Smash the Thing: William Kentridge, Classical Antiquity, and his *Refusal of Time* in *O Sentimental Machine*

Abstract

This article examines a 2018 exhibition of William Kentridge's work, entitled *O Sentimental Machine*, at the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung in Frankfurt. This exhibition placed the South African artist's work in confrontation with the museum's collections, which offer an overview of sculpture from antiquity to early modernity. The exhibition draws together themes explored in Kentridge's sustained engagement with Greek and Roman antiquity: critiques of triumphant narratives of history; questions of memorialisation and ruination; and the probing of narratives of enlightenment, which begin with Plato's allegory of the cave (*Rep.* 514a-521b). The first half of the article considers Kentridge's dialogues with Greek and Roman antiquity in his wider works before turning to his *Triumphs and Laments* (2016), a series of images telling the story of Rome, imprinted on the embankment walls of the Tiber. The second half focuses on *O Sentimental Machine*, paying particular attention to *The Refusal of Time*, a piece presented at the exhibition. The article argues that this piece offers a compelling challenge to narratives of 'civilisation', at the centre of which lie hegemonic notions of time, underpinned by constructions of the classical tradition. Kentridge thus offers a vision for emancipatory engagements with Greek and Roman antiquity.

Introduction

In 2018, an exhibition of William Kentridge's work was staged at Frankfurt's Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung. Entitled *O Sentimental Machine*, the exhibition placed the South African artist's work in confrontation with the museum's collections, which offer an overview of sculpture from antiquity to early modernity. The title of the exhibition refers to the words

attributed to Leon Trotsky, that 'man is a programmable, but sentimental machine'.[1] These words betray a fundamental preoccupation of the exhibition: how human life has been controlled by narratives of enlightenment and progress since antiquity. Tightly bound up with this is the function of ideologies of time in regimenting human societies across history. Situated as it was among the Liebieghaus' artefacts of 'civilisation', Kentridge's work challenges the stories that civilisation tells about itself. At the root of this is a rejection of hegemonic ideologies of time that have governed our lives for millennia. This article suggests that the radical statement made by Kentridge's *Refusal of Time*, developed through Kentridge's sustained interrogation of classical antiquity throughout his career, is amplified by its dialogue with the classical collections of the Liebieghaus and provides a model for emancipatory engagements with antiquity.

I begin by introducing William Kentridge and outlining his engagements with classical antiquity in his wider work. In particular, I outline the significance to the Liebieghaus exhibition of his 2016 *Triumphs and Laments*, a colossal frieze depicting 'flashbacks' from Roman history, installed on the banks of the River Tiber. I then turn to *O Sentimental Machine* at the Liebieghaus specifically. In this second half of the article, I will consider four main themes drawn out by Kentridge's engagements with the classical collections of the Liebieghaus, focussing on one particular piece of the exhibition: *The Refusal of Time.*[2] After situating the piece and the exhibition within the context of the Liebieghaus and its history of the industrial, mechanical exploitation of labour, I will move on to consider the links between industry, machinery, and time. Next I explore the historical and ancient links between time and political power as brought to the surface by Kentridge's *Refusal*. Finally, I will close by considering what refusing time actually means. These four themes are roughly divided into two

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[1] Sleek team (2018).

[2] See Brinkmann and Schrader (2018) for a list of the collections of the Liebieghaus.

parts: a consideration of the space of *O Sentimental Machine* and the *Refusal of Time*; and then an examination of the time being refused.

William Kentridge: Artist of Shadows and Fragments

The artist William Kentridge was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, to white, Jewish, anti-apartheid lawyer parents. Kentridge has held the margins as central to his artistic vision throughout his career. Isolated from the mainstream Eurocentric currents of the European and North American artworlds, he adopted the marginal medium of charcoal drawing early on in his work.[3] Deliberately anachronistic in his approaches, he drew on the work of German expressionists – Beckmann, Dix, and Grosz – and creative techniques of the early twentieth century.[4] This non-linear engagement with artistic traditions, circling around certain points of art history, borrowing techniques from different periods and using a variety of media, often very technical, is a concrete manifestation of Kentridge's conception of history. This conception of history is underpinned by Kentridge's philosophy of time which, Gabriele Guercio suggests, is rooted in Jewish notions of time, which Kentridge crafts into a tool of resistance. Such a conception of time, rooted in the experiences of the Jewish diaspora and which fosters a profound sense of historical memory, sees historical time as 'lived out in a precarious state, caught between hope and desperation'.[5] This approach to time, and the history that is built upon it, is key to Kentridge's engagements with antiquity that are discussed in this article.

For Kentridge, history is a collage rather than a narrative. 'Our confidence in traditional, one-dimensional readings of humanity's history', Kentridge writes, 'has long proven illusory

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[3] Cameron (1999).

[4] Helfenstein and Delot (2019) 14.

[5] Guercio (2016) 135-136.

and misleading.'[6] Instead, history is fragmented. The question is whether we choose to hide the joints and scars between the fragments. Rodin, according to Kentridge, had a box of sculpted arms and legs, some of which were based on copies of Greek and Roman sculpture, and which provided the raw material for his Impressionist sculpture. Such processes of the recycling of the material of the past itself has ancient precedent. Kentridge points to the Capitoline Wolf as a further example of collage: 'a Byzantine wolf and two much more recent boys added'.[7] Thus, as Ute Holl sees it, Kentridge seeks truth in the fragmented, overlooked, and incomplete. 'This is the artist's project', Kentridge explains, 'needing the fragments, even delighting in them, in the project of wresting meaning from them'.[8]

The scars left behind by joining the fragments of the past into linear historical narratives are a central object of examination for Kentridge's art. Echoing Water Benjamin's assertion that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism',[9] Kentridge's art makes us see that history's barbarism is rarely legible on the surface of the documents of civilisation handed down to us. Its traces of violence must be excavated from the archives collected in opposition to established, linear histories. In Kentridge's South African context, the meaning of such oppositional archives is tied up with histories of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles. At the same time, Kentridge's Jewish

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[6] Kentridge (2019b) 175.

