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## The Genocidal Gaze

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## FOUR



# William Kentridge's *Black Box/Chambre Noire*

THE GAZE ON / IN THE HERERO GENOCIDE,  
THE HOLOCAUST, AND APARTHEID



The past is always an imaginary museum.

JOACHIM FEST

At Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau, in 2012, an art installation created by William Kentridge, a white, Jewish South African, went on display as part of an exhibition called *Art and Press*. Titled *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, this animated miniature theater incorporates early twentieth-century German colonial film clips, mechanized figures, music, photographs, maps, and newspaper clippings; the performance lasts twenty-two minutes. The subject matter of *Black Box* is the 1904–7 genocide of the Herero and Nama people in Africa by the German military.<sup>1</sup> Kentridge gestures in several directions: the work interrogates German guilt; the silence surrounding this genocide; and *Trauerarbeit*, Freud's term for working through grief. Kentridge draws symbolic links between this first genocide of the twentieth century and the Holocaust, initiated less than thirty years later. Kentridge also gestures toward Apartheid: he grew up under this racist regime and, it can be argued, the policies and ideology of Apartheid owed much to the Nazis.

My analysis of this installation piece focuses on Kentridge's exploitation of animation and the ways in which the animation alternately embodies and critiques the *genocidal gaze*. Because of the performative nature of *Black Box*—museumgoers sit on chairs to watch the workings of the miniature theater—and the inclusion of items from the archives of German imperialism, the Holocaust,

and Apartheid, *Black Box* dramatically conveys to its audience the lethal nature of the involved ideologies. George Steinmetz argues in *The Devil's Handwriting* that *precolonial* “ethnographic discourse” (i.e., images of Africans disbursed throughout Europe by travel narratives, missionary reports, etc.) created a racist mind-set, the imperial gaze, which in turn shaped colonial policy in German Southwest Africa. The effort of this chapter is, in a sense, to provide a mirror reflection of Steinmetz’s work by looking at Kentridge’s *postcolonial* “ethnographic discourse” of the genocidal gaze, the colonial policies it shaped, and the subsequent deadly oppressions it begot.

Thus this chapter unpacks the postmodern fragments of *Black Box* in an effort to understand what Kentridge suggests about genocide, silence, mourning, and the role of art/museums in a post-Holocaust world. To provide the proper context, the chapter also attends to the paratextual materials offered by the Martin-Gropius-Bau, as well as to excerpts from Kentridge interviews and from the original catalog for his art installation. I also briefly contextualize *Black Box* in the emerging traditions of Holocaust art. *Black Box* is a palimpsest that emphasizes the profound damage that the genocidal gaze and silence about genocide visits upon subsequent generations.

### A Description of *Black Box/Chambre Noire* and Its Archive

For the reader who is unfamiliar with Kentridge, as I was when encountering his installation in Berlin in 2012, or the reader who has not had the opportunity to see *Black Box*,<sup>2</sup> my first dilemma is to describe this work. I turn to the catalog for *Black Box/Chambre Noire* published by the sponsor of the piece, Deutsche Guggenheim. This catalog appeared in 2005, well before the Martin-Gropius-Bau exhibit, when the work was first displayed in Berlin, in the gallery of Deutsche Bank, a partner with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; the partners present three or four exhibits per year in the bank gallery. Here is how the piece is described in the foreword to the catalog, written by Dr. Tessen von Heydebreck, a member of the board of directors of Deutsche Bank AG:

Over the course of more than three years, the artist has been developing his *Black Box*—an installation of animated film, mechanized figures, and drawings all situated in a miniature theater. Formally, the focus is on the technical development of the theater and visual reproduction procedures, but the contents deal with Germany’s colonial history in Africa, in particular the massacre of the Hereros in 1904. This abominable chapter of German history was recently the subject of a commendable

exhibition in the neighboring German Historical Museum. The German Colonial Exhibition of 1896, which Kentridge refers to, treated similar themes, albeit with a completely different perspective, and was also in Berlin.<sup>3</sup>

This brief description of *Black Box* is a useful one, combining as it does the physical aspects of the installation, its themes, and its historical context. It also hews closely to Kentridge's own assessment of German violence during the colonial era in German Southwest Africa between 1884 and 1919.

