cave on another leaf, but when approaching the mouth of the cave to fetch your answer, the wind would always be swirling around and you would never know if it was your fate you had picked up or somebody else’s. Again, the idea of circling and chaos was present. The overarching idea became to explore the question of ‘fate’ through the character of Sybil. Although we

might believe we can predict the future, we have no *right* to expect any specific future outcomes. We can never know if we are making a *right* or *wrong* decision. The pandemic, as it happened, was what prevented the planned launch of the opera at the Rome opera house. It launched in Luxemburg to a timid audience of 50, appropriately spaced a seat or two apart.

But back to the creative process. Two years before the pandemic, the center for the Less Good Idea had been co-founded with partner Bronwyn Lace. The work began with an open call to draw together about thirty people in Williams's downtown Johannesburg studio: musicians, actors, dancers, a video cameraman, to capture what could be generated in a 7- to 10-day workshop on the theme of fate and the Cumaean Sybil. First, the context was shared - the Calder, the Philip Miller, the Sybil - but then a big space for improvisation and invention was opened up. (What sound could we have? What tree? One huge tree that turns around? One singer? What could costumes be like?)

What was important was to construct "an openness for recognition," not to have clear instructions or meaning, but to say "there is a body of possible languages", and then it is about being open to "what can emerge" (Kentrige). During the devising process, it took them about three minutes to know that they needed live music. And then it was a question of capturing the grammar of the excitement that makes things emerge, to bring it on stage, to the stage. There was an "impulse towards meaning", and an "unavoidable optimism in the process of making" that William also calls *Fortuna*, closer to serendipity than to random chance (Kentrige). There is a life force in the collective making.

Kentrige insists on the importance of the studio being a "safe space for stupidity". One needs to find a place for human stupidity in the face of machine intelligence, he explains, a space that does not compute, so as not to be owned by the algorithm, the new form of "fate" that threatens to control us (Kentrige). At least in the studio there is a place big enough for this doubt and uncertainty, he says. But then, what is it that can be accomplished together in a studio? How much alone? And how much interaction with the outside world? Kentrige recognizes it was a natural move for him:

[...] to go from making drawings to animating them to working with a puppet theater company, people coming to the studio. So, there is a section of the studio, the main room, for drawing, which it does not help to have anyone else in. And then there is a bigger, more industrial studio in town where sculpture happens, rehearsals, filming if there are lots of people. And a lot of work that happens at night or on the weekends when the studio is empty.”

(Kentridge)

And when a piece like *Sybil*, with music directed by Nhlanhla Mahlangu and Kyle Shepherd, with dancers from The center of the Less Good Idea like Teresa Phuti Mojela, Thandalize “Sonia” Radebe and Thulani Chauke, all *authors* in their own right as composer-musicians, choreographers and dancers, comes to the attention of a broader public, it does indeed make political, existential and aesthetic sense, and *that* is its power.

Preparing for dialogue

I would have to interview Kentridge somewhere near the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris prior to that evening’s performance of *Sybil*. I had imagined us sitting around in a local café in a *tête à tête*, a 30-minute recorded chat over coffee. After all, we had met and acted together as students on our campus at the University of the Witwatersrand (“Wits”) in South Africa. We had both studied in Paris in 1981. I had visited his two studios in Johannesburg and had seen several of his international exhibitions and performances. However, I was unexpectedly invited to attend a rehearsal before our meeting. It will be hard to talk about anything but the show, I had thought. If the interview happens at all, it cannot be improvised.