[7] Kentridge (2019) 95. NB, however, ongoing debates around the dating of the Capitoline Wolf: Calcagnile et. al (2019), through a radiocarbon analysis, date the wolf to the 11th or 12th century; Osborne (2020) 150, suggests that the variety of results produced by thermoluminescence tests could be as a result of repairs carried out on the statue, Etruscan in origin, during the Middle Ages.

[8] Kentridge (2014) 185.

[9] Benjamin (1969) 256.

heritage, and his ancestors' flight from antisemitic persecution in Lithuania to South Africa,[10] lends an additional sense of urgency and personal stakes in his opposition to official archives built on the foundations of racial and colonial violence. From the oppositional archives, Kentridge seeks to render 'visible and audible all that was meant to be disfigured and hidden'.[11]

In so doing, Kentridge also aims to undermine the fiction of homogeneous time – that is time which travels in a straight line, at the same speed, omnipresent and universal – through his encounters with 'the forgotten, the buried, the suppressed'.[12] Holl refers to Kentridge's work as akin to a descent into Hades or a return to the world of shadows represented by Plato's cave (*Rep.* 514a-521b).[13] Such katabases emblemise Kentridge's artistic mission which can also be seen as a move against the totalising impetus of enlightenment. As opposed to Plato's enlightenment which occurs upon exiting the darkness of the cave, Kentridge goes into the shadows in his quest for knowledge.

Holl represents Kentridge, in his role as the historian of the shadows and suppressed, as Orpheus who must 'descend into the netherworld to bring the dead back to life'.[14] Perhaps it is not a coincidence then that the myth of Orpheus is the subject of one of the more well-known sculptures of Rodin, the example cited by Kentridge of an artist who creates new collages of the fragments of antiquity. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice – as well as Plato's cave – is also explicitly cited by Kentridge as an interlocutor of his production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.[15] Mozart's tale of the hero Tamino's rescue of the princess Pamina from the forces

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[10] Huyssen (2017) 78.

[11] Holl (2019) 70.

[12] *Ibid.* 84.

[13] *Ibid*. 84-85.

[14] Kracauer (1973) 79, cit. Holl (2019) 85.

[15] Kentridge (2014) 42.

of darkness and superstition stands in as an exemplary narrative of enlightenment and, in the argument that Kentridge's work elaborates, of 'the nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence'.[16]

Kentridge then positions himself in opposition to totalitarian narratives of enlightenment which in turn are positioned as a continuation of the exit from Plato's cave, a theme to which I return. However, in adopting this stance, Kentridge constantly returns to motifs and themes drawn from classical antiquity. We have already seen how one of his examples of history-as-collage is the Capitoline Wolf, and how his critique of enlightenment is restaged as Orpheus' descent into Hades. The worlds of ancient Greece and Rome maintain a strong presence in Kentridge's work. In excavating what is suppressed in the stories that the West tells about itself, Kentridge draws on the myths built around Greece and Rome, tears them apart and rearranges them to form collages that tell a different story.

An early example of Kentridge's reshaping of the classical tradition is his 1996, thirty-minute puppet show, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse.* Based on Monteverdi's opera of the same name, Kentridge recasts Odysseus' homecoming for a South African context. However, rather than staging Odysseus' return to Ithaca, Kentridge's show dramatizes a patient's return to health after an operation. The stage setting is an early modern operating theatre drawing attention to the theatricality of the surgery, as well as demonstrating Kentridge's interest in Renaissance anatomical science, with the human body as its object of knowledge, and its relationship with the birth of modernity.[17] This Odysseus' journey back to health and his return to his self requires a katabasis into the history of his illness, a stitching together of fragments of his past to mirror Penelope's weaving.

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[16] Ibid. 11.

[17] Cameron (1999) 23.

The motif of destruction and reconstruction is key to understanding Kentridge's engagement with classical antiquity. In a lecture delivered to accompany the first performance of his piece, *The Refusal of Time* (2012), Kentridge recalls taking a train from Johannesburg to Port Elizabeth as a child. He remembers his father telling him and his sister the story of Perseus' accidental killing of his grandfather Acrisius, despite the elderly king taking all possible precautions against this after it was foretold by the Delphic Oracle. This leads Kentridge to speculate about an idea proposed by the nineteenth-century German amateur astronomer Felix Eberty. Eberty suggested that space is an infinite and universal archive in which everything that has happened on Earth is stored. Light from Earth travels out into space, carrying data with it, going off into the infinite abyss but never being destroyed. Elsewhere, Kentridge conceptualises the boundary between Earth and space as the River Styx, and time as a raft which crosses the water, to be lost in space's infinite archive. As time slows down the closer it gets to the event horizon of Hades, the raft is always about to be lost – Zeno's paradox on a cosmic scale.[18] Unlike Zeno's arrow, however, the boat does eventually cross over into the absolute darkness. However, what if this universal archive can be rearranged? What if events transpired in a different order, such that Perseus' discus missed Acrisius at the games in Larissa?

In thinking these questions through, Kentridge imagines taking a hammer to a Greek vase narrating the death of Acrisius. This imaginary act of destruction evokes the very real destruction of Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), in which the Chinese artist photographed himself dropping a 2,000-year-old vase onto the ground, documenting its being shattered into pieces. This controversial piece has led to Ai Weiwei being seen as heir to the Red Guard of the Cultural Revolution, who took Chairman Mao's exhortation to 'smash

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[18] Kentridge (2012) 10; see also Kentridge (2014) 159-161.