By contrast, here is the curatorial label of the piece as it appeared in the Martin-Gropius-Bau exhibit in 2012 (note that the label appeared in both German and in an English translation, which I quote here):

William Kentridge (b. 1955) gained recognition through his drawings and animations and as a stage designer. *Black Box* encompasses animated films, sculptural objects, and drawings, and can have three meanings: Black Box as theatre, as photographic "dark room," and as flight recorder, registering the course of events and causes of catastrophes. With his *Black Box* Kentridge, a South African, documents the course of history, the process of mourning, guilt, and atonement. The work combines photographs, newspaper articles, and excerpts of German films dating to the era of colonialism, with the artist's own drawings and films.

A second label, provided only in German, lists the materials used and the sponsors of the commission.

It is *stunning* that this curatorial label contains no specific reference to the Herero and Nama, GSWA, or the genocide committed there by German colonizers in 1904–7. Stunning for several reasons. First, as noted in the catalog quoted above, the German Historical Museum mounted an exhibition titled *Namibia-Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte* that ran November 2004–April 2005; genocide (*Völkermord*) is specifically named in the opening sentences of the exhibit description:

The hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the German colonial wars in Namibia took place in January 2004. The war lasted from 1904–1908 and went down in history as the first genocide of the twentieth century. For Namibia, at that time German Southwest Africa, this was one of the first wars of resistance of the African population against foreign rule and colonization.<sup>4</sup>

Second, scholars have begun to publish widely on this genocide and to call the Germans to account for their silence:

It was, after all, in the colonies that the European “*Gewaltmensch*” [a Nietzschean term for “strong man” born to dominate] learned his handiwork of extermination. Nevertheless, this war of annihilation has been largely forgotten in Germany and pushed into the background by the catastrophes of two World Wars and the Holocaust. Yet concentration camps and genocide in the German colony foreshadow the crimes committed later during the Third Reich. (Zimmerer and Zeller, xiv)<sup>5</sup>

Third and most significant, such silence is precisely what Kentridge himself is addressing in *Black Box*: the failure to come to terms with the past, to acknowledge particularly the Herero and Nama genocide as a kind of precursor to the Holocaust, to publicly undertake *Trauerarbeit*, the work of mourning, as a bulwark against repetition of such crimes against humanity. One can only imagine Kentridge’s anguish upon reading such a label.

### *Black Box: The Genocidal Gaze, the Camera, and Apartheid*

William Kentridge was born on 28 April 1955 into a comfortable, middle-class family in Johannesburg, South Africa. Apartheid was seven years old and Johannesburg housed the largest township for black South Africans, Soweto, which today has more than two million inhabitants. Kentridge’s parents were both attorneys who worked in the anti-Apartheid movement; his mother co-founded an important public-interest law firm in South Africa. His family is of Lithuanian Jewish descent, Kentridge himself being third generation.<sup>6</sup> After attending primary and secondary school in Johannesburg, Kentridge earned his bachelor’s degree from the University of Witwatersrand in Politics and African Studies in 1976.

Kentridge recounts a formative childhood experience, a discovery made in his father’s study:

At the time, I was six years old and my father [Sydney Kentridge] was one of the lawyers for the families that had been killed [at the Sharpsville Massacre].<sup>7</sup> I remember coming once into his study and seeing on his desk a large, flat yellow Kodak box, and lifting the lid off of it—it looked like a chocolate box. Inside were images of a woman with her back blown off, someone with only half her head visible. The impact of seeing these images for the first time—when I was six years old—the shock was extraordinary. I understood that the world was not how I had imagined it at all, that things happened in the world that were inconceivable.<sup>8</sup>

The camera thus becomes an instrument of both trauma and epiphany for Kentridge. Certainly one of the multiple meanings of *Black Box* is the black box camera, an early style of camera shaped like a black box; more recent terminology often links black box cameras with veiled observation and spying. The stage of Kentridge's miniature theater becomes just such an instrument of surveillance and denigration,<sup>9</sup> revealing the very genocidal gaze that leads to the murder of thousands of "expendable" indigenous people, to the murder of six million Jews and five million other victims, and to the massacres during Apartheid.