I had recently given an international scientific paper on the role of chance in the art of Henri Michaux¹⁰ and William Kentridge.¹¹ But chance meetings in William’s work are, to a certain extent, prepared. The improvisations have a framework. I decided to reflect that technique back at him, to give him a space of freedom, a playground to a certain extent, while introducing, almost randomly, a certain number of questions I wished to address. In order to connect with



Figure 1. Dialogue prompts. Photo © Vera Mihailovich-Dickman, 2023.

him and change registers from the rehearsal I was to attend (I had already seen the show in Luxemburg), I had prepared three items: a newly printed French stamp commemorating the life of Nelson Mandela who had died ten years earlier (our shared history after all); an old postcard, paint-washed by a Serbian artist friend, Milos Todorovic, showing the Denfert Rochereau square (near to where William had lived in 1981), and a postcard-size print of one of Henri Michaux's *Mouvements* ideograms in Indian ink. I prepared a set of cards from which he could randomly draw the subjects or questions for our conversation, but then considered that to be too playful and too risky for the situation. After all, I had no idea where we would be. I had also brought a charcoal image I'd made to connect Kentridge and Michaux while writing about their work previously. I had a range of questions and would have to find a way to connect them, allowing William to think freely.

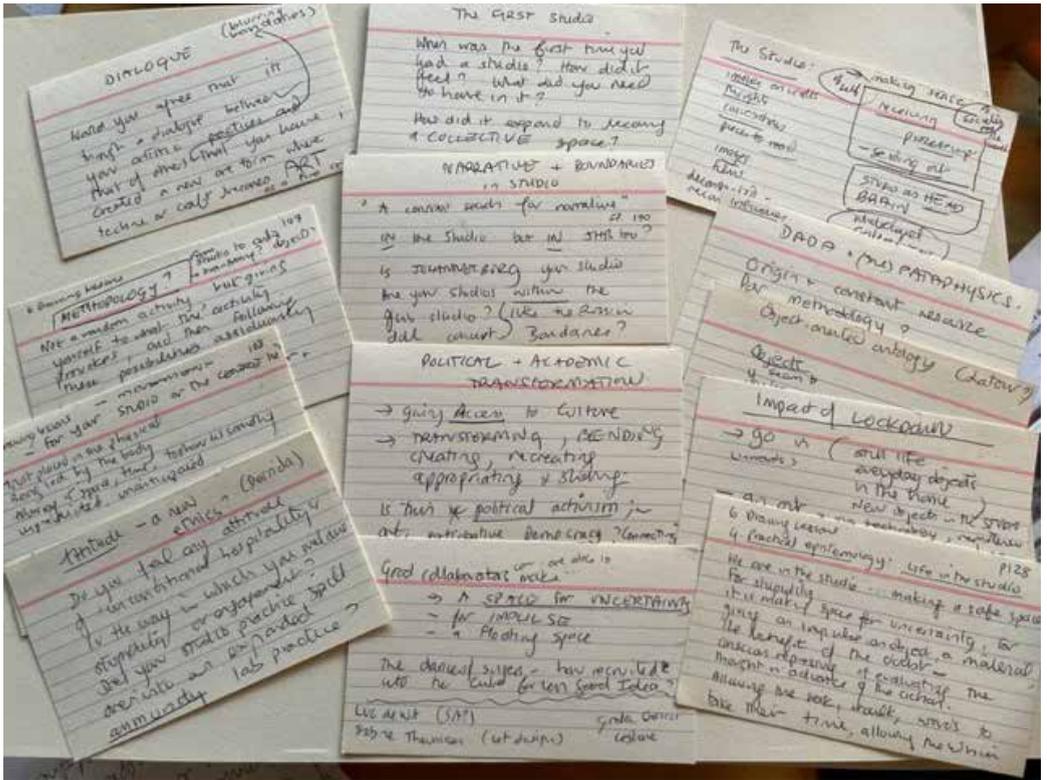


Figure 2. Interview questions. Photo © Vera Mihailovich-Dickman, 2023.

We were invited backstage to the Green Room (the name of our theater club at Wits) to sit around a low table onto which I spread my cards and 'gifts', proceeding to choose a card at random from which to start the interview. Sparked by the first question, William was able to 'walk around the studio of his brain,' telling me a story, until we found a place where there was a mystery, surprising us both to some extent. There was something he had never thought about or seen, and now it appeared clearly. It was 'studioness' he had accepted to talk about.¹² He had spoken about the "Studio" on many occasions,¹³ but we had found a new dimension, which became more important than any other details. It was the city of Johannesburg as solo and collective Studio. I considered the mission accomplished. The next day, William Kentridge confirmed it.

