

For all we know, nothing is watching

William Kentridge (drawings) & Ingrid de Kok (poem fragments)

In 2013, the Sunday edition of the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) invited South African artist William Kentridge to contribute to a supplement with pages devoted to an original, specially commissioned collaboration between one writer and one visual artist, to launch alongside the 2013 Frankfurt Book Fair. Kentridge asked poet Ingrid de Kok to collaborate with him. Together they made a triptych of trees, For all we know, nothing is watching, one panel of which was published in the newspaper. The triptych was sold at the 2013 Johannesburg Art Fair.

William: The drawings come from an ongoing series of trees I have been making, trees from the countryside around Johannesburg. Many of the drawings have incorporated texts or phrases that come from lectures I have given, but I wanted to work with a different kind of text in the drawings for the FAZ project. I have known Ingrid and her poetry for many years, am a big admirer of her poetic voice, and wanted to see how we could work together. At first I suggested we begin with a complete poem of hers; she proposed “Vocation” (about the process of writing poems) as the text we could shatter and put into the drawing. But then we decided to work with fragments of poems, already shattered, which hint at a meaning constructed from many poems in the same way the tree drawings are constructed from many fragments, sometimes from different trees.

The process involved pinning words to the drawings in three versions: a schematic version (constructed almost entirely from texts); a pared-down version (the one published in the newspaper); and a leafier version (more like a literal tree). The schematic tree had nearly all the potential phrases, which were edited down for the second tree. The third and most leafy tree developed the thoughts from the central tree, with additional themes emerging. The two of us stood in my studio with the phrases printed onto paper ribbons, testing different phrases in different positions, while Anne McIlleron, my assistant, was next door reprinting the text in different fonts and point sizes to find the right fit. An essential part of the making was the constant movement backwards and forwards—moving fragments of text and tree from one drawing to another—until all three trees had reached a state of provisional completion.

As Ingrid and I both had our childhoods in this part of the world, there is a sympathy, I think, of Ingrid for the drawings and me for her words—as not describing this world, but as coming from this soil.

Ingrid: The fragments of text used on and in the trees come from poems in my volumes *Seasonal Fires: new and selected poems* (2006) and *Other Signs* (2011). Many years ago

William agreed to let me reproduce his haunting drawing of a tree and burial site, "Mbinda Cemetery," as the cover of my second book, *Transfer* (1997). So *For all we know, nothing is watching* turned out unexpectedly to be a revisiting of our original correspondence.

It was a delight and honour to be asked by William to work with him. We exchanged numerous exploratory emails about the possibilities we might pursue before we finally met to work in the studio. After William went to the Kunshistorisches Museum in Vienna, he wrote to me about seeing again the Cranachs and Memlings with early European paintings of trees in the foreground, the snake and the tree of knowledge and "the encyclopaedia in the tree," as he put it: "a new connection...or had a part of me known all along?" He asked about my favourite Transvaal tree but responded that *Acacia tortilis* was a bit wide for a newspaper page, though "we may make an espaliered *Acacia*." He kept reading my phrase "drought's carapace" as "daughter's carapace"—perhaps, he wrote, because of "the *fille* embedded in filigree."

When I arrived in the studio there were three versions of the trees already drawn. As we worked, playfully, intensely, William would draw additional elements and respond to my selection of phrases. Some found a place in or on a tree, some did not. A general theme emerged in the process: fugitive pieces about books, writing, creativity, conflict, process, ageing, history. The final verbal composition is less a coherent text than a flow of phrases that hint towards a narrative, a response to the tree artwork—to the branches, roots, leaves, trunks—in language scrapings, parings, gleanings, clippings, sweepings. The phrases became a kind of concrete poem in which, as William put it, "their embeddedness in the drawing is their form."

William Kentridge (drawings) and Ingrid de Kok (poem fragments),
For all we know, nothing is watching, 2013, Indian ink and printed
texts collage on *Universal Technological Dictionary, or, Familiar
explanation of the terms used in all arts and sciences* by George Crabb,
1826, 160 × 121.5 cm

ARCHIVE OF
UNKNOWN THINGS

MARAUDING SKY
FIERCER THAN
MEMORY

ARCHIVE OF
HALF-KNOWN
THINGS

DREAM'S
AFTERTASTE

JUST BEFORE DARK

FUTILE SHADE

TORN ARM,
TORN WING

QUIVER OF
BLUNT ARROWS

WHY STILL BELIEVE
STORIES CAN RISE?

SLIVER OF MOON

STONE RATTLE

DROUGHT'S
CARAPACE

DROUGHT'S

YOUR ARRYTHMIC HEART

WHY STILL IMAGINE
WHOLE WORDS,
WHOLE WORLDS?

