

# Archive of Darkness

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

Ferdinand de Jong

all photos courtesy of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam, except where otherwise noted

We have reached a point where all destinations, all bright  
lights, arouse mistrust.

William Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons* (2014)

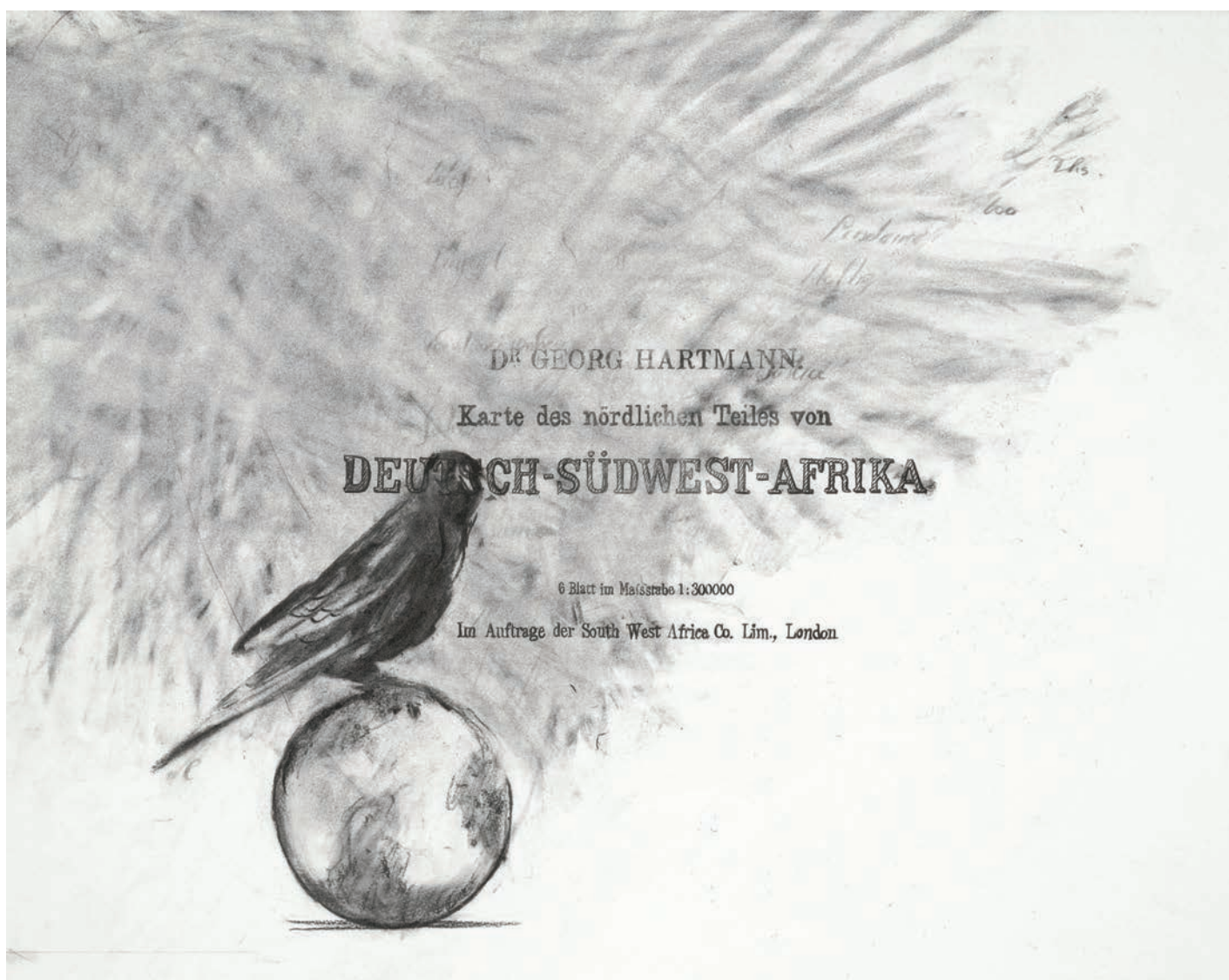
Since the Holocaust was recognized as a historical calamity without precedent, Germany has publicly atoned for its history through official apologies, financial reparations, and public commemoration. While the Holocaust has been acknowledged as a crime against humanity, atrocities perpetrated under German colonialism slipped from public attention and were subject to colonial aphasia. Ironically, the memorial politics commonly referred to as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* have obscured German involvement in atrocities perpetrated in the colonies. Apart from a memorial stone in Berlin's Neuköln neighborhood and a rededicated statue of an elephant in Bremen, no permanent display currently bears testament to the genocide of the Herero perpetrated in German South-West Africa.<sup>1</sup> However, in response to political demands by the descendants of the Herero victims for recognition of atrocities committed and legal procedures for reparation payments, Germany's colonial past is receiving increased public attention. In this context, the question arises: What art can contribute to the calibration and commemoration of colonial pasts? This article examines the intervention of one work of art in the public debate about Germany's colonial past. It suggests that *Black Box/Chambre Noire* by the South African artist William Kentridge has provided a forum for the

calibration of archival evidence and ethical considerations on reparation, reconciliation and forgiveness.

