



## Commentary

### 8

PENNY SIOPIS: William, we've known each other for a long time and we've shown together over the years. Our work in film remains deeply rooted in our interests in drawing and painting, which first brought us into contact. Let's talk, and then I want to show you *Communion*, a film you haven't seen. p231

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: We got to know each other at an exhibition competition at Rugantino's Restaurant in Johannesburg in the late 70s. I think that was my first exhibition. I had monoprints, maybe an etching or two – and I think you had paintings of cakes.

PS: Food, interiors.

WK: You won the competition – and I thought here I am again; always second prize. This is the story of my life.

PS: En kyk hoe lyk jy nou!

## A Retrospect — Penny Siopis in conversation with William Kentridge

WK: The next proper meeting was at the 1985 Cape Town Triennial.

PS: We both won prizes then.

WK: Stanley Pinker won the main prize and we were both rewarded for effort. And there you had this extraordinary work.

PS: *Still Life with Watermelon and Other Things*. p57

WK: I remember the food was impasto, almost as thick as icing. I had the drawing called *The Conservationist's Ball*, which was a triptych based on *Las Meninas*, with the rhinoceros flying in one corner. It was the first big drawing I'd done. That was a proper meeting in that the works were exhibited in the same space at the same time. We got a kind of national recognition.

PS: The show toured the country, which was a big thing for us. It was a moment when

Siopis in her studio at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, 1986



we knew about the kruger park



it was hard to be like the animals



elephants

national art competitions were shaping South African art.

WK: The third meeting was in 1986 when you were in Paris, in a very small flat at the Cité Internationale des Arts. And Penny being Penny, it was not as if the fridge was full of fabulous food to cook and eat, but you did have in it a dead rabbit, which you would take out and draw, and when it started defrosting it had to go back.

PS: Alice [William's daughter] was with you and all of two years old. She kept asking, 'Will you open the fridge?' In Paris, I couldn't afford oil paint so I worked in pastel and collage.

WK: The movies came later. The first one was your family home movies, *My Lovely Day*, [p194](#) with your grandmother talking.

PS: It's just text, but people remember talking. The only voice is my mother singing at the beginning and end of the film from a record she made in 1955, now full of scratches. In between there is Greek folk music from my childhood. The story is my grandmother's as I remember it. The footage is my mum's 8mm home movies.

WK: But there are home movies and home movies. I have looked at all our old home movies, which my father took on 8mm. Firstly, nothing's ever outside the garden. There's nothing like the Kruger Park or any public space at all. Secondly, no shot lasts for more than half a second. It was very good that my father had a paying job as a lawyer. He would never have made it as a film-maker. I did drawings from the home movies for my 2011 film *Other Faces*, but I've never used the actual home movies themselves.

Pray  
2007  
Video, sound  
Duration 2 min 48 sec

PS: Let's talk about your movies. How you started working with moving images.

WK: I've been making movies for a long time. I did an art film with Steven Sack in the early 80s, I think it was. So when I came to do the charcoal drawings for animation in 1989, it didn't feel like a new thing. But for me using the archive or found footage really began with *Ubu*. That was 1996–7, not so different from when you started using your found footage. I was so jealous after seeing *My Lovely Day*. If only I'd thought of that, I could have made it. But a) I hadn't thought of it and b) I didn't. It's a beautiful piece. It's remarkable.

PS: I had great material. My mother was an avid documenter of personal and public space – kids playing in the garden,

military parades. Her films are rich in that way, but also in how they're shot. It's easy to imagine other things through them, to dislocate time and space. Her lingering shot of Table Mountain, for example, was perfect to picture Smyrna and Greece.

WK: This is what you also do fantastically in *Obscure White Messenger*. Tsafendas is talking about his tapeworm and one sees an octopus and completely puts the two together. The octopus is more of a worm than if you actually had a worm. It's about that mixture of reading and seeing, and the strange way one's brain constructs the film from the two activities. If you'd asked me, I would have said there's this wonderful voice with a strong Greek accent of your grandmother talking in *My Lovely Day*. Now you say there was no voice.