superstition' to violent excesses.[19] Yet, Ai Weiwei's destruction was also an act of preservation. He recalls the disinterest in China's artistic heritage among the Chinese general population of the 1990s, and, spurred on by this, began to collect Chinese antiquities, which were undervalued and cheaply available at that time. He later began to turn these ancient artefacts into contemporary art pieces, one of which being *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*.[20] By preserving this act of destruction, the artist was also, in a way, preserving the urn itself, albeit in a new form. Kentridge's engagement with classical European antiquity thus enters into conversation with Ai Weiwei's mediation upon classical Chinese antiquity. However, Greco-Roman antiquity has been, from at least the Renaissance, a part of the story that Europe tells about itself. Unlike China's attitudes towards its ancient heritage as challenged by Ai Weiwei, the cultural artefacts of Greco-Roman antiquity are closely guarded treasures. For this reason, Kentridge's destruction must remain imaginary:

> Concerning entropy no. 1
>
> Take a vase. Use a no.9 hammer and rap firmly on a rim. Smash the thing. All the pieces with half athletes, the discus, the tree, the maiden - all in pieces. Place shards in a hat. Shake vigorously. Spread the evidence. Read your fortune.[21]

Kentridge imagines what the fortune read by the shards of the vase would read:

> Concerning entropy no. 3
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> Take a vase. Use a no.9 hammer and rap firmly on a rim. Smash the thing. All the pieces with half athletes, the discus, the tree, the maiden

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[19] Sorace (2014); Gamboni (2010) 95.

[20] Wai-Ying Beres (2015).

[21] Kentridge (2012b) vii.

The king

The grandfather

The fisherman

The shield

The sandals

The cloak

The shower of gold

The right chair

The wrong chair

The wrong chair

The wrong chair

The wrong chair

The wrong chair

The wrong chair

The train

The son

all in pieces. Place shards in a hat. Shake vigorously. Spread the evidence. Read your fortune.[22]

Pieces of Kentridge's own past are now mixed into the shards ('the train', 'the son'). Stories become entangled, thrown together by chance, still intelligible despite being a collage of fragments, or snapshots, rather than a linear narrative. In fact, taking a hammer to the vase and smashing the thing allows more of the story to be told: we glimpse Perseus' shield which

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[22] *Ibid.*

protects him from Medusa's petrifying glance, we see his winged sandals, we see Acrisius in the wrong chair, we see the train on which the young William hears of Acrisius' end, we see the son shut up in a chest with his mother, the son who sits on the train and learns of the king in the wrong chair.

Things being thrown together by chance are fundamental to Kentridge's artistic and philosophical vision of Fortuna.[23] Fortuna is the juxtaposition of 'the contrary and the heterogeneous', which is to linked to Kentridge's complex subject position as an anti-racist, white South African artist of Jewish heritage whose art explores and seeks to transgress boundaries of privilege, class, and 'race'.[24] Fortuna is a vehicle for the exploration of the triangulation of power, injustice, and art. Indeed, much of Kentridge's work engages with art's hidden transcript of violence. In his 1990 animated film *Monument*, the industrialist Soho Eckstein erects a monument to the labour on which his wealth rests. Since the industrialist's wealth relies on the continuous exploitation of labour, the monument is a living one, a black worker standing as still as a statue with a load on his head, 'potent proof', says critic Leah Ollman, 'that the condition of slavery is not yet dead enough to be memorialised'.[25] Among recent debates surrounding monuments in the wake of Black Lives Matter and decolonial movements, Kentridge's engagement with the documents of civilisation as documents of barbarism requires renewed and closer examination. Among the works of Kentridge, perhaps the most comprehensive interrogation of the dynamics of memorialisation and suppression in official transcripts of history was seen in his 2016 work, *Triumphs and Laments* which I turn

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[23] Kentridge (1994) 163.

[24] Sitas (2001).

[25] Ollman (1990) 74.

to now in order to contextualise the *Refusal of Time* at the Liebieghaus and its engagement with theories of history and time.

Triumphs and Laments

On the 21st April 2016, the anniversary of the mythical founding of Rome, the banks of the Tiber, between the Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini, witnessed the inauguration of William Kentridge's *Triumphs and Laments* (figure 1). Its images were created by placing large stencils on the walls of the embankment and blasting away the surrounding grime which had accumulated there, leaving behind shadows of the stencils, a process described as 'erased-graffiti' technique.[26] This site and process of imprinting images had previously been used by Kristin Jones, who left a series of Capitoline Wolves on embankment wall. Jones would later collaborate with Kentridge in selecting the images for *Triumphs and Laments*, among which the Capitoline Wolf would reappear in a number of guises.[27] The process of creating 'by taking away' offers a striking metaphor for Kentridge's mediation on what is suppressed and silenced in history, reading into the shadows of the millennia-long story of the Eternal City.[28] This technique for leaving images which begin to fade as soon as they are created mirrors the tension between ruination and monumentalising narratives of history; these were, Salvatore Settis points out, 'ephemeral decorations which imitate the eternal, in a city where the eternal is ruins'.[29] *Triumphs and Laments* raises important challenges to the story that 'civilisation' tells

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[26] Kentridge (2016) 50. See also Guerci (2016) 136, who sees the ephemerality of *Triumphs and Laments* as underpinned by Jewish temporalities.

[27] See Lila Yawn's guide to the images at https://eternaltiber.net/triumphs-and-laments-research [accessed 14/09/21], and Kentridge (2016) 257-271. On the reasoning behind the appearances of the wolf in *Triumphs and Laments*, see Kentridge (2016) 53.

[28] See Settis (2020) 280-281; Guercio (2016) 134-135.

[29] Settis (2020) 276.

about itself, that are central to *O Sentimental Machine*'s *Refusal of Time*: the undermining of linear narratives of progress rooted in classical antiquity; the exposing of the fragmentary nature of the past; and the recognition that each triumph is underpinned by the laments of the conquered.