OWL'S INDIFFERENT
HOOT

WELTS AND WEALS

NEW BEARINGS

TO THE BEGINNING
AND THE END

WATERMARKED PAPER

BIRTH-CABLE SYNTAX

JUST BEFORE DARK

SIGN TO SIGN

RESINOUS
TONGUES

MY FATHER'S BOOKS

OLDER FATE

TO RETURN HOME

LEACHED BODY

HEAT'S FILIGREE

MY COUNTRY'S GRAVES

FOR ALL WE KNOW

NOTHING
IS WATCHING

LEAVES IN RANDOM
PILES BURNING

HISTORY'S IRON SADNESS

A WORD'S GRAVID
PRESSURE

THE FUTILE SHADE

INTO THE DARK

THE SHADE OF A
THORN

DEEP VOWELS

FUTILE SHADE

MY SHADOW
SQUATS

OTHER SIGNS

FOR REFERENCE

ENTRANCE
OUR TRACES

A RHYMING
DICTIONARY

NECESSARY PREY

FOR REFERENCE

BIRTH-CABLE SYNTAX

THE FUTILE SHADE

INTO THE DARK

FOR ALL WE KNOW

WHY NOT BELIEVE IN
SOMETHING OTHER
THAN WORDS
LOST AND FOUND

A LITTLE WIND
ITS VEINED WINGS

DROUGHT'S
CARAPACE

PARTS OF SPEECH

BEATING
WINGS

OWL'S INDIFFERENT
HOOT

OTHER SIGNS

VERBS THAT MOVE
MOUNTAINS

THE BEGINNING
AND THE END

MY COUNTRY'S GRAVE
ITS ELECTRIC FENCES

OWL'S INDIFFERENT HOOT

MB

HIGHWELD BIRDS

AS THERE ALWAYS ARE

OLDER FATE

HEAT'S FILIGREE

MY COUNTRY'S GRAVES

TO RETURN HOME

LEACHED BODY

HEAT'S FILIGREE

MY COUNTRY'S GRAVES

FOR ALL WE KNOW

NOTHING
IS WATCHING

LEAVES IN RANDOM
PILES BURNING

A WORD'S GRAVID
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THE FUTILE SHADE

INTO THE DARK

THE SHADE OF A
THORN

DEEP VOWELS

FUTILE SHADE

MY SHADOW
SQUATS

OTHER SIGNS

FOR REFERENCE

ENTRANCE
OUR TRACES

A RHYMING
DICTIONARY

NECESSARY PREY

FOR REFERENCE

BIRTH-CABLE SYNTAX

THE FUTILE SHADE

INTO THE DARK

FOR ALL WE KNOW



FOR ALL
WE KNOW

PARTS OF SPEECH

BODY PARTS

LOVE'S LESIONS

WHOLE WORDS
WHOLE WORLDS

MARAUDING SKY
FIERCE THAN MEMORY

RESINOUS

TONGUES

MENDING

INVISIBLE

THE SHADE
OF A THORN

LINEAMENTS

LOVE'S

DROUGHT'S CARAPACE

DEEP VOWELS

HEAT'S FILIGREE

VEINED WINGS

SICK FOR HOME

MIGRATING BIRDS

ARCHIVE OF
HALF-KNOWN THINGS

VERBS THAT
MOVE MOUNTAINS

NOTHING IS
WATCHING

A RHYMING
DICTIONARY

WHO LOVED WHOM

DREAM'S AFTERTASTE

ARCHIVE OF
UNKNOWN THINGS

LEAVES IN RANDOM PILES
ARE BURNING

FUGITIVE
TRACKS

MY COUNTRY'S
GRAVES,
ITS ELECTRIC FENCE

MY FATHER'S BOOKS

EVENING FLUX

NOTHING IS
WATCHING



FOR ALL WE
KNOW

LOVE'S LESIONS

WATERMARKED PAPER

SOME THERE BE

MARAUDING SKY

ALL SEVEN SENSES

RECORDS OF WATER

DEEP VOWELS

A QUIVER OF BLIND STROKES

BODY PARTS

ARCHIVE OF HALF-
KNOWN THINGS

OTHER SIGNS

STERIL SHADINGS

PERNICOUS TONGUES

MY FATHER'S BOOKS

INTO THE DARK

ARIADNE

SHADE OF A THORN

HEAT'S FILIGREE

SIGN TO SIGN

DROUGHT'S CARAPACE

VEINED WINGS

FUTILE SHADE

PARTS OF SPEECH

HOME TRUTHS
WHOLE WORDS
WHOLE WORLDS

MY COUNTRY'S GRAVES

ITS ELECTRIC FENCE

LEAVES IN
RANDOM PILES
ARE BURNING

LAND'S HALF-LIT
PRINTS

THINGS ARE
WINDING DOWN

A WORD'S GRAVID
PRESSURE

NOTHING IS WATCHING
NOT EVEN A STAR