[p202](#)

*Communion*  
2011  
Digital video, sound  
Duration 5 min 30 sec

PS: It's the voice in your head which is always being made. The beauty of moving images is that things go quickly. You can't always fix what you see, in the way you might with still images.

WK: There's another difference. In the static image, you don't know where to look. I find it hard to have the focus required for looking at a picture. In a film it's easy, because it's changing all the time. You're not expected to give more than a tiny focus to any one moment. The fluidity of the films makes me feel very close to them temperamentally and to the leaps they contain. With a painting, you can't give yourself an instruction to say: this is an octopus but it's really a worm. The wonderful ambiguity and self-construction by the viewer is built into the films. Your films are also a natural

extension of the hoarding of objects in your house and studio, the finding of a physical archive. The way they turn into film, with all the other things that are added, sound and reading text, the adjustment of fragments, feels to me the richest combination of your interests.

PS: When I found the reel of the octopus in its little aquarium, I knew this was the worm, at once vulnerable and threatening. I loved how it moved with or against the dust spots, sprocket marks and stains in the celluloid, in a dance of believability and dissonance. I think your films do something similar, William, in how the material traces simultaneously create and break the narrative.

WK: In the Tsafendas film particularly, but also in *My Lovely Day*, there is a way of connecting things that makes



them become 'history painting'. It's the connection back to the archive of photographs of Verwoerd being shot and to memories of those images. Was that *The Master is Drowning*? That is the closest to documentary. p206

PS: Yes, the only one with the logic of chronology, and in which I used bits of documentary footage.

WK: Let's look at *Communion*.

PS: It's a difficult piece. I'd love your response.

[Conversation continues while watching]

WK: It's very powerful. Where did you find the footage?

PS: All over. In flea markets, wherever I could find it. I recognize some of the places because I know them. This scene about a political meeting in the Eastern Cape is actually Greece ... This one about the nun's burnt rosary, which shows snakes writhing in someone's hands, was actually shot in Port Elizabeth; the hands are those of the man at the snake park who was famous for his fearless handling of the reptiles.

WK: Where does the music come from?

PS: It's Brother Clement Sithole singing a lullaby from the *Thula Project* CD, arranged by Philip Miller.

WK: And the text?

PS: I wrote it from different sources – legal records, newspaper reports, a little book





by a family member. I'm fascinated by how stories like hers, in all their particular detail, speak beyond their historical circumstances. That Joe Slovo was the advocate for the defence is interesting when one thinks about that time in our history and what the questions he raised about common cause and culpability meant then; but more interesting for me is what they mean now and how they point to other complicated human questions.

WK: It's not so different from Amy Biehl, the American student who was killed in Guguletu.

PS: Being killed by people you love and who love you? Yes.

WK: A similar thing happened to somebody in the Soweto uprising in '76.

PS: He was a community worker ... Dr Melville Edelstein.

WK: It's a five-minute film and it's not saying this is the whole history of South Africa. It's just one film among many. If every film you made was about whites being killed by a black crowd, it would become a film about white anxiety. But the subject is a real one. It touches on the ambiguous position of nuns and missionaries, and on the idea of never forgiving anyone for a good deed. Some people might be antagonistic to the film, hating the possibility that it might be a mirror or that they're being looked at in this way yet again.

PS: I know and understand this. But I also resist being locked into hard binaries that trap our imaginative capacity for a different kind of thought.

WK: Let's look at the scene of the white woman and black kids dancing with white sticks. The questions about missionaries looking after people, patronage, the Enlightenment project of those with civilization bringing it to the Dark Continent are all there, but that image also contains ironies and complexities. To say that you're using stereotypes is to say this is a difficult image that I don't want to look at. It's a resistance to the actual image itself. It is also to resist the ambiguities of all the questions about the line of Western thinking around civilization. It's very problematic – but to say that one shouldn't make art about these questions is completely blind. That's what art does – not through an intellectual description but through its sensuousness and by allowing people to have an excitation from this. It happens through details of