One aim of Kentridge's colossal frieze on the embankment of the Tiber was to make the river a protagonist in the life of the city once again.[30] The frieze tells Rome's history, as a series of 'flashbacks'[31] – or, to echo Kentridge's imaginary destruction of a Greek vase, fragments – from Rome's legendary foundation before the time to the Caesars to the murder of Pasolini and the Lampedusa shipwreck (the sketches for this displayed in *O Sentimental Machine*), its image a reconfigured representation of a restaged sea-battle (*naumachia*) in the Circus Maximus.[32] The sequence is seen as a triumphal procession, 'like unwinding the frieze on Trajan's column'.[33] Yet, as Settis makes clear, this is not the history of Rome as is usually told. The triumphalist narrative of Rome, Settis explains, is always 'reticent about the pain and death on which each triumph rests'.[34]

Nevertheless, Kentridge does draw on the conventional iconography of Roman triumph when he reproduced images from the Arch of Titus (81 CE, figure 2) among the moments of Roman history chosen for *Triumphs and Laments*. We see the Roman legionaries carrying off the menorah from the Temple of Jerusalem, following Titus' victory over the Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE). The representation of this image from the Arch of Titus is juxtaposed with further

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[30] Ibid. 278.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Kentridge (2016) 52. On the classical roots of discourses surrounding the Lampedusa shipwrecks, see Agbamu (2019).

[33] Kentridge (2019) 100-102.

[34] Settis (2020) 270.

images drawn from Jewish history as it relates to Rome. The image which follows in the frieze represents the humiliation of Jewish people at the Renaissance Carnival of Rome, while the next shows two men – representing Jewish deportees – captured by the Nazis, and about to be executed. Lila Yawn's guide to this image suggests that we see this condemned pair as representing the millions killed in the Second World War.[35] What follows is one of the few uses of text in the sequence, a black square with the words 'quello che non ricordo' ('that which I do not remember') written in parentheses on it. These words, guiding our reading of Kentridge's frieze, are given additional weight when considered in light of Kentridge's family history. In his essay, 'That which I do not remember', Kentridge speaks of his ignorance of the links between the glory of the Roman Renaissance and the history of the Ghetto of Rome, and his ignorance in being able to put the fragments of this history together.[36] That which Kentridge does not remember is the connection between the history of Rome, especially its Renaissance triumphs, and the history of the persecution of Jews.[37] His *Triumphs and Laments* therefore, in turning to Roman antiquity in order to be able to begin this narrative, serves as a 'medicine or a remedy for the fragility of our memory'.[38]

Yet these images, as a medicine for a fragile memory, are ephemeral. The natural decaying processes of history and memory are foregrounded by *Triumphs and Laments*. At the very beginning of the sequence and at its centre are representations of Winged Victory, which appears twice on Trajan's column.[39] Yet where Victory reappears at the centre of the frieze, it is followed by two further images which show Victory in stages of collapse, ending as a pile

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[35] https://eternaltiber.net/triumphs-and-laments-research/#page1 [accessed 18/09/21].

[36] Kentridge (2019) 98.

[37] Kentridge (2016) 50-51.

[38] Settis (2020) 288.

[39] This is also an image cited by Kentridge (2019) 95, as an example of collage.

of rubble, mirroring the ruination of the ancient imperial capital. Tellingly, the collapsed Victory is followed by an image of the Campidoglio statue of Cola Di Rienzo, the ill-fated, early Renaissance revolutionary and acquaintance of Petrarch who re-established a short-lived Roman Republic in 1347, installing himself as tribune.[40] Similarly to the collapsing Victory, we see the She-Wolf of Rome three times, twice in skeletal form, in addition to a series of figures on horseback, including Marcus Aurelius and Mussolini, with broken arm, posing as a Roman conqueror. The image of Mussolini alludes to Giovanni Brancaccio's 1940 fresco from the Mostre d'Oltremare, and whose self-proclaimed restoration of a Roman empire followed the Italian invasion of the Abyssinia of Haile Selassie, also shown in the frieze.[41] The sequence begins to draw to a close with a collapsing horse, before ending with a horse which is skeletal in appearance. The emphasis on the trajectory towards death and decay which underpins triumphs is further underlined by the presence of dead bodies in the procession. The first of these is that of Remus, whose death is central to the foundation myth of the city of Rome, and whose cadaver is followed by that of the murdered film director Pier Paolo Pasolini and Aldo Moro, the former Italian Prime Minister, assassinated by the Brigate Rosse in 1978.

The juxtaposition of different times, condensing numerous historical layers, such as is seen with the leitmotif of cadavers in *Triumphs and Laments*, is emblematic of Kentridge's engagement with the idea of anachronism.[42] Anachronism itself is a concept and word with classical roots, and has been seen as central to the articulation of the idea of the Renaissance.[43] Museums, in their collections of artefacts from different periods are, in Settis' words

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[40] See Musto (2003).

[41] Settis (2020) 299.

[42] Ibid. 294.

[43] Umachandran and Rood (2021).

institutions of anachronism *par excellence*.[44] Given the location of *Triumphs and Laments* in the city of Rome and the presence of the Capitoline Wolf in the frieze, Settis points to the Capitoline Museum as a key example of an anachronistic institution. However, it is at the Liebieghaus in Frankfurt where we see Kentridge's engagement with ideas of anachronism and museum collections most strongly articulated.

The 2018 exhibition, *O Sentimental Machine*, at the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung draws together numerous strands of Kentridge's found in *Triumphs and Laments*, as well as his other work outlined so far. In particular, by staging this exhibition among the collection of ancient, medieval and early modern sculpture at the Liebieghaus, Kentridge's work is put into closer dialogue with ideas of 'civilisation' than perhaps any previous show of his. The curators of the exhibition, Vinzenz Brinkmann and Kristin Schrader, see *O Sentimental Machine* as taking place within the context of Kentridge's 2010 exhibition at the Louvre, *Carnets d'Égypte*, which throws together the histories of ancient and modern Egypt and investigates the legacies of European and North American interferences in the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[45] *O Sentimental Machine* builds on *Carnets d'Égypte* by expanding its critical lens to Eurocentric constructions of time itself – a critique whose expression finds special potency when articulated against the backdrop of the Liebieghaus' architecture and collections.

The Liebieghaus: 'An Opulent Tower of Europe'

On one side of the River Main, which flows serenely through the banking city of Frankfurt, crystalline skyscrapers vie for height to announce the pre-eminence of the corporations that they represent. On the other side, behind an orderly tree-lined promenade, lies a row of elegant *Gründerzeit* mansions, now mostly turned over for use as museums. One of these mansions is

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[44] Ibid. 305.