Thus, while *Black Box* is certainly about the ideological and methodological connections between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust, it is also about Apartheid. These events are linked by attitudes toward racial/racist hierarchies that the Apartheid government reconfigured as whites/Indians/coloreds/blacks. Other links include support of totalitarian ideologies; relocation of peoples according to race and ethnicity; large-scale murder of those deemed genetically inferior; use of concentration camps and military tactics to confine people; institution of laws that defined citizenship, those who could receive an education and who could vote; and the delusion of "Aryan supremacy." Apartheid was rooted in fascism: the primary architect of Apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, studied in Germany in the 1920s as the Nazi Party was forming, as did several of the future leaders of Apartheid, and they used many of the principles and tactics of Nazism in the creation of the Apartheid state.<sup>10</sup> The secret organization of the Afrikaners, the Broederbond, espoused Nazi principles, particularly nationalism, antisemitism, opposition to intermarriage, and insistence on the purity of language in educational settings.<sup>11</sup> While the transition in South Africa from Apartheid to a democracy with Nelson Mandela elected as its first president is often praised as a "bloodless revolution," it should be noted that thousands died in the anti-Apartheid struggle.<sup>12</sup> In sum, *Black Box* is a raw accusation of the genocidal tendencies/gaze of the German people, who provide the connections among these three historical moments.<sup>13</sup>

### *Black Box: Animation and Memento Mori*

In the following section, I will briefly describe the entire twenty-two-minute performance, emphasizing specific instances of Kentridge's use of animation to reference genocide and the genocidal gaze: his use of puppets; drawings and a film of rhinos; and drawings of skulls, which are omnipresent in the piece. The movement of the puppets and the use of animation to create the rhinos and skulls in effect perform aspects of the genocide and present to the viewer the unremembered and unlamented victims. The focus here is on images of the

Herero and Nama genocide and images of the Holocaust. Many of these images apply equally well to Apartheid. Kentridge has said: “I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and films are certainly spawned by and feed off the brutalized society left in its wake. I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings.”<sup>14</sup>

The first sequence of the piece displays an image of a typewriter, drawn in white crayon on black, and the typewriter “types” a scrawled cursive sentence that reads, in part, “Worte an das Volk der Herero,” an excerpt from the infamous statement by German General von Trotha: “Das sind meine *Worte* an das *Volk der Herero*” (These are my words to the Herero People), one of his orders for extermination of the Herero.<sup>15</sup> The typewriter then transforms into a rhinoceros, also drawn in white on black. The rhino is a frequent image in *Black Box*, symbolizing GSWA; both the human and animal inhabitants there were an endangered species under German control. Through the use of animation, the rhino transforms into other objects or from other objects. Finally, a camera on a tripod flashes by in this opening sequence, an instrument of surveillance, control, and denigration when used by German imperialists. Thus Kentridge dramatizes the genocidal gaze immediately, calling the viewer’s attention to the use of the *worte* (word) to inform the Herero of the intent to exterminate.

The viewer then sees a series of “curtains” open, as if the performance is to begin; the curtains are made of newsprint, written in German. Semiotically, these curtains continue to highlight the use of language—texts, treaties, orders, lies—to dominate the indigenous people. The sequential openings create a palimpsest, as if the viewer is being drawn back in time, through layers of texts, in order to discover what really happened, what has been silenced, consigned to oblivion. The first puppet appears: it looks to have been constructed of the kind of compass used in geometry, but it clearly has resonances with the calipers Germans used in both GSWA and the Holocaust to measure heads and skulls. Such a device gestures toward eugenics and the devious and completely spurious effort to use such measurements as evidence of Aryan superiority. This puppet always carries a baton, almost invariably performs acts of violence or directs them to be performed, or invokes symbols and images of death; he is Kentridge’s synecdoche of the genocidal gaze. Here, he conjures up a drawn image of the Nazi eagle who is poised on top of the world, another image of both domination and the aspirations of the Third Reich.

