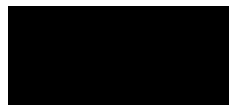


The Role of the Artist in Society

Annabelle



We have stepped over the precipice of the twentieth century, still bloody from wars and exploitations and the myriad sacrifices made in the name of progress. Now, we are falling through the twenty-first century, drifting in a culture that makes it easy for us to feel what those in power want us to feel and think in the language they use. The artists are the only part of our society who have not fallen over the cliff, but are instead climbing taller mountains. They are pulling themselves up towards cultural truths by their fingertips, struggling to pull the rest of man behind them. I'm interested in how the artist's perspective develops out of a culture, grows within that artist's particular historical context, and then suggests change or dialogue within society.

Artists are my favorite paradox. They create work fueled by their societal environment, but exist outside of that society's institutions. Historian and social activist Howard Zinn accurately describes the artist as 'transcendent,' someone who thinks "outside of the framework that society has created."¹ By acting outside of that framework, and in many cases outside of society itself, artists are free to be the most honest and constructive members of humanity. They make it their business to examine the institutions that guide our lives.

In a post-literate society, we rely on "written language as commandment" to provide us with long-term definitions of social institutions.² These institutions include everything from abstract concepts of love and selfhood to government and money. As a result, we have become overly committed to ideas that do not reflect our reality. John Searle, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley who specializes in philosophy of language and the mind, argues that you "cannot have feelings without language, without writing."³ Written language then becomes the means of perpetually instating the feelings of whatever group is in power.⁴ The control of written language is too entangled with power implications to accurately guide all factions of a society. Art, however, is more adaptable to the true feelings of individuals.

Thus, art is a valuable tool for processing social modes of feeling on a large scale. It is "an important way of arriving at an opinion without the rationalist form of legal argument."⁵ Because artists are transcendent to the socialization of their time, they are free to explore their experience within humanity instead of within its institutions.⁶ The cultural conclusions reached by artists are often more emotionally honest than those created by politicians, scholars, or scientists, and therefore more accurate. Like written language, art is a documented commitment to a perspective. This perspective is invaluable to society.

Just as "citizens derive much of their political information from people in their immediate social context,"⁷ artists get much of their creative material from the people and situations around them. William Kentridge is an artist who keeps knowledge of all of the advanced forms of civilization in his tool bag, manipulating things like identity, tension, hope, and history as if they were made from the same stuff as his charcoals and paper. Descendent of a "nationally

¹ Zinn, Howard. Artists in Times of War. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. Print.) 7.

² Searle, John. Interview by The Children of the Code Project. Video recording Interview. 3 June 2010. Web. 18 Apr. 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D10lAx3wfDk>>.

³ Searle. Interview, 3 June 2010.

⁴ Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States. New York: Harper & Row, 1980. Print.

⁵ William Kentridge: anything is possible. Dir. Susan Sollins. Perf. William Kentridge. [s.n.], 2011.

⁶ Zinn, 23.

⁷ Schulz-Herzenberg, C. "The Implications of Social Context Partisan Homogeneity for Voting Behavior: Survey Evidence from South Africa." *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology International Journal of Social, Human Science and Engineering* 7.8 (2013): 61. *WASET*. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

celebrated legal family” from partisan-era South Africa,⁸ Kentridge is a prime example of an artist who blends his personal experiences with a transcendent view of society to create provocative work.

Quintessential to Kentridge’s art is his “understanding of the world as process.”⁹ His films, drawings, and theatrical productions exist outside of traditional modes of understanding post-apartheid society. By suggesting “art and life are a continuous process of change rather than a controlled world of certainties,”¹⁰ Kentridge is documenting a perspective that is in stark contrast to the political environment of South Africa now. Elections remain controlled “due to the legacy of apartheid segregation... where most voters live in politically homogeneous social environments. Highly stratified racial and political contexts predetermine the social context,”¹¹ causing most citizens to make their decisions based merely on loyalty to biased institutions.

Thus, a multitude of tensions are present.¹² On one layer there is the tension between factions that each support polarized agendas. On another, there is the obstruction of elections as means for change due to racial block voting. Then, there is the break in dialogue and reinforcement of differences caused by the fact that “the transmission of political information through personal discussants is likely to be channeled by the dominant cleavage structure that characterizes the social setting.”¹³ Since the people have become fiercely loyal to partisan institutions, they are now well versed in both the language and system of emotions encouraged by partisan leaders. This all culminates in a break from reality as political language no longer needs to refer to the reality of the people, but only to the theoretical reality of their social constructs.¹⁴

It is out of such chaos that the artist achieves his most useful purpose: to manipulate the very social institutions that are creating tension into something that resembles an honest human experience. All members of society feel these tensions in very real ways. Kentridge works to resolve cultural conflicts by playing with “man as a material to be shaped, torn apart, and recomposed differently.”¹⁵ He changes the South Africa he sees as he puts it on paper, noting, “the distortion is the correction.”¹⁶ It is in this distortion that Kentridge documents his perspective, breaking free from societally implied ways of thinking and feeling to reach something elevated, something resembling truth.