[45] Brinkmann and Schrader (2018).

the Villa Liebieg, now the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung. The villa was built for Baron Heinrich von Liebieg, a hugely wealthy textile businessowner whose family came originally from Bohemia, and who lived from 1839 to 1904.[46] Completed in 1896, it was designed by the architect Leonard Romeis and came to constitute what the current director of the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung refers to as 'a three-dimensional encyclopaedia of European artistic styles' (figure 3).[47] To put it differently, the editors of the *Handbook to O Sentimental Machine* described the villa in Frantz Fanon's words as 'an opulent tower of Europe', a phrase often quoted by Kentridge.[48] The collector's obsessiveness demonstrated by the exterior of the villa is borne out inside too. Liebieg was an avid collector of Greco-Roman antiquities and later, in imitation of the Enlightenment, Encyclopaedic museums of London and Paris, branched out into collecting Egyptian and Asian arts and antiquities. He stipulated in his will that, upon his death, the house be turned into a museum to display his accumulated pieces. Liebieg died in 1904, and the museum was opened in 1907.

For a visitor to the museum today, it is easy to forget the violence and dispossession which made both the villa and its collection possible. To get a sense of what life was like for textile workers upon whose labour Liebieg built his wealth, we can turn to the writing of Liebieg's roughly contemporaneous compatriot, and fellow mill-owner Friedrich Engels. In his work on *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, first published in 1845, we get a sense of the nature of the foundations of the Liebieg wealth. Engels describes the physical, psychic, and social harm of the industrialised textile industry, the industry in which his own family had made their fortune. He describes among textile workers in Leeds physical deformities caused by the conditions of their work. At the very least, according to an inquiry into the conditions

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[46] Marschner (1985).

[47] Brinkman and Schrader (2018) 10.

[48] *Ibid*. 60.

of mill workers led by Sir Barry in 1836, the stronger, younger workers who were able to escape the most barbarous conditions still experienced chronic pain in the back, hips, legs, develop varicose veins, swollen joints, as well as large ulcers on their legs and calves.[49] Engels describes the working conditions which leads to these ailments:

> The operatives [millworkers] have little to do, but must stand the whole time. Anyone who sits down, say upon a window-ledge or basket, is fined and this perpetual upright position, this constant mechanical pressure of the upper portions of the body upon spinal column, hips, and legs, inevitably produces the results mentioned.[50]

Engels' description enumerates the body parts of the worker, proceeding from the back down to the legs. The description of the 'perpetual upright position', and the 'constant mechanical pressure' exerted on the upper body bear clear resemblances to descriptions of automata – inanimate objects endowed with motion. The absence in Engels' description of any reference to the head or thought emphasises that these workers are mere appendages of the productive apparatus, no more valued (indeed, most likely less so) than the machinery that they operate.

At the same time that the Liebieg dynasty was building its industrial empire, the German Empire was consolidating its grip on its African colonies. The newly formed nation state of Germany acquired its first colonies in South-West Africa, today Namibia, in 1884, and hosted a conference of European imperial powers, convened in Berlin in 1884-1885, to carve up the continent of Africa between them.[51] Although the majority of cotton coming into Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was from the USA, the push for a

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[49] Barry (1836) 21 cit. Engels (2009) 174.

[50] Engels (2009) 175.

[51] Conrad (2014).

self-sufficient German textile industry was a major factor in the formulation of colonial policies in Africa in the early twentieth century.[52] The prominence of textile magnates in the promotion of a colonial agenda should therefore not be understated.

The violent history of German imperialism ran parallel with the development of the Liebieghaus. The cruelty and devastation wreaked by the suppression of the Herero and Nama uprising, occurring between 1904 and 1908, occurred almost exactly contemporaneously with the period between Liebieg's death and the opening of his museum, and is one of the colonial atrocities discussed in Kentridge's 2012 lecture on 'A Brief History of Colonial Revolt', one of his Norton Lectures at Harvard. Kentridge situates this genocide as part of the same history as Plato's cave which leads to Kentridge's work in understanding these questions: 'the Herero genocide is part of a continuing set of questions and actions, questions of seeing, understanding, and the use of violence, a set of questions reaching from Plato's cave to where we are here, and the studio becomes an emblematic space for working with these questions'.[53]

Yet even before these genocidal events, in which the panoply of industrial murder was brought to bear on thousands of Africans, the destructive power of industrial modernity was already becoming apparent. Indeed, the notion that colonies were laboratories of modernity finds especial justification in the cast of Germany's African possessions. As Stefan Conrad points out, as late as 1940, Germany's lost colonies were still looked back to as an opportunity to 'start afresh, unhindered by the traditions of former times such as exist at home. This can open up a huge sphere of activity for great organizers in the administration of the colonial empire'.[54] Whether this meant applying the novel 'science' of racism to the management of

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[52] Sunseri (1990).

[53] Kentridge (2014) 39.

[54] *cit.* Conrad (2014) 143.

colonised populations, planning cities to keep coloniser and colonised separate, or advancing tropical medicine, the role of colonialism in formulating elements of the German nation's discourse of modernity is key. Such technologies of scientific racism would, of course, later be perfected under National Socialism, the devastation of which, wrought upon Europe's Jewish population, adds another layer to Kentridge's engagement with Germany's colonial modernity.

The bricks of the Villa Liebieg were thus cemented by interweaving histories of exploitation and expropriation, at home and in Africa, and articulations of European modernity, the architecture of which is forensically dismantled through Kentridge's *Refusal*.