It is perhaps the puppets that are the most menacing aspect of Kentridge’s use of animation. Kentridge describes them thus:

The six characters are a Megaphone man who's the narrator; a transparent Herero woman defined by the head-dress: she's actually a spring with a piece of transparent gauze on her head. A mechanical running man: a cut-out piece of paper that runs; a pair of dividers, that's the measuring arm, measuring skulls and geography; an exploding skull that makes a brief appearance; and a second Herero woman based on a German postal scale from 1905, a scale for weighing letters.<sup>16</sup>

These puppets move to a metronome-like sound, which might be heard as a typewriter or a telegraph, both tools of death in GSWA, and they move in an accompanying jerky motion. Occasionally their movements are timed to the music in the piece, which includes excerpts from Mozart and Namibian praise songs recorded in Namibia. The puppets are eerily humanoid, despite their robotic movements, and they are *unheimlich*, uncanny: they carry resonances of Kafka's torture device in "The Penal Colony."

Following this sequence, the screen behind the curtains begins to move from right to left, and intersecting lines appear, suggesting the links between Berlin and Windhoek (both words appear in script) and between the genocide of the Herero and Nama and the Holocaust. A camera lens opens and closes and an image of three men hung from trees appears, which is based on an actual photograph taken by the Germans, who often photographed their cruel actions and their victims, another "gaze" of manipulation and control.

Next, the running man appears and signals to von Trotha's extermination order, inscribed above on another layer of the palimpsest (and not visible on all YouTube iterations). The mechanical running man seems to represent the fleeing Herero, the effort to escape from the German violence. Then two puppets beat a third into oblivion; Kentridge describes the origin of this image: "In *Black Box* there's a sequence of two men beating each other or a third object based on postcards the Germans made and sent home of people being whipped, a prurient violence assumed to be a thrill that wasn't hidden away. The mechanical figures are based on those postcards."<sup>17</sup> Note that when Kentridge visited Namibia to do research for *Black Box*, he visited an antique store where he found a trove of Nazi memorabilia<sup>18</sup> as well as documents, maps, and other ephemera from the German colonial era; he purchased some of these materials, which were then incorporated into the installation. As these two puppets flog a third, the victim falls into pieces, is reconstituted, and then falls apart again, an image of a merciless death. As we saw in the opening pages of the introduction, such flogging was routine and completely unregulated in GSWA and led to many deaths.

After this rather frenetic phase of the *Black Box*, the viewer sees more intersecting lines and then a text appears, reading “Walfisch Bai” (often spelled Walvis Bay), a body of water south of the Namibian coastal town of Swakopmund, where one of several concentration/death camps was established by the Germans in the aftermath of the Battle of Waterberg. These camps were created to both exploit the labor of the Herero and Nama and intentionally exterminate them through starvation and disease; again, an obvious link to the Holocaust is made here. The word “Waterberg” then slides into view; this mountain located in northern GSWA was the site of the key battle between the Germans and the colonized Hereros in August 1904. During this sequence, one of the Herero women puppets appears, made of a spring and some gauze, and wearing the characteristic Herero headdress for women. This headdress resembles two cattle horns atop a large, fabric-covered hat; as cattle were highly valued by the Herero, the headdress is an honorific. The woman puppet bends back and forth as if quietly grieving; her movements are seen against black-and-white footage of the actual site of the battle of Waterberg, filmed by Kentridge himself.

Now comes a louder, somewhat dizzying sequence in which a spinning disk delivers images in split seconds: a bull’s-eye target riddled with bullets, animals that metamorphose, drawings of Africans with bullet holes, a text that reads “Zwischen den Rassen” (between the races) and another that advertises a cream for a “Shone Buste” (a well-cared for bust/breast). The latter undoubtedly references the German imperial gaze upon black African women and the proclivity for photographing them bare-breasted. Some such photographs, in books published after the genocide, show evidence that the women’s clothing has been rudely torn down so as to reveal their breasts for the photographer. The running Herero man appears again, against various backdrops including one with bold letters “Welt-Detektive,” a reference to a magazine titled *Aus den Geheimakten des Welt-Detektiv*, which began circulation in Germany in January 1907, the time when the genocide was subsiding.<sup>19</sup> Then a roughly hewn, sketched telephone pole transforms into a swastika and then into a gibbet, or gallows. A hanging light appears from which a shower head grows, and a full-on shower pours down on the running man, an overt symbolic reference to the Holocaust and the use of “showers” for gassing at death camps. He runs in place here for several seconds, then proceeds through a landscape full of abstract, linear drawings, robotic-looking calipers.