Philosopher and mathematician Alain Badiou comments on the artist’s purpose in relation to truth when examining the concept of cultural change. He argues that we live in a constructible universe where all people across all cultures and time periods belong to a generic set. The artist’s problem is to communicate truth to this generic set. Without truth, we are “imprisoned by differences because truth is difference with the freedom of something that is

⁸ Kentridge, William, Mark Rosenthal, and Michael Auping. *William Kentridge: five themes*. (San Francisco, Calif.: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; 2009. Print.) 36.

⁹ William Kentridge: anything is possible.

¹⁰ Kentridge, Rosenthal and Auping, 110.

¹¹ Schulz-Herzenburg, 62-63.

¹² "SFMOMA and YBCA Collaborate to Present Public Intimacy: Art and Other Ordinary Acts in South Africa." San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2014. <http://www.sfmoma.org/about/press/press_exhibitions/releases/981>.

¹³ Schulz-Herzenburg, 63.

¹⁴ Searle. Interview, 3 June 2010.

¹⁵ Kentridge, Rosenthal, and Auping, 113.

¹⁶ William Kentridge: anything is possible.

beyond the difference.”¹⁷ Societies as distinctive as both apartheid South Africa and capitalist America prove that true freedom cannot exist where individuals are defined merely by their place in the group. In a generic society, “you must recognize the place of the other and be free to go to that place.”¹⁸ So, although universal truths do not change, they are expressed through transformation of society’s existing institutions. The artist has the freedom to go beyond the desire for change to alter the nature of change itself.¹⁹

Today’s society needs artists to bring about change more than ever before. The last century was a long and bloody time in which “people were completely smashed by the huge forces around them.”²⁰ The twentieth century is over and now we’re all left standing here like soldiers who have seen too many explosions, blinking with sunspots in our eyes. Yet, it was also a great time of purpose and idealism, action and innovation. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, an influential historian of twentieth century and contemporary art, writes that in comparison, we seem to “wander in our own time, in a ‘projectless,’ seemingly aimless universe determined by statistics, unable to act with any sense of agency, unable to imagine what the twenty-first century might become, other than a society of pointless spectacle and financial speculation”.²¹ Perhaps this wandering nature of today’s man is good. It could mean that we are one step closer to achieving Badiou’s generic society in which I have the freedom as an individual to occupy whatever place I choose instead of allowing culture to define my reality for me.

Christov-Bakargiev’s description of this age as “projectless” refers to the shift away from systems of society governed by the obsessive desire for progress. The dominant political, financial and ideological institutions of the last century were all searching for some kind of abstract, ephemeral thing called progress. Western culture is still motivated by the left over language from Christian industrial individualism, dictating that I personally have a place on a linear progression of thought and creativity. My culture implies that I must live in a constant state of feverish hope, always caught somewhere between unearned pride for my allegedly civilized civilization and self-deprecating anticipation for the glories of an ever unattainable future. Frankly, I hate that way of thinking. I find it exhausting. Instead, I prefer an anti-linear, “shit just happens out of specific causes and conditions” view of history that leaves me waveringly planted in the twenty-first century.

I often describe myself as a wanderer, which makes me characteristic of my age. I, too, am living and creating within a social context that has been molded by the chaos of the twentieth century. My sculptures and drawings convey that I am in a perpetual state of running from some institution or societal pressure, including everything from socioeconomic class to identity. I had to make the distinction between running *from* myself and running *for* myself. It is only by actively creating works that address the tensions in my life that I can be liberated from them. This state of graceful volatility is the only kind of agency that I can claim.

To create successful cultural change, we must each adopt a personal sense of agency. I am eager to distort the world that I come from in my artwork, because if I don’t differ from the patterns of feeling taught by those who hold power over everyone like me, who will?

¹⁷ Badiou, Alain. “Introduction to the Philosophical Concept of Change.” European Graduate School. Europe, Saas-Fee Switzerland. 2012. EGS. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

¹⁸ Badiou.

¹⁹ Badiou.

²⁰ William Kentridge: anything is possible.

²¹ Kentridge, Rosenthal, and Auping, 111.

“Conformity to the attitudes and norms of the dominant group bring with it social rewards,”²² but nonconformity can bring social truth.

While many artists of the previous centuries futilely sought to escape the tension of their troubled times, broken by war and injustice, the artists of today are building homes in the rubble left by that psychological tension. What comes after a period of “negative discontinuity [in which] the twentieth century has renounced everything that the nineteenth century’s golden age promised?”²³ Certainly not progress in the traditional sense, but instead an overwhelming honesty. I want to fill the role of an “artist [who] understands that both the optimistic and pessimist future unroll together.”²⁴ I want to be honest and transcendent as I step into the role of artist and out of the realm of known culture.

²² Schulz-Herzenburg, 64.

²³ Badiou.

²⁴ William Kentridge: anything is possible.

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