The interview

Vera Mihailovich-Dickman: (an aside to William): From the Green Room at Wits in Johannesburg to the Green Room at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris!

William, thank you for this dialogue - I see it more as a dialogue than an interview mostly because this issue's contributors, many of whom are peers, are far more interested in dialogue and dialogic practices than they are in hierarchically determined academic work. Several are members of Cross Pollination, the research platform that initiated the Parliament of Practices, a tactic that has been employed across Latin America and Europe to promote dialogue across disciplines, cultures and experiences. Despite being a transnational network, they have in common a background in the theater laboratory. I attended a workshop with Cross Pollination in Denmark last year but working with several of these practitioner-researchers online was my entry point. It was under lockdown and so, as a starting point, there was a question of: does one reach inwards in this situation or – somehow - outwards?

If I think about you, your work, the studio, in fact 'studioness', one of the things that we wanted to talk about, and that my peers and I are curious about, is boundaries, the inside and the outside, and that Russian doll expansion that starts inside your brain. I felt, at the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition in London, somehow, that I was walking from one part of your brain to the next, and then, at the LAM exhibition in France, walking through your whole expanded studio. Let's start with that - what was your first studio, if you remember it, and what did you feel you needed in it?

William Kentridge: I think I must've been about 13 or 14 when I felt I wanted to build a studio. I had a perfectly adequate big room in the house called "the playroom", as a child, with toys, a table tennis table ... but I thought that, at the age of 13, I needed a studio. There was an old potting shed in the garden, concrete slabs for putting seedlings in, and I worked over the December holidays with a gardener in the house, a person my parents had employed as a gardener, to turn this into a studio. Neither of us had constructed anything before but we

bought window frames and windows and bricks and roofing and built the top walls of this collapsed building into a studio and tried to put some sort of lino flooring down but a) it faced completely the wrong way, so the only flat surfaces had direct sun blaring in, and b) it was very damp, so the concrete never dried properly, and the floor just lifted off and floated away.

You couldn't really seal the windows because we were inadequate builders and had chosen a completely unusable space as a studio. So, the activity of building it was important and good, the idea of studio was there at a very early stage but, practically it was much more efficient as a real studio to move back into the house. So that was the first studio, a kind of 'failure' studio and it stayed as a derelict building for another twenty years before it was knocked down and a cottage built in its place.

Then I had, when I moved out of the Houghton house when I was 20 into Junction Avenue, a two-roomed apartment, a cottage, and one of those rooms was designated as the studio, which was not a tiny room by Paris apartment sizes, but not a big room, maybe 4 by 5 metres

VD: You were making posters at that time, right?

WK: I was making posters and doing a lot of silk screen for theater. I was working for the Johannesburg Art Foundation and we would do the silk screening by hand without a vacuum table and then put clothes lines up all over that second room and over our bedroom and go to sleep at night with the lacquer thinner fumes drying off the posters as we slept underneath them, and poisoning ourselves, and that was a studio for a number of years, and then we came to Paris.

VD: You didn't mind 'poisoning yourselves' because there was a kind of activism in your work too, wasn't there?

WK: There was a kind of activism in the posters, absolutely! And then when we came back to Johannesburg after the year in Paris at the Theater School (Jacques Lecoq) we bought a house in Bertrams and that was a slightly bigger space – the larger room there was the biggest room in the house and that became a studio.

VD: By then were you already developing multiple techniques, as well as filming?

WK: That was starting. The first few films were made in that studio, so it was both a place for making films and for drawing and then we moved into and took over the largest room in my parents' old house, which was their sitting room which became the studio for a few years: it was my studio there from 1993 to 1999. Then when we moved in, I finally built a proper studio in the garden. That was the first purpose- built studio. The others had been bigish rooms and in the Studio what I needed was a space where I could pin anything up on any wall, so all walls are pinboard surfaces. It had a section closed off from the studio which was an office – where two people were working. It had a storeroom for materials and a plan chest for drawings. It needed storage and the mechanics for making some tools and raw material and then the central space was the studio which had to be big enough to walk around in, that the walking around the studio was an important part and the fact that one could pin things anywhere in it too, so all the walls were potentials. It didn't have to have great natural light because a lot of the work I was doing then was filming. I needed to have controlled lighting better than natural light, so that it would stay consistent. It's built in amongst trees, almost like a huge treehouse, but the studio itself has no view line at all - if you go into the office there are beautiful, gorgeous trees, but what I needed was a kind of 'enlarged head'.