The skull—a symbol of the victims of the genocidal gaze and thus a powerful memento mori—appears in varying positions and transformations throughout *Black Box*. The viewer first sees the skull when the compass puppet reappears after

the sequence of the running man and the shower. The compass puppet turns a clay pot into a skull; this is followed by a drawing of the head of Hendrik Witbooi (the subject of chapter 1), which turns into a skull, and then by a globe that turns into calipers holding a skull. This is a particularly laden metamorphosis—again reminding viewers of the tools of the Schutztruppe and the Nazis. Kentridge has commented: “This links the Herero of 1904 with the genocides of the 20th century. I had archival images of those heads that were sent to Berlin and references to the measuring of skulls. There’s a character in *Black Box* whose main job is to measure skulls” ([www.postmedia.net/06/kentridge.htm](http://www.postmedia.net/06/kentridge.htm)). Shortly after this skull sequence, the skull reappears and a series of intersecting lines is drawn from the skull to other objects; such intersecting lines, which again function as a visible reminder of the linkages (and the silence) that are the overall message of *Black Box*, are commonplace in Kentridge’s work.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the skull appears atop the compass puppet, exploding again and again.

At this point, viewers have seen about two-thirds of *Black Box*. We have seen the representative of the genocidal gaze—the compass/calipers man—and the symbols of the victims—the Herero running man, the Herero woman, and the rhino. Now, suddenly, a new puppet appears—the Megaphone Man. He is made of sticks topped by a megaphone, and he carries a sign affixed to his front that carries the capital letters “TRAUERARBEIT.” He serves in this final section of the installation/performance to command the audience to grieve for the forgotten victims of German genocides and Apartheid. He performs a kind of metafunction, reminding viewers that they are in a museum, that the work of art they are watching serves as a memorial, and that their participation in this mourning and memorialization is required; it is their responsibility to end the forgetting.

As the Megaphone Man crosses the stage, a clip of a 1912 film made during Germany’s colonial era in Cameroon comes into view under the Megaphone Man, who soon sallies off the stage. The audience sees white hunters, dressed in classic khaki safari garb, shoot a rhino at close range.<sup>21</sup> The viewer watches as the rhino painfully thrashes about in the throes of death. The hunter then bounds lightly over the tall grasses and cuts off the foot of the rhino, his trophy. Use of the rhino as an image no doubt references the plight of the rhino in Africa now: as a result of drought and poaching, the rhino faces extinction/erasure in several areas.<sup>22</sup> The rhino thus serves as one of many reminders of the fragility of life, of mortality, of the impact of the colonizers for whom wresting the natural resources of Africa—minerals, rubber, diamonds, gold, and the labor of human beings to extract these resources—was the real goal. The colonial project was,

in its essence, hypocritical: its outcomes were profoundly antithetical to the so-called goal of bringing “civilization” to the “heathens.”

The two figures that flogged a man previously now flog a skull that is beaten into oblivion, to be replaced onstage by the exploding skull Kentridge mentions in his list of puppets. The skull is then manipulated in various ways by the compass puppet, being bandaged, becoming a severed head, having characters written on it, including a “J,” most likely a reference to the Nazi use of “J” for Juden, which was marked on passports and identity cards during the Third Reich. The Herero woman reappears, bending over, swaying, grieving, while behind her is flashed “Totenliste II und Nachtrag” (list of the dead and a supplement [to the list]). The music slows and the movement, almost like davening, becomes excruciatingly slow. Another series of intersecting lines intervenes, and then the rhino appears for the final time, moving in the direction of the Megaphone Man puppet. He indicates his commands by turning his megaphone head. The rhino stands on his hind legs, and then his forelegs, turns into a drafting compass, then into two geometric forms beating each other, and finally, becoming a rhino again, soars over Megaphone Man. The piece ends with the Megaphone Man, boasting his “Trauerarbeit” sign, alone on the stage; he is briefly illuminated and then eases off the stage, which falls into darkness. The credits for the piece begin to roll.

## What Kentridge Has to Say

The history that looms largest in Kentridge’s work is the complex, deeply entwined relationship between Europe and Africa, the rhino in the room, so to speak [a reference to the rhino in “Black Box”], a presence that can never be ignored.