The Elephant in the Room

The *Handbook to O Sentimental Machine* foregrounds the prominence of ancient automata to the thinking behind the exhibition. Automata were, in the ancient Greek imaginary, inanimate beings capable of independent motion. The earliest attestation of the word comes from Homer's *Iliad*. In book eighteen, Achilles' mother Thetis visits the blacksmith god Hephaestus in order for a new shield to be crafted for her son. Homer draws our attention to Hephaestus' self-propelled (αὐτόματοι, *Il*. 18.376) tripods and golden, mechanical women, 'in appearance like living young women' (ζωῇσι νεήνισιν εἰοικυῖαι, *Il*. 18.418).[55] Earlier on the Horae, deities of time, are described as guarding the self-moving gates of Olympus (αὐτόμαται δὲ πύλαι μύκον οὐρανοῦ ᾶς ἔχον Ὧραι, *Il*. 5.749). Already, among the earliest extant references to automata, then, they are closely associated with time.

Vinzenz Brinkmann, in an essay included in the handbook, argues that humankind's earliest mechanical inventions looked to the mechanics of the cosmos for inspiration. From Near Eastern and Egyptian inventions for the measurement of time to the second-century BCE

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[55] See Bosak-Schroeder (2016) 123-124; Mayor (2018) 144-150.

Antikythera (Athens National Archaeological Museum), gears, cogs, wheels and axles emulated the observed motions of celestial bodies.[56] Comparably, a number of miniature sundials, found across the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean and made from expensive material, have been found, the largest number of which from the vicinity of the Temple of Jerusalem. The small size and material value of these objects suggests that these were not made as time-keeping devices but status symbols, which gesture towards the owners' control of time.[57] Similarly, the Antikythera mechanism was found in a first-century BCE shipwreck, from which a number of bronze statuettes were also recovered, including that of a youth that rotated on a wind-up, mechanical base – an object created to amuse and impress.[58] Brinkman suggests that the mechanisms that went into ancient Greek mechanisms such as self-driving carts, steered with cogs and cylinders, influenced Joseph-Marie Jacquards' 1805 programmable mechanical loom.[59] Brinkman, in connecting the motion of celestial bodies and ancient mechanisms to measure time with machines of industrial production, highlights the relationship between time and production, a theme critical to Kentridge's *Refusal*, which I will turn to shortly. Yet Jacquards' mechanical loom, in mechanising the role of the loom worker, draws an equivalence between the work of a living organism and that of a machine. We have already seen in Engels' description of mill workers how their work reduces them to the status of automata. However, this close relationship between living organisms and machines is not new to modernity.

In his *De Motu Animalium* (7:701b1-7), Aristotle likens the motion of animals to those of man-made automata. In their recent edition of the text, Christoff Rapp and Oliver Primavesi

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[56] See Freeth et al. (2021) on a proposed model of the workings of the Antikythera.

[57] Taccola et al. (2021) 82; 89-93.

[58] See Bouyia (2017) 31.

[59] Brinkmann (2018).

argue that Aristotle's concept of automata was influenced by the sorts of mechanical musical theatres dreamt up by the third century BCE engineer Philo of Byzantium.[60] Indeed, as Primavesi makes clear, the only ancient text focused on automata, Hero of Alexandria's *De automatis*, understands that, technically-speaking, automata are specifically mechanical theatres.[61] The theatre designed and described by Hero, telling the story of Nauplius, has been described as the 'first programmable device', although Jacquard's loom is another, albeit much later, candidate for the title.[62]

Primavesi draws direct links between ancient mechanical theatres and Kentridge's work. William Kentridge's art, which constantly returns to automata, is a recent statement of this long association between art, theatre, and machines. *Black Box / Chambre Noire* (2005), shown in *O Sentimental machine*, stands in the tradition of Philo of Byzantium's mechanical theatres. The title of this piece plays on the idea that automation and artificial intelligence are 'black box' technologies – contraptions whose workings are shrouded in an impenetrable veil of mystery.[63] Kentridge's *Black Box* is a fully automated miniature theatre, narrating the implications of *fin-de-siècle* European bourgeois society with colonial atrocities, with a focus on German imperialism's crimes in Southwest Africa. The *Refusal of Time* takes these themes and expands on them, both in terms of physical scale, and its more explicit engagement with the documents of what is known as Western Civilisation.

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[60] Rapp and Primavesi (2020); Primavesi (2018) 25-26.

[61] *Ibid.* 27. On Hero of Alexandria's (*De automatis* I) description of the mechanical theatre, see Schmidt (1899) 388-341. On the workings of the Heronian theatre, see Drachmann (1963) 197.

[62] Mayor (2018) 200; 247.

[63] Knight (2017).

Kentridge's *Refusal*, situated among the classical sculpture of the Liebieghaus, foregrounds the relationship between measurements of time and modes of production. The piece was developed between 2011 and 2012 in collaboration with the historian of science Peter Galison and premiered at Documenta 13 in 2012. The *Refusal of Time* consists of a large wooden frame with mechanical pistons, surrounding pumping bellows, standing as a critique of technical notions of time. The exhibition handbook tells us that its hulking proportions were inspired by an elephant shaped time-pump which stood in nineteenth-century Paris, its network of pneumatic pipes sounding timed signals to workers and officials in the city. Kentridge's machine – referred to as the Elephant – here closely resembles Jacquards' loom, a mechanical instrument of labour governed by mechanical time.[64]

At the Liebieghaus, the machine was installed in the 'Large Rome Room' (Room 107, figure 4). The huge, pump-like mechanism (figure 5) sat in the middle of the room, noisily whirring and working away, surrounded by fragments of classical statuary. Lights and images were projected around the room, casting shadows and illuminating the lapidary traces of the past. Of the works in the room, most are Roman copies of Greek originals, collected from across the Roman empire. The exhibition catalogue draws attention to the collecting culture of the Roman imperial elite and invites comparison with art collectors of the modern world. François Hartog sees the Roman craze for Greek art as an important moment in the emergence of the notion of heritage,[65] a notion of which the form of the Liebieghaus and its collection are an exaggerated statement.

This Roman demand for Greek art sparked an industry in the manufacture of copies. The copies in the Liebieghaus Roman Room include a *Torso of a Leaning Satyr*, a second

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[64] Galison (2012) 314.