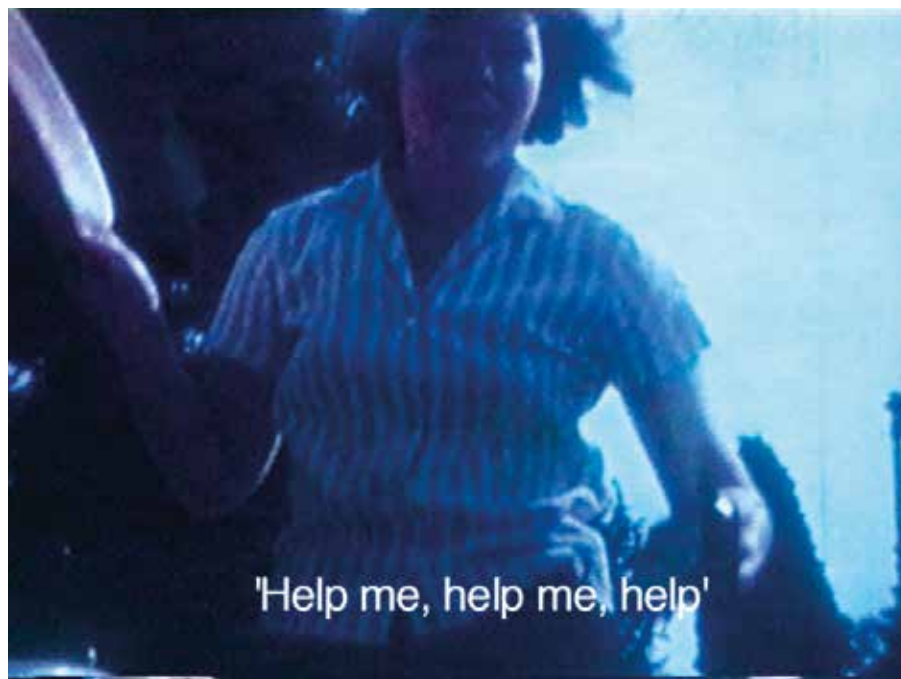
the period and the time, all the things embodied in black people dancing for a white woman.

PS: It's the sensuous particulars in the music as much as in the images that keep things open.

WK: Look at that shot of four people walking, the white woman behind. Presumably she's a tourist taking photos or her husband is ahead taking a movie, but in this image there's an inversion of the white family walking ahead and the black nanny walking behind. The interesting area of the film is between what you read and what you see.

PS: Making a space, I hope, in which other subjectivities that cross the race divide open up.





WK: There's a big space for subjectivity to be an essential part of looking and for people to acknowledge that part. Not only to talk about what the film is, but about what it evokes in them and what are the parts of them that go out and meet it halfway.

PS: The form of the film and how elements are put together should encourage this.

WK: It's like the octopus and the worm. You've got images that are tangentially connected to the text and set up the most interesting tensions. The scratches on the film represent the stone or the blood in the eye, or the decoloured sky through the windscreen that is covering her face. One could ask several questions. What if you'd shifted the sync out by three seconds, so that when the text refers to a crowd dispersing it's not the image of

the crowd one sees, that comes slightly earlier or slightly later? Or what if the story had been put into the second person as opposed to the first person? Those possibilities are within the language and feel of the film itself; I'm asking what the different options of grammar within it might be.

PS: The grammar is the thing! There are so many options. It's important to keep the 'given' features of the found material in tension with the new roles they play – to be able to see the two things at once. But, for the story to be believable, some scenes need to be congruent with text, and in sync – like the crowd dispersing. The space between text and image is already very elastic. The arbitrary cuts that are a feature of the original dumping of celluloid to digital often prompts my edits. I like the first person because it complicates



things, puts the situation in the present, and the words become the imagined voice of the reader. The 'I' or 'me' of the person looking and responding subjectively to what they're seeing and hearing.

WK: The first person is very strong. It puts it into the Christian context of speaking beyond the grave.