MARIA-CHRISTINA VILLASENOR

In his own essay in the original catalog for the *Black Box* exhibit in 2005 (a full seven years before the *Art and Press* exhibit with the inexcusably bland label quoted earlier), Kentridge makes it abundantly clear what his emphasis is:

I am particularly interested in the Germans in southern Africa, what was then known as German Southwest Africa, now Namibia. German missionaries and traders came to colonize Southwest Africa in the later part of the nineteenth century and asked Bismarck for support. Reluctantly at first, Germany sent in troops to support them, and, eventually, Southwest Africa was declared a colony. . . . In the first years of the twentieth century, there was an enormous massacre, primarily

of the Herero tribe, in southwest Africa. Although *it is now mostly forgotten, overshadowed by other German massacres and genocides later in the century, there are many ways in which the mechanisms of those later European massacres were already underway in southwest Africa at the turn of the century* [emphasis mine].<sup>23</sup>

Kentridge goes on to delineate some of the links between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust, including the measurement of skulls.<sup>24</sup>

When Kentridge determined to make the Herero genocide and its links to the Holocaust and Apartheid the center of his installation, he not only read widely on these topics, but he traveled to Namibia to see the actual locations of the brutality and violence. Specifically, he visited the site of the Battle of Waterberg and studied the memorial there. In an interview conducted by Cheryl Kaplan in New York in 2005 while Kentridge was still creating the installation, and later in Kentridge's studio in Johannesburg, he commented:

I'm looking at German colonization in reference to Namibia for the exhibition. I went there to look at the place where there was a great massacre of the Herero by the Germans from 1904–1907. Some of that archival material and footage shot in the mountain where the genocide began is in the final piece. . . . At the site where the battle first happened, the Hereros, in anticipation of the attack, retreated with their families and cattle to a mountain where there was water, called Waterberg. They waited there for the attack. The German forces fought under General Lothar von Trotha and the Herero forces under Samuel Manharero [*sic*]. The Germans took months getting ready, building railway lines, and then a great battle took place. The Hereros were driven into the desert where most of them died of thirst, ambushed at water holes. 85% perished in three years. The site is now a national park in Namibia. At the bottom of the mountain, there's a German war cemetery where 23 German soldiers are buried. It's well maintained with a visitor's book, where German tourists write things like: "thanks for keeping such good care of the graves" and "please can there be no more wars in our times and you do such honor to these people." In the campsite dining room there are photographs of the Kaiser and his wife and of German troops, but *nowhere is there any word of what happened there*. It's as if you had Auschwitz and a few Germans who died of dysentery while they were working there and then had a sign where they were buried, but not a word else about what happened in Auschwitz. (emphasis mine, [www.postmedia.net/06/kentridge.htm](http://www.postmedia.net/06/kentridge.htm))

In this illuminating midrash on *Black Box*, Kentridge again emphasizes what I have termed the genocidal gaze. He traces the fatal consequences of the German perception of indigenous Africans and Jews as subhuman. He also notes the

German failure to come to terms with the past, to engage in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* about imperialism in GSWA, and the ways in which such silence led to the Holocaust.

## The Genocidal Gaze in *Black Box* and Animation as Transformation

Standard texts on animation almost invariably define the term “to animate” as “to bring to life” and they reference its etymology as the Latin word *anima*, meaning soul or life.<sup>25</sup> This emphasis on animation as life-giving was at the heart of the early Disney studio. In writing their famous book on that studio, two of Disney’s animators, Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, noted that “truly the age of the animator arrived with the first crude evidence of *life* in the single drawing.”<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, Kentridge sees the technique as one of *transformation*, metamorphosis not limited to bringing life to the inanimate. In creating his animations, Kentridge begins with one or two images in his head and makes a large charcoal drawing in his studio, where he has set up a 35mm camera on a tripod some distance from the drawing. He makes a new mark on the drawing or erases an existing mark, steps to the camera, shoots two frames of the drawing, and then repeats. These still shots are then connected to create for the viewer a sense of a moving drawing, not unlike flipbooks enjoyed by children. Kentridge has commented:

There is a *sense of animation as a field of transformation*, of depicting transformation, that has always been at the heart of it and that continues today. Charcoal is very fortuitous material to be working with for animation because its tonal range kind of is very good for photographic film but also because of the speed of its transformability. It’s very easy to erase so you can kind of change it as quickly as you can think. *I suppose it became a way of thinking rather than a physical movement* [emphasis mine].<sup>27</sup>