[65] Hartog (2003) 149-170.

century Roman copy of an original by Praxiteles, a head of a colossal statue of Zeus-Ammon from Tunisia, and a fragmented Corinthian capital from Roman Egypt, the flotsam of the Mediterranean's classical antiquity washed up in the collection of Liebieg. Not all of the works in the room are ancient, however. Mounted on the wall opposite to the entrance of the room are three classicising bas-relief panels from the *Sepulchral Monument* for Johan Philipp Bethmann-Hollweg (1791-1812). These were crafted by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen in the early nineteenth-century for the young son of a Frankfurt banker, who died while on a *Bildungsreise* to Florence. In the right-hand panel, the personified River Arno and Death watch on as Sleep holds poppy heads over the dead youth. The regular inhalation and exhalation of Kentridge's elephant instantiates the natural rhythm of respiration and life, which has been subsumed into a mechanical time. However, the mechanical lungs of the elephant are stalked by the presence of death, embodied by the sepulchral monument and the assorted fragments of antiquity.

A Brief History of Refusing Time

Peter Galison states that an aim of the *Refusal* is 'an intensification of our encounter with time'. It is 'an exploration that begins in physics and its cultural, imperial, and philosophical history'.[66] If Kentridge's art and its lessons on the fragmentary collage of history allow us to speak in such totalising, linear terms, the philosophical history of time and its ideologies stretches back into antiquity. From the Seleucid institution of an imperial calendar, beginning with Seleucus I's reconquest of Babylon in 311 BCE, and resisted by the Hasmonean and Maccabean ideologies of messianic time,[67] to the Roman assimilation of Greek time

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[66] Galison (2012) 314.

[67] Kosmin (2018).

systems into the Julian calendar from 45 BCE,[68] the temporal ideologies of ancient empires were bound up with spatial expansionism and control over natural rhythms. The hegemony of Christianity in Europe would later entrench temporality into a universal timeline, rationalised by the Gregorian calendar, resistance to which lasted into the eighteenth century.[69] However, the eschatological time of the church began to be displaced by the empty, homogenous time of modernity,[70] which itself was threatened at times of revolution, such as the French, which saw itself as beginning time anew.[71]

Peter Galison's research focuses on the history of time at the turn of the century, while Kentridge's specific interests in this area lie in *fin-de-siècle* colonial and revolutionary temporalities. These interests intersect in the *Refusal of Time*. The breathing of the mechanical 'elephant' alludes to the assimilation of natural temporal cycles – of respiration, life and death, and seasons – to industrial time. In the late nineteenth century, contemporaneous with the life of Liebieg, the regularisation of time accelerated. High imperialism, railways, the proliferation of rapid means of communication, and the interlacing of the globe with telegram wires required a central, organising temporality.[72] At the same time, mass industry required the disciplining of labour with an overarching, omnipresent conception of time.[73] In *Reading Capital*, Althusser and Balibar note that each mode of production generates its own temporality centred around labour time.[74] With the triumph of industry, gone were the seasonal cycles of agriculture. Now

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[68] Feeney (2007).

[69] Freiberg (2000); Poole (1995).

[70] Koselleck (1985) 3-8.

[71] See Perovic (2012) 81-82 on the influence of the discovery of Pompeii on French Revolutionary time.

[72] Prasad (2013).

[73] Thompson (1967).

[74] Althusser and Balibar (1970) 239-245.

time was regimented to the minute, workers lives organised around shifts in factories which operated around the clock. The temporalities of imperial expansion and mass industrialisation converged at a single point: the Greenwich meridian.

In 1894, a French anarchist living in London refused the time imposed by the meridian in quite a literal sense. Martial Bourdin attempted to blow up the Royal Observatory, although a poorly timed fuse caused the bomb to explode before it got to its destination, killing the unlucky would-be temporal terrorist. Part of the sequence of images projected by Kentridge's own *Refusal of Time* includes a video dramatizing Bourdin's deed. The figure of Bourdin is played by a black woman, expanding the significance of Bourdin's defiance of capitalist, industrial time to encompass a refusal of white supremacist, colonial, patriarchal time. Furthermore, where Bourdin failed in his attempt, this refusenik's plot comes to fruition. The meridian is destroyed, but, after the destruction of universal time, what comes next?

The Triumph of the Defeated

Frederic Jameson sees modern time as tightly bound up with European colonialism's occlusion of the structural inequality and oppression on which it is based, reminding us of the mission of Kentridge's art to lay bare the hidden traces of history's violence. Jameson writes,

> As far as modernism is concerned […] the epistemological separation of colony from metropolis, the systematic occultation of the colony from metropolis, the systematic occultation of the colonial labour on which imperial prosperity is based, results in a situation in which […] the truth of metropolitan experience is not visible in the daily life of the metropolis itself; it lies outside the immediate space of Europe, in the colonies.[75]

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[75] Jameson (2003) 700.

In other words, the triumph of European modernity relies on the suppression of that on which it is built: the expropriation and exploitation of the world beyond Europe. What then happens when this colonial reality, the truth of the modernity of the metropolis, irrupts into the illusion of the 'opulent tower of Europe'? Kentridge, as an artist of the periphery, an African of European descent, uses his liminal perspective to explore this question.

Kentridge's *Refusal of Time* projects a procession of shadowy figures, playing musical instruments, across the walls of the Large Roman Room and the sculptures housed therein. Kentridge, who came into political maturity against the backdrop of anti-apartheid mass meetings, has long seen representations of processions and parades as synecdochic of 'the people'.[76] Kentridge's works *Arc Procession* (1989), *Shadow Procession* (1999) and Turin's *Processione dei riparazionisti* (2017), not to mention *Triumphs and Laments* (2016), all bear testament to Kentridge's fascination with people on the move.

Processions, for Kentridge, mean 'foot power', power that comes from the bottom of the body and from the bottom of the world as seen by the Mercator projection.[77] Popular processions are people on the move. James C. Scott argues that mobile people have always been a thorn in the side of the state, which has long sought to sedentarise them.[78] A procession made up of 'the people' is a challenge to this and a rebuke to the triumphant march of the state.