PS: It evokes the Christian idea of eternal life but also other ideas of transcendence. For me it's also saying the event still lives. That fraught moment when something terrible happens. We reflect on it afterwards. How did it happen? How did things turn so suddenly? Rationally we might understand it, but actually it's imponderable. That's what's still alive.

WK: It's a prelude to what happened in the Congo in the 1960s. I don't really know

the story, but it's also about people devoted to a community, tensions rising and contradictions boiling over. All particular relationships that people have had with those they've worked with get overwhelmed by a historical moment, by the rage of a crowd. Part of the South African imaginary is the fear that liberal white people have of being under threat by a black crowd. It's part of an anxiety. The skill of the film lies partly in the way you talk about this as something that's also in you.

PS: The materiality of the film speaks loudly here.

WK: The way in which the old footage, the grain of it, the burnt parts of the film, the scratches at the beginning of the leader tape work on us as a memory of an historical time, the outmoded technology,



the disjunction between the text and the images – that's where the piece is happening. A particular technology, the editing and the sound combine to make the full experience, which is more than the historical analysis of an actual event.

PS: When I was making the film, I found a scene of nuns in India. If I were superstitious I'd have been worried; nuns just when nuns are on my mind! For all the marvellous serendipity, the nuns didn't fit in. It's a curious process, this looking, finding, fitting.

WK: When I was doing the film for *Black Box* about the genocide in South West Africa, I wanted photos of the German army there in 1904. They had some which were no good, but on one of the reels they also had the hunting of a rhinoceros in Cameroon. That became a key image.

There's a way of collecting items that's open to what the items suggest and what you could recognize in them. It's the same with the footage. You're open to saying it's not what my script is expecting – if there is a script. I have no idea quite how it works or what it will be, but it feels rich enough to say, well, let's follow it.

PS: It's like throwing a pebble in water. You might go for the ripples rather than the splash. I spend a lot of time with ripples, in a kind of 'just looking' space that is also a thinking space. It's a way to shift the shapes in my head. I did a lot of this in the lead up to *My Lovely Day*. I was recovering from my back operation and had to lie in bed for weeks. I spent my days looking at my mother's footage and being mesmerized. All the while things were happening 'outside' in the country – politics, the TRC – which became

part of the tissue of my looking. It was a time of uncertainty, in both politics and art. I think both of us had complicated feelings at that time of transition. During apartheid things were clearer if not simpler; we were part of political organizations and aligned in our way, however difficult this was.

WK: For me an era to be passed over quickly.

PS: But I still think we were right not to allow the apartheid state to use our work. For me that was straightforward. What was complicated – and it was not unlike things now in some ways – was how art itself figured in that context. It was a strange moment.

WK: It was a very strange moment. I don't think any of us came out of that well. We weren't strong enough to defend

the right to be more anarchic than we were and we weren't strong enough to really be political actors. It convinced me certainly that my place was in the studio, not at committee meetings.

PS: But the imperative for solidarity I really understood.

WK: I do understand the need for solidarity, but at a certain point I absolutely resist it also. In the name of solidarity there was an astonishing authoritarian control of what should be done, and in the end a complete contempt for the activity of art. That has its costs now. For the state, art is of no interest and of no significance. It has no need of support because it's fulfilled its historical mission of solidarity. Once the transformation happened, it was done. For me it's not a straightforward or a simple question.



There's a section of Mao's talk to the literary conference in Yenan in 1942, which I've been looking at for my China project, where he has two big instructions. The one is to look to the masses always, to go and learn from the peasants and the workers. That's one thing I'm not so good at, being a person of the people. But then he talks about the bourgeois artist as being a hero searching for a place to show his prowess. That for me struck a chord. If one can't stand in solidarity, what then is the empty and free space that you are forced to circulate in and inhabit? National heroism for me became not possible. There's a cost. I love it that your work is a kind of solidarity on the other side of solidarity, resisting the demands of instrumentalized art.

PS: Another kind of politics.

WK: Yes. What you'll also find in your films is a polemic against certainty, against a single instrumental interpretation. But there are people who want an answer: the world *is* like this, rather than saying the world is nothing; it is only as it is constructed by different people reading it, living it, making their own collage of it. People not involved in the arts often don't understand that what happens in the studio is emblematic of how in fact everybody has to construct a sense of the world, of history.