*Black Box* is a piece William Kentridge produced after he had been working on an interpretation of Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte*. Drawing upon the history of cinema, theater, and opera, *Black Box/Chambre Noire* is a tightly packed play of automata that perform against a backdrop screen on which images are projected to a haunting soundtrack composed by Phillip Miller. Lasting for 22 minutes, the performance tells the history of the Herero genocide perpetrated by the German army in German South-West Africa. Recasting Mozart's *Magic Flute* as a shadow play in a miniature theater, *Black Box/Chambre Noire* reflects on the opera's associations with the Enlightenment. Illuminating its shadows cast in the colonial encounter in Africa, *Black Box* revisits established views on the Enlightenment as a project of human progress and perpetuates a critical inquiry launched by the members of the Frankfurt School.

Tellingly, the work is entitled *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, referencing the camera obscura, the room of shadow plays that served scientists since the second half of the sixteenth century as a technology for the exploration of vision (Crary 1992). The term *chambre noire* also references the main chamber of the analog camera, through which light falls on the photographic plate, but the title's references are multiple and are not confined to the field of vision. In aviation technology, the black box is a device designed to record conversations of the flight crew in a cockpit. Installed in anticipation of disaster, it is a technology to answer questions about the operation of the aircraft when its pilots are no longer alive to give testimony. Finally, the title also references the black box theater as it was designed for experimental theater pieces in the 1960s and 1970s. Typically, this kind of theater was constructed to enable the audience to have a full view of the stage and to break down the boundaries between performers and audience. Referencing different technologies of vision, the piece situates itself in a history of reflection on light and shadow and engages with Plato's allegory of the cave, which has served as a pivotal metaphor for enlightenment since antiquity. In short, *Black Box/Chambre Noire* examines techniques that shed light on

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1 William Kentridge. 2005. Drawing for *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, showing the German eagle ruling the world.

what is cast in darkness and subjects to scrutiny how they affect perception, an epistemological exploration appropriate to the examination of forgotten histories.

*Black Box* uses a range of technologies to commemorate the Herero genocide, perpetrated by the German army between 1904 and 1908 in what was then German South-West Africa (Fig. 1). When Deutsche Bank commissioned a work by William Kentridge, it did not quite anticipate the occult subject matter of *Black Box*.<sup>2</sup> Exhibited in Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2005, the moment of the work's installation coincided with an emergent public debate on Germany's historical culpability and its responsibility for reparation payments to the Herero people. In a speech given at the centennial commemoration of the Battle

of Waterberg in 2004, the German Minister for Development and Economic Cooperation, Heidemarie Wieworek-Zeul, had publicly acknowledged Germany's moral responsibility for the genocide. Although this statement did not represent the position of the German government, its Foreign Office confirmed in 2015 that "the 1904 to 1908 war of extermination in Namibia was a war crime and genocide." Since then the German government has negotiated with the Namibian government over the terms and conditions of an official apology and reparation payments, but such negotiations seem to have stalled.<sup>3</sup> However, as expected, the admission of guilt fueled Herero demands for reparation payments (Zimmerer and Schaller 2008:476).

In spite of its critical success, *Black Box* has not generated much scholarly interest.<sup>4</sup> This article proposes to situate *Black Box* in a wider category of contemporary art that engages with the ghosts of the colonial archive. In recent decades, artists-as-archivists have started to explore the poetics of the spectral in an attempt to work through the dark legacies of colonialism (Foster 2004; Enwezor 2008; Spieker 2008; Buchloh 2009; Demos 2013; Garb 2013; van Alphen 2014; de Jong and Harney 2015; de Jong 2016). Engaging a politics of temporality that goes beyond a determined future, their reassembling of archival images "functions as a possible portal between an unfinished past and a reopened future"





(Foster 2004:15). Such archival reassemblage has its historical precedents, set in states of emergency, that retain their relevance today. In its accumulation of photographic reproductions, Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–1929) was one of the first modern attempts to construct an assemblage of reproductions for future remembrance. Archival art has retained this reliance on reproductions, even after Auschwitz (Didi-Huberman 2003). Archival images of trauma that were initially subjected to a *Bilderverbot* have been reproduced and recirculated for the purpose of transforming the spectator's gaze (Guerin and Hallas 2007). Revisiting the past to reanimate a historical memory, Hal Foster reminds us, the archival impulse is often directed at a “recovery of the utopian demand” (2004:22).