The fact that this is a procession of shadows explicitly engages with Plato's allegory of the cave. In his essay 'In Praise of Shadows', Kentridge defends shadows for what they can tell us about enlightenment, in general and in reference to the period of history known by that name. Shadows call into question the relationship between 'reality' and ideology by

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[76] Sitas (2001) 62.

[77] Maltz-Leca (2019) 129.

[78] Scott (1998) 1.

challenging claims to certainty, authoritarian in origin. The cave-dwellers of Plato's allegory are dragged out against their will and, having been forcibly enlightened, return to the cave to tear their former cohabitants away from their shadowy illusions. The philosopher-king's presumption of knowledge and claim to power, Kentridge suggests, would later be inverted into hegemonic monopolies of violence over the sorts of knowledge that are accepted. European colonial endeavours in Africa explicitly framed their missions as bringing light to the 'dark continent',[79] 'a gruesome working out of the impulses of Plato's cave', according to Kentridge.[80] The informed choice to enter once more into the cave, not in order to forcefully 'enlighten' its inhabitant, but in order to empower one's individual observation of the shadows passing across the wall in this way becomes a radical act, 'allowing us to be neither the prisoners in The Cave unable to comprehend what we see nor the all-seeing philosopher returning with all his certainty, but allowing us to inhabit the space in between the space between what we see on the wall and what we conjure up behind our retinas'.[81] This is not Kentridge idealising the state of ignorance of the prisoners in the cave. In his lecture 'In Praise of Shadows', he draws associations between the prisoners shackled in the cave with enslaved Africans, chained up in the holds of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage.[82] Rather, at stake here is the rejection of an imposed, authoritarian enlightenment, of the sort which justified the violence of colonialism.

Elsewhere, Kentridge states that his processions gesture towards 'the muchness of the people of the world […] the endless processions of people carrying bundles of clothes, the

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[79] Bratlinger (1985).

[80] Kentridge (2014) 48.

[81] Ibid. 32.

[82] Kentridge (2014) 26.

spoils of war. All of history carried by them'.[83] These are the people carrying the objects that case their shadow across the wall of Plato's cave. The *Refusal of Time* makes them visible where Plato keeps them hidden. Processions make another appearance in Kentridge's film *The Head and the Load* (2018) which bears tribute to African soldiers of the First World War acting as porters, bringing supplies to the front, a parade of Atlas-like figures with the world on their shoulders. These too are the people who carry history on their shoulders: the exploited; the dispossessed; the witnesses to history's violence. Kentridge, the descendent of refugees, sees a further contemporary resonance of his shadowy processions in the streams of displaced people fleeing war, poverty, and persecution, which criss-cross the globe;[84] as much a part of the history of Europe as the glory of ancient Rome, a notion gestured to by *Triumphs and Laments*' hybrid image of a *naumachia* in the Circus Maximus and a boat *en route* to Lampedusa.

Unlike the official triumphal march of ancient Rome, our understanding of which, Settis explains, is refracted through its Renaissance reconstructions,[85] a popular procession is profoundly and tangibly historical. The Roman triumph, in bringing the spoils of imperial conquest, including captives, back to the imperial capital, also brought the peripheries of empire to its centre. This ritual of Roman power is still emulated by rulers and governments across the globe. However, what precisely is it that is being emulated? Mary Beard emphasises the chronological disjuncture between literary representations of triumphs and the events themselves, making it difficult to arrive at historical reconstructions of the rituals, shrouded as they are in layers of representation.[86] The procession as seen by Kentridge, on the other hand,

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[83] Helfenstein (2019) 16.

[84] Kentridge (2014) 28.

[85] Settis (2020) 290.

[86] Beard (2007) 287-333.

is a radical act of historicization, of recognising the forces that have moved history, the masses – hidden in the shadows – who have carried its weight on their shoulders.

Refusing the triumphant narrative of civilisation, refusing the time that is imposed by it, means shining a light on history's shadows, not in order to dissipate them, but in order to make them visible. Perhaps, it is in returning to Plato's cave and descending once more into the darkness, that we reclaim our Fortuna.

Toppling the Opulent Tower of Europe

O Sentimental Machine brought Kentridge's work in direct confrontation with a vision of history as a linear trajectory of civilisational progress, in which each triumph rests on the laments of the defeated and suppressed, and a providential march of the classical spirit, ending with industrial modernity. By this account, the ideologies of time imposed by empires of antiquity were sanctified by the institution of the Christian calendar, before being perfected and regularised by industrial time. The elephant in the room of *The Refusal of Time* embodies the mechanisation of life under the ideology of industrial modernity which rested on the exploitation of Europe's overseas colonies. Kentridge, a white, anti-apartheid South African, descended from Eastern European Jewish refugees, uses the hybridity of his identity to offer an incisive critique of visions of history offered by such ideologies. The Liebieghaus was the ideal setting for this critique, drawing together histories of industrial and colonial exploitation.

When Kentridge takes a metaphorical hammer to the vase telling the story of Perseus and Acrisius, it is not in order to forget the story being told. What 'smash[ing] the thing' does is to show how linear narratives are illusory. Smashing this narrative allows for it to be seen from different perspectives and for individual encounters with the past to be foregrounded, as Kentridge – the boy on the train – is able to see himself in the fragments of the Perseus and Acrisius story once it has been reduced to fragments.

The Refusal of Time does not obliterate the documents of the past in the Large Roman Room. Quite the opposite: the refusal requires these artefacts for its articulation. The ideologies of time which brought together and continues to display the fragmentary sculptures of the Large Roman Room and the Liebieghaus as a whole is dismantled by Kentridge, allowing for the collections to tell a different story, one which empowers us to engage critically and creatively with antiquity. *The Refusal of Time* does not amount to a refusal of history, but its emancipation.

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Figure 4 The Large Roman Room. Photo: Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Frankfurt am Main.

Figure 5 The Refusal of Time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © William Kentridge. All Rights Reserved.

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