VD: The interesting thing is the importance of being in the studio, waiting for the right thing to attract you - you can walk around for quite some time until something jumps off the wall and says "this is what today speaks to me and where my work is going to start." There's a lot of collaboration in your work which leads me to the impression that in the same way as you slowly expanded, so did your studio, almost as if, today Johannesburg itself is your studio?

WK: Yes, yes, but just to correct a little bit what you were saying just before – it's not walking around waiting to see what takes my fancy - it can be said that I know exactly what I've got to do but to gather the energy, to start, for the first mark to happen, that's what the walk means.

It's kind of finding the moment when the decision is made, and the first mark comes out and that's the key - and often the way to deal with that is to make not exactly a random mark, but a very gestural fast mark, so it will then find its clarity in the workings. But this gathering of the thoughts and energy, both of those things happen together.

VD: And that, for you, needs to be in a limited space?

WK: Yes, interesting, even when I'm outside. I've done something like walking around the edge of the swimming pool for an hour and I realize I haven't actually got into the pool, I've just been circling it and then I think what the hell, it's hot, let me get in and collaboratively, a lot of our good conversations happened in or around the swimming pool, when you don't think that that's what you're doing, when we haven't sat down and said, "OK let's have a serious talk about the project." It's when you're doing something and then you say, "You know, I've got a new thought" but it has to do with somewhere in a physical space (...) so the swimming pool is one space, the water is one space - slowly swimming up and down lengths, ideas coming up, checking them with other people - finally we've spent half an hour with our arms over the edge of the pool talking. Inside the studio is another space - as I go in, I open the door, I close the door, and I'm in the space ready to work, and, before the work it's just - "let me just try to clarify what I'm about to do," so it's in the expectation that work is about to happen that often the walk insists its way in. Sometimes you can go in and straight away the first mark goes down, you know what you're doing, it's all set up, but even then - "let me just clarify - this will lead to that," and then there's a circling of the studio.

VD: When you're driving from the studio in Houghton to the one in Maboneng, in town, for example, I'm sure you are looking around you, as if everything that you are seeing is a little bit like the things on the studio wall?

WK: I'd never thought about it in those terms - but thinking now of Johannesburg as the studio, particularly in the sense that the collaborators and performers that I'm working with are so, in general,





Figure 3. William Kentridge in the Houghton Studio. Photo © Adine Sagalyn, 2015.

Johannesburg-based, it *is*. It's not the walk between the drawing and the camera, which it is in the studio, but the movement between the Houghton studio and the town studio - it's that kind of connection. It also has the edge, it has the edge because it's always a complicated drive, complicated in the sense that you have to be aware. You're aware at every stop street,¹⁴ at all the places - you have to be, more than I would feel in, say, a European city, though maybe that's a false idea of a European city. Let's say, you can't be on your phone during that journey. You have to be checking when you're reaching a stop street, what/ who's around, what's going on - that is the circumstance of Johannesburg in that part of town.

VD: There's also the question of the narrative that is important for you and so Johannesburg is a constantly changing narrative. There's also this idea of making sense of this changing society, on a certain level. If you're observing, you must certainly be bringing into your work things that you've seen, or they become some of the figures or structures that appear and that go into interaction with other things,

Figure 4. William Kentridge in the Maboneng Studio, CBD Johannesburg. Photo © Vera Mihailovich-Dickman, 2015.



other objects that are important to you, part of your vocabulary, and then they go around until they make sense, and you connect them in some way. Is there some kind of growth in the narrative?