Conventionally imagined as a technology for storing traces of the past, the archive is thus reconceptualized as a site to reopen the future. However, rather than provide us with more linear metanarratives, the archive's found objects enable artists to work in nonlinear ways (van Alphan 2014:235–36). Indeed, Foster (2004) has suggested that the fragmentation characteristic of archival art rejects linear models. Digging through strata of imperial debris, artists excavate colonial archives as construction sites for new narrations. This article aims to demonstrate that *Black Box* breaks new ground in animating archival fragments and, through a multiplicity of techniques, affords an affective engagement with the ghosts of the colonial archive.

2 William Kentridge. 2005. Projected image in *Black Box/Chambre Noire* of a decapitated head mounted on a stand for scientific scrutiny. The image is projected from two opposed directions within the layered space of the miniature theater.

#### DRAWINGS FOR PROJECTION

Made of pinewood, the physical contraption of *Black Box* measures approximately two meters in height, width, and depth. The box looks like a puppet theater, with a proscenium covered with reproduced maps that carries the inscription “The Gazetteer of Principles.” Adorned with cardboard curtains, the theater also resembles a miniature opera house, and because the side curtains are very roughly cut and resemble rock, the setting simultaneously invokes the shape of a cave. Puppet theater, opera house, and cave, this theater hosts multiple temporalities that unfold in their entangled performance. Within this miniature theater, several rails facilitate the movement of automata performing different characters. Shaped as a sandwich-board man, rhinoceros, skull, and a Herero woman, these automata engage in a shadow play against a backdrop screen on which film images are projected. During the performance, a front screen is lifted to reveal a stage that reveals another, transparent screen, onto which images are projected by two digital projectors, placed in front and





behind the wooden contraption. *Black Box* is built up of several screens and coulisses, creating a multilayered space extending both inwards and outwards to the setting in which it performs (Fig. 2). To synchronize the performance of the automata, music, and projected images, the choreography is orchestrated through digital technology, subjecting the mechanical puppets to the discipline of the digital clock. As a highly sophisticated installation, *Black Box*'s technicality assists in defining its subject matter. Staged in museums around the world, this black box also raises questions about the role of cinema in the white cube.

With his signature technology widely known as "drawings

for projection," William Kentridge has established himself as one of today's most innovative artists. Understood as a particular filmic practice, his technology consists of a time-consuming process whereby the artist drafts images that he reproduces through photography. In his studio, Kentridge draws a scene on paper, which he photographs. The artist then changes the drawing by erasing and redrawing it, and makes another photograph. By repeating this process, a series of photographs is produced which the artist turns into a sequence to be projected as a film. The process is not dissimilar to animation, yet distinguished from it in several ways. First, rather than producing an endless series of slightly different drawings resulting in a moving image in which the original process of making is effaced, Kentridge works with a limited number of drawings, each of which is reworked to ensure that traces of the previous image remain visible in the new image, resulting in a palimpsest image

that shows its own erasures. By photographing a limited number of such drawings, the illusion of a smooth transformation that is achieved in animation is deliberately avoided. Drawing attention to its own "erasures," the resulting palimpsest distinguishes itself from conventional animation through its ruptures and the revelation of the process of its own making.

To be clear, this process relies both on the hand of the artist and the process of mechanical reproduction, a technique Rosalind Krauss has extensively explored for its obvious engagement with the history of cinema and its function in the public sphere. Although Kentridge's drawings for projection look back



3 William Kentridge. 2005. Drawing.

4 William Kentridge. 2005. Cut-outs of heads illuminated with references to German public sphere and industrial economy for *Black Box/Chambre Noire*.



5 William Kentridge. 2005. Projected images of skulls and automaton on stage of *Black Box/Chambre Noire*.

at early black-and-white cinema and risk inducing nostalgia for the lost promises of film's utopian potential, she suggests that his palimpsests actually aspire to reclaim that medium's utopian possibilities. Precisely because he employs outmoded technologies for his drawings for projection, Krauss suggests that Kentridge's art "attempts to undermine a certain kind of spectacularization of memory" as it prevailed in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee (Krauss 2000:29–35).<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, by transposing the problem of truth and reconciliation from South Africa to Namibia and Germany, this article examines how Kentridge's images for projection address the issue of the global circulation of models for reconciliation by providing a very thoughtful response to it through revisiting the historical debate on the utopian possibilities of cinema conducted between Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin.<sup>6</sup>