In an interview filmed in 2005, the year *Black Box* was completed, Kentridge provided salient details of his creative process.<sup>28</sup> He noted that his animated films generally run between four and nine minutes. He uses only twenty to thirty pieces of fresh paper to create the entire film, redrawing, erasing, and redrawing as he goes. His laborious process means that he makes forty to fifty seconds of material in a week; the full film thus takes months to complete. He acknowledged that “each day I keep a crazy animation log” to track his progress. Watching Kentridge perform this process in his studio is rather astonishing. His

facility with the charcoal means that with a few strokes he can change an entire facial expression, make a bodily movement, or cause a bird to fly. This kind of faculty was acquired through years of practice: as an art student he was taught that charcoal drawings were the prelude to oil painting—considered the “real” art—and so he diligently perfected his charcoal technique. Now he uses that skill exclusively.

Kentridge’s process of “animation,” by virtue of the nature of charcoal and his approach of erasing lines and reinserting them at a slightly changed angle to create movement, gestures toward the erasure of the Herero and Nama genocide from memory and from German history for almost a century. And yet, traces are left behind: Kentridge’s reuse of the same paper, rather than cels (the traditional process for animation), creates a visual palimpsest that becomes form, content, and synecdoche. Kentridge employs neither script nor storyboard, considered to be de rigueur steps in the process of animation; instead, his charcoal becomes “a way of thinking rather than a physical movement” and it leads him toward discovery. When asked by an interviewer about his work on *Black Box*, “What did your research reveal that you didn’t know at the start?” Kentridge replied tellingly:

*The big thing was the invisibility of the story in Namibia. It would be very hard to imagine our relationship and the history of WWII in the absence of records, books, writings, films, memorials, museums, debates. Those are absent here, though not completely. I by no means am the first person to look at this material. My ongoing interest is the question of Enlightenment and Colonialism, it’s a very current question in the world today. The Kaiser wiped out a whole population for the sake of Germany’s honor. Those questions are not so far from us still. (emphasis mine, [www.postmedia.net/o6/kentridge.htm](http://www.postmedia.net/o6/kentridge.htm))<sup>29</sup>*

Kentridge’s desire to make visible the heretofore invisible, to make the absent present, to memorialize the Herero and Nama, is also the impulse behind much Holocaust art. This is true whether the art was produced by victims during the Holocaust—such as that by Felix Nussbaum, Nelly Toll, and Charlotte Salomon—or by survivors after the Holocaust, or by the second generation, the children of survivors. It is also true of post-Holocaust art created by artists—such as Kentridge—who have no direct connection to the Shoah. Many contemporary artists, endeavoring to represent memories or create them, have also used installations, as Kentridge has. For example, American artist Shimon Attie is famous for the site-specific installations he produces; in the work titled *The Writing on the Wall*, he used slides to project photographs of Jewish life in pre-World War II Berlin onto the same or nearby buildings. His work functions as a memorial by making

the absent present and engendering memory. Anselm Kiefer, a German artist who now lives in France, creates enormous installations that often reference decay and degeneration. One of his installations, *Breaking of the Vessels*, is a twelve-foot-high bookshelf filled with giant books in a state of decay; broken glass surrounds the installation. *Breaking of the Vessels* alludes to the Kabbalah; the installation has also been read as a memorial to the People of the Book, a common designation for Jews and Judaism, given the centrality of the Torah; the broken glass may reference the Night of Broken Glass, the first full-scale Nazi attack against Jews in Germany. Kentridge is somewhat unique in that he has used his installation to represent “man’s inhumanity to man” over the entire twentieth century.

Holocaust art “moves freely between history and memory.”<sup>30</sup> The same kinds of debates discussed in chapter 3 regarding “poetry after Auschwitz” are also a source of controversy in Holocaust art. How faithful to history should such art be? Can it be beautiful? Are people without a direct connection to the Shoah “authorized” to represent it? Can the horrors of the Holocaust ever be truly represented? What are the ethical responsibilities of artists creating work about the Holocaust? What about the use of “popular” culture? Many survivors were deeply offended by Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* books because of their use of the medium of comics, yet they have become classics in the field. “The visualization of the Holocaust remains one of the quandaries of Holocaust representation” (Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity,” 1), and yet to both honor and re-create personal and collective memory, as Kentridge has done in *Black Box*, is essential as the survivors, the witnesses, pass away.