WK: It's interesting because it's a connection I hadn't thought of before. You bring up thinking of inside the one studio, the smaller space of the Houghton studio and then the other – there's a range of objects that keep on requiring to be drawn, like the coffee pot, or the panther, the rhinoceros, or the tree, in the same way the collaborations are with many of the same people moving from project to project. In a way there are many different trees, but they are all “the tree”, and there are many different roles that different actors or singers who work with me perform, but it's the same group, so in that sense it does feel like it's a Studio Group.

VD: A “Studio Group”. That's really interesting. I was also wondering whether, because of the society that you live and work in, you see it a little bit as political and academic transformation. For example, in a way you're giving access, but you're also gaining access to cultures you had no access to. Your work is very multilingual, you are also giving access to the voices of and works by people that might not be accessible otherwise, and you are, somehow, by blending, creating, recreating, appropriating, sharing, transforming, you're materialising something new, establishing a collaborative encounter with these cultures. You're making something new, which seems to be a kind of political act in the sense that you're working with the raw material of a new society, something that was not possible before Mandela was released. Although it's in the art, it's almost like a participative democracy. It's like looking at a truly democratic way of living and connecting where voices can actually be shared and where you can equally co-create. Is it deliberate for you to co-create across cultures in that way?

WK: Well, I'd never thought of it in quite the terms that you are describing it. I'm not disagreeing with it. I always think of them as particular individual performers - there are so many astonishing singers, actors who obviously bring with them histories and stories, some very specific ones that become part of the narrative. So to give an example of that, you're talking about the trade in body parts around the world, thinking, for a character, of people selling their kidneys,

trading organs like that - both legally and illegally, voluntarily and involuntarily, and one of the actors is saying, “yes, there’s a man in the township called Fingers and each time he needed something he would chop off a finger because he had insurance for his hands.” So, the first finger bought him a car, the second finger enabled him to fix his house, the third finger did something else and it was a kind of monetizing of the body in another strange way. So, for him it was a hilarious story of this person they called Fingers in the township, but it certainly gave a whole new angle into thinking about the body and trade in the body. So, it’s not just for the voices, or for movement skills, there are those plus all the things that go behind it and, for monolingual white South Africa, there’s a shame in not knowing all the other languages that we’ve heard all our lives.

VD: Is that what they say, the word “shame”, at the very end of *Sybil* - are they singing it?

WK: No, they’re singing “*Tshepo*”- they’re singing “Hope - Where shall we place our hope?” The soloist woman is singing a version of “Where shall we put our hope?”

VD: I see, but when they’re lifting up the leaves, were they saying “shame, shame?”

WK: No, no it’s “Shwe ... Shwe” so I’m not sure, literally, but it’s a sound more than anything ...

VD: So, to stay with the idea that if you’re going from the way you work in your solo studio to the way you work in your collective studio, there’s almost a sense of reaching out into the community, the society, that your practice in your individual studio has become a practice across the city where in fact where you’re blurring boundaries ...

WK: Well even the stuff that’s done in the other studio, the center for the Less Good Idea,¹⁵ it’s very much there, in town, next to my studio. The community the center deals with, for example, its primary focus is on the artists, actors, and giving them a space to work in an open way that would be impossible in the theater or on other projects.

Secondarily, it's the people who come to see it and tertiarily, it's the immediate community around the Center.

So some of the artists who come to the center are interested in working with groups of people, musicians - there are some Nigerian funeral dancers, there's Isicathamiya choirs (similar to acapella, but rooted in an isiZulu tradition), there are other dancers in the area that they like to work with - but other artists are much more interested in things about themselves, or other relationships, questions, and all of those are possible at the Center. After years of working in a kind of agit-prop way, of thinking - "what is it? - what are the sort of images that the world needs to see?" - to changing, over the last many years, to saying, "I need to do something that either intrigues *me*, or the people I'm working with," in the hope that if there is something in it that interests me, other people will connect to that too, rather than starting with thinking - "what do other people not know that I know, that I can show them?" A lot of the projects start with frustration with one's own stupidity, working from there outward, rather than thinking - "here's something I know that I'm going to teach you."