PS: That's a question of freedom actually.

WK: It's a question of freedom, but also of not understanding the authoritarianism in the assumption that there is an objective truth. Art has not only the right but also the need not to be as clear-cut. You need to find a space in which to make sense of things, but the meaning is not arrived at nor delivers information in the way an essay would.

PS: That's the imaginative space I associate with the physical space of the studio. A place to think *through* things – I mean literally physical objects – and just *do*. I

would never have thought of the octopus as the worm otherwise.

WK: I've written and done a lot of lecturing on the studio as a safe space for uncertainty and stupidity. But mainly for uncertainty. Walking around this studio is the equivalent of the ideas moving around my head. The studio is an expanded head. The world comes in and it gets deconstructed and rearranged and then something comes out of the studio; a sentence comes out of your mouth. There's also the peripheral vision when you circle the studio and see the bits of work you've done; and peripheral thinking, allowing different ideas to accumulate and to consolidate into the piece. Some people say to me their studio is their computer; wherever they are is where their studio is. I have a very different experience of what it is to be making art, which has to do with physicality rather than virtuality.

PS: My experience of the studio is similar, especially with painting. I set the conditions for something to happen. Accidents happen that spark thought. Surfaces throw up forms that want to become images, and need to be dragged out. I work with the painting on the floor and direct the flow of the medium through physical means. Sometimes I stand on a table and throw the ink and glue. Gravity has its way. Then I lean the painting against the wall, to get a distant critical look, and then it's back to the floor again. A dynamic of being immersed in the stuff and looking down, and then seeing how the immersion reads looking up. Horizontal and vertical. Moving matter moves my mind. It's different with the computer, with editing, but it's still an embodied process for me – watching millions of tiny images on the screen flicker, stop, flicker, stop, as I touch the keys. It's like touching the celluloid itself. It's thinking through things.

WK: There has to be a belief in the physical activity of being an artist, and the

connection between that body work and the thinking work. It's not about thinking in advance quite what the meaning will be. There is a direction – but as you say, it's a question of looking at the first pieces of film and seeing how they could fit together, or at all those objects that are sitting in the storeroom. What is the story they will tell today? Which one has to become part of this installation?

PS: In that way the work is always becoming.

WK: The great thing about drawing in charcoal for film is that every drawing is provisional. In other kinds of work, I was bothered by not knowing when the pictures were finished, but in this medium that is of lesser importance.

PS: And painting?

WK: I painted so badly as a student. It caused such unhappiness. There are some of my pictures in the dining room, including a few still lifes. I could be a happy Sunday painter. But it's so utterly different to the other work. Because it's all about: does it look right, does it look nice? It's not about thinking, it's not about drawing a thought. It gets lost in the pleasure of mixing that pigment, of what's in that shadow.

PS: But only if you treat painting like that!

WK: I know. [Shows some work] These are black ink paintings but I think of them as drawings.

PS: Because there is no colour? But there's colour in your recent works.

WK: That's found colour. Look at how bright these Chinese drawings are. A room full of maps with bright projections. That's my next exhibition. It is going to be very colourful.

PS: The beauty of colour is that it's so subjective. It can complicate, even destroy meaning.

WK: Some people like you have a way of just putting down the colours. When I'm mixing the colours myself, they always end up the same and they're always just off.

PS: Off colours are interesting.

WK: If they were interestingly off it would be fine. But look at this map. That particular pink and that particular green just feel so exactly right together. I can recognize that – but if you said to me here's a map, colour it in, I wouldn't know where to go. Penny, you've always been at ease with colour. I need someone else to mix them for me.

PS: It's not always about the familiar mixing. With the ink and glue paintings, I can't mix in the usual way. I have to squirt colour directly into the wet white glue. I can't see what I'm doing. I've learned to predict what might happen, but I'm often surprised. The colour only emerges when the glue dries and becomes transparent. It's the air that finally mixes and fixes the colour. And it's not really final.