It is also instructive to think of the similarities between *Black Box/Chambre Noire* and the two texts by Uwe Timm, *Morenga* and *In My Brother’s Shadow*, discussed in chapter 3. All three of these pieces are post-Holocaust, postmodern, and postcolonial. All three are comprised of bits and pieces that somehow make a whole, fragments of various texts, photographs, imagined and historical characters, dreamlike images, military orders. As these fragments rub against each other in the work of art and in the mind of the reader/viewer, they cause comparison, disruption, accusation, understanding, and mourning. This frisson calls attention to the ways in which the genocidal gaze is carried from generation to generation and to the damage it inflicts.

## Conclusion

“Each sheet of paper has built into it the history of the sequence of movements,” remarks Kentridge in the 2005 film. Just as the history of the charcoal

is embedded inside the visible movements of the head or the bird on the film, so are the historical connections among the Namibian genocide, the Holocaust, and Apartheid that Kentridge is endeavoring to make visible. These events are reconnected in *Black Box*, with the title here suggesting the disclosure of the disaster that the black box in an airliner records. The secrets of the catastrophe are hidden until the black box can be retrieved and decoded. Kentridge's post-colonial art serves the same function: to impart to the viewer the details of the Herero genocide and make visible its relationship through both ideology and methodology with the Holocaust and Apartheid. The palimpsest of Kentridge's technique is the synecdoche for the palimpsest of history. "The process itself brings certain kinds of meaning to the work . . . if one is working with a cel image, you have a perfectly clean image; when working with charcoal, it shows traces, the passage of time," continues Kentridge in the film. So, for Kentridge, the use of animation is about transformation: the sobering, inhuman impulses seemingly transformed by geography, time, agency, motive, culture, and outcome, and yet repeated again and again.

Kentridge uses animation not to suggest life, to animate the inanimate, as is the usual sense of animation, but rather, in a counterintuitive manner, to create multiple images and symbols of death, a palimpsest of mortality and genocide. The use of his automatons in *Black Box* often results in death or in reminders of mortality. The kinds of metamorphoses imposed by/upon the puppets are at the heart of Kentridge's use of animation. Such an approach is inevitable, according to Alan Cholodenko, professor of art history at the University of Sydney, Australia, and author of theoretical books on animation:

Animation cannot be thought without thinking loss, disappearance and death, that one cannot think the endowing with life without thinking the other side of the life cycle—the transformation from the animate to the inanimate—at the same time, cannot think endowing with motion without thinking the other side of the cycle of movement—of metastasis, deceleration, inertia, suspended animation, etc.<sup>31</sup>

The installation poignantly reminds viewers of the *lack* of mourning and grief work after the GSWA genocide; nothing comparable to the development of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* following the Holocaust occurred in GSWA or Germany itself. In a real sense, *Black Box* becomes the memorial for the Herero and the Nama, demanding words, names, noise, music, a reminder of what happened and who the perpetrators were. The Megaphone Man *shouts*; he *insists on* the importance of mourning; he engenders memorialization where little has occurred. Meanwhile, in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, the infamous *Reiterdenkmal*,

a fifteen-foot-high bronze equestrian statue mounted by a German soldier, continues to serve as a powerful indicator of the devastating German presence in Namibia.<sup>32</sup>

As one critic has commented: “Though it seems unlikely that Freud, Mozart, colonialism, Nazism, pseudoscientific justifications for racism, the nature of perception, and the histories of photography and moving pictures could be woven into a single work, Kentridge succeeds at just that in *Black Box/Chambre Noire*” (Dubin, 157). Kentridge deploys animation to interrogate the cruelty of human beings toward one another, to make visible a history that has been silenced, to demonstrate the power of the genocidal gaze as an instrument of destruction linking events of the twentieth century that were “justified” by the racial/racist hierarchies of imperialism. His palimpsest succeeds in representing the passage of time and the consequences of the failure to do the work of mourning. *Black Box* becomes the memorial for all who died even as it is also a warning to museumgoers of their responsibility to remember, to speak, and to resist the tools of oppression.