VD: I think that the project that I started was about discovering that our home could be a studio and that the objects in the home also had a place. Some had been forgotten, sometimes we were taking photographs from the point of view of an object, bringing in and sharing objects we'd forgotten, going into spaces we had never sat in, working across languages led by artists and students from different disciplines and cultures and also students in different countries, trying to co-create in this space and time our lockdown home 'studio' which was remote. I noticed that some of your very beautiful drawings, still life with objects I hadn't seen before, like vases with flowers, partly collaged, were being done then, yet it seems you didn't reach out to have remote interactions. Was that a personal preference, or had you discussed it, and were there problematic technical issues about people working from home with computers or phones, not having the rooms and space, or needing to come to a collective studio?

WK: No, some things were possible to do long distance and we started with them, but editing, even something like editing, there is some editing that people do in their own houses, but it is very much the conversation together ...

VD: So, working together in real time creatively for a final piece that is going to be edited?

WK: A lot of the lockdown project was a series of nine half-hour films about life in the studio, done all in the studio in the garden, and that was about the compression of the studio, the claustrophobia of being stuck there, so even when the lockdown ended, the decision was taken to still keep all the filming in that place, and as soon as they could be, the editors were back on site.

VD: In fact, you said in the conversation with your film-maker Walter Murch that editing is poetry –

(**WK:** *He* said that) –

VD: And you agreed, maybe? It's about bringing in the poetry?

WK: Well, for him it's just a question of how long is a shot, but the drawings don't ever feel like co-creations. The theater pieces absolutely do, the sculptures do feel like this, the tapestries do. Where there are other people, it's not just their technical skills but it's their experience, their eye, their judgement that is part of the making of the pieces, and theater pieces supremely so.

VD: Were the sculptures your idea?

WK: The sculptures are my idea ...

VD: Of course, some of the works we'd seen before in shadow pieces and cardboard ...

WK: But I just began to realize it's about scale and as they grow, they are more and more essential.

VD: Yes, it's really brilliant to see that!
I know we have to conclude because other people need your time



Figure 5: Vera Mihailovich-Dickman and William Kentridge in the Green Room, Théâtre du Châtelet. (Photo taken on request by local staff)

but maybe I can just ask, William, at the center for the Less Good idea, when you're working across disciplines with all these different people, does somebody lead the workshops with a physical methodology, for example, like you used at Jacques Lecoq, when you speak about the different breathing steps and four stages or four levels of tension?

WK: Different people lead warm-ups, so we have different approaches. We say, "Won't you do the warm-up today?" and then the different directors have their way of working with them. So, there's not a physical methodology of the Center. We had a series of classes in physical theater, so one was Jacques Lecoq, (...) one with Jenny Reznick, each one doing a course, three different physical theater courses. So there's a process or a strategy, but there isn't a technique.

VD: And then you work for, say, a five-day intensive week?

WK: Yes, but then, you know, different groups get together at different times to complete what they were doing.



VD: OK, well one of our dreams was one day to work across the ethers with the center for the Less Good Idea and maybe, William, we will be able to make that happen because your work has been so inspirational.

WK: There are groups that do this with Bronwyn.

VD: I raised the question with Nhlanhla Mahlangu in Luxemburg and in a video call later. He said it was not very interesting for him but that it interested Thandazile “Sonia” Radebe, and she was, at one stage, wanting to go further, but it was harder then to gather the conditions to take that further.

But I think your work with the idea of 'embracing the unknown' (our expression) and the 'safe space for stupidity' (your expression), going into and embracing uncertainty is a very interesting creative process that we are also trying to use in a summer school art-science project (Useful Fictions #3) with Marcus Neustetter on the Institut Polytechnique de Paris campus. We're going to try and take those working principles and embody them, making it very physical.

We're trying to create an ephemeral studio space which will have a very physical existence where we bring in the body and material objects, where it's a lab, but not just a thinking lab. We'd like to elaborate or create a new space together, an environment of symbiosis, and I think everything, all the indications that are given in the books that you've written, things you've spoken about so frankly and unpretentiously, give us ways of working that help us feel safer in this space of complete openness where we need to trust the process.

Figure 6: William Kentridge outside the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris.
Photo © Vera Mihailovich-Dickman, 2023.

Closing thoughts

There is a fine line between a 'solo' or 'group' studio preparing work, where every artist is contributing *techné* to building a new oeuvre that can be exhibited, published or performed, and a more open studio, so to speak, where collaborative research is a way of working that can help an artist discover how to expand their potential while remaining true to certain principles, techniques or values. How can artists, and even just learners, surprise themselves through interaction with others that help them grow? How is a 'safe space for stupidity' created? Is it simply an attitude of openness and curiosity that builds on deep questions that can be explored together? Or is there a process that generates both trust and creativity?

Perhaps a missing link, one precious to William Kentridge, is to be open to the time and interaction it takes to allow meaning to emerge from chaos, to trust that every contribution makes a difference to meaning making, and that sometimes a new form emerging collaboratively allows for new understandings - of the past, of oneself, or of an artistic practice.

This interview was edited for clarity and brevity.

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Notes

- 1 Parliament of Practices (PoP): A platform and a tactic for generative knowledge exchange initiated by Marije Nie and Adriana La Selva in 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1930765>
- 2 “Internationalization at Home” pedagogies of which “virtual mobility” is an option (Leask, 2009)
- 3 This included artists Karolina Beimcik (Polish jazz singer), Christoph Falke (German actor and director), Tapani Monen (Finnish actor and director in Italy), Marije Nie (Dutch musician and dancer, often based at NTL in Denmark), and Marta Wryk (Polish opera singer in Germany)
- 4 Studio 7 in Schwerte, run by Christophe Falke
- 5 At the time the E.U. Global Health (EUGLOH) alliance was a new European University comprising 5 partners: U. Paris-Saclay, U. Porto, LMU, U. Szged, U. Lund. There are now 9 partners in the alliance.
- 6 Synergie Langues Art Musique (SLAM), UEVE, Université Paris-Saclay, plug-in lab headed by Brigitte Gauthier.
- 7 Rita Castro-Neves, photographer and installation artist in Portugal.
- 8 Cross Pollination collective was founded in 2017 by Adriana La Selva and Marije Nie, to bring practitioners from all disciplines of the performing arts together in a nomadic theater laboratory to engage in the dialogue in-between practices. Cross Pollination’s Nomadic Laboratory: a praxis in-between practices Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença. 2021, Vol. 11, Issue 4: Laboratories in Flux
- 9 <https://news.berkeley.edu/2023/01/27/berkeley-talks-william-kentridge/>
- 10 Henri Michaux (1899-1984), Belgian-born major 20th century French artist (poetic writings, visual arts)
- 11 TimeWorld Congress, Paris 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBOeWSBov-k&t=144s>
- 12 ‘Studierness’ is a possible translation of “studiinost” (Eastern European theater practitioners referring to a praxical spirit). For Bryan Keith Brown “Studio is a place for perfecting oneself, a collective and organizational form around the interdependent relations or ethical bonds between the people who comprise it” (Brown, 2019, 13 in *A History of the Theater Laboratory*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge) quoted in endnote 6 by Adriana La Selva in *Affective topologies and virtual tactile experiences in theater training* (Theater, Dance and Performance Training, Vol 4, Issue 2, 2023).
- 13 Note in particular “Drawing Lesson Four - Practical Epistemology: Life in the Studio” in *Six Drawing Lessons*, Harvard University Press, 2014, and *Footnotes for the Panther*, Fourthwall Books, Johannesburg 2017.
- 14 A “stop street” or “robot” in South African English refers to a traffic light or an intersection, a junction.
- 15 “The center for the Less Good Idea” - the name originates from a Tswana proverb: “If the good doctor can’t cure you, find the less good doctor”. (...) “In the act of playing with an idea, you can recognize those things you didn’t know in advance but knew somewhere inside of you” (lessgoodidea.com).