#### A FORGOTTEN GENOCIDE

Because of Germany's role in the extermination of the Jews under the Nazi regime, its *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (past mastering) has focused on the Shoah. In the post-World War II era Germany's colonial past was largely forgotten and atrocities committed during its colonial history received scant attention. To recall the obscured past of the Herero genocide, let us briefly review its history and the role documents played in its perpetration. The colonization of the territory Germans named South-West Africa was initiated by the Rhineland Missionary Society, eager to convert the native population and lift their souls. To protect the interests of the missionaries, the German army established in 1885 the protectorate Deutsch-Südwest-Afrika to support the conversion of colonial subjects into enlightened Christians. The German government also encouraged white settlement, expropriating the land of the Hereros. To respond to their increased marginalization and the manipulation of contracts about land reserves, the Herero chief Samuel Maharero ordered an attack against the Germans in which an estimated 130 Germans were killed. This incident initiated the German-Herero War (1904–1908), which quickly culminated in the inconclusive battle at Waterberg, after which the Herero fled into the Omaheke desert. On their flight through the desert,

thousands of Herero died because their wells were deliberately poisoned by the German army.

The German Reichskanzler encouraged the survivors to surrender and ordered them to register in concentration camps (*Konzentrationslagern*), located in various parts of the country (Fig. 3) (Gewald 1999:186). Famished and hunted like animals, many Herero wound up in the camps, from where they were distributed as slave laborers to both civilian employers and the German army. The conditions in the camps were atrocious, echoing those in the British camps for Boer captives during the Boer War and foreshadowing the conditions of the infamous camps erected several decades later in Europe. Recording the state of the starving population, the administrators of the camps kept records to discriminate between those prisoners fit for labor (*Arbeitsfähig*) and unfit for labor (*Unfähig*). The administration also produced so-called *Totenliste*, lists recording prisoners' causes of death as exhaustion, heart failure, bronchitis, or scurvy (Gewald 1999:189).<sup>7</sup> With hindsight, we can see that German South-West Africa served as a laboratory for the bureaucratic administration of death.<sup>8</sup> The Herero genocide was the first genocide recorded through bookkeeping: It raises questions about the history of bureaucracy.

Towards the end of World War I, the Union of South Africa invaded the German colony and called for an examination of the German atrocities (Silvester and Gewald 2003:xxvii). Incoming South African forces found files detailing practices of incarceration in concentration camps and glass plate negatives that displayed the flayed backs of victims exposed to "paternal correction" (Silvester and Gewald 2003:xvii). As a matter of urgency, South African Major Thomas Leslie O'Reilly was ordered to compile a report on the German treatment of its native subjects. Published in 1918, the Blue Book blocked Germany's attempts to retain control over Namibia. However, although it contained incriminating evidence, the Germans dismissed the Blue Book as "a bulky bit of propaganda" and no German officers were ever prosecuted (Silvester and Gewald 2003:xix). Moreover, when the first all-white assembly for South-West Africa met in 1926, it adopted a motion to destroy all copies of the Blue Book.





Throughout South Africa and Namibia, copies of the Blue Book were systematically removed from public libraries because, as Silvester and Gewald put it, “The dead of the Herero genocide and other atrocities were dismissed and forgotten in the interest of white settler reconciliation” (2003:xxxii). An archive of darkness was summarily suppressed.

As in other colonies, German colonization resulted in a visual economy in which images of “the primitive” circulated for purposes ranging from scientific research to strategic geopolitics (Hayes, Silvester, and Hartmann 2002; Hartmann, Silvester, and Hayes 1998). *Black Box* relies extensively on this colonial archive of historical images, including photographs reproduced in the Blue Book (Silvester and Gewald 2003:xxxii). One of the most shocking images incorporated in *Black Box* is that of Herero men, stripped and lynched, hanging from trees.<sup>9</sup> *Black Box* also reproduces historical photographs of skulls removed from the corpses of Herero prisoners and sent to Kaiser Wilhelm’s Institute for Physical Anthropology in Berlin where, mounted on stands as material evidence for theories of racial genetics, they served to demonstrate the superiority of the German “race” over black Namibians (Geldenhuys 2007).<sup>10</sup> However, the archive of historical images Kentridge draws upon is not confined to the Herero genocide and explores other possible historical relationships. In *Black Box*, portraits of General Lothar von Trotha and Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi are projected alongside several anonymous skulls (Fig. 4). Cut in slices, both horizontally and vertically, the projected images of the skulls of the historical protagonists resemble and reference the photographic representations used by German forensic scientist Richard Helmer to certify Josef Mengele’s death. When Mengele’s skull was found in a graveyard in Brazil in 1985, Helmer developed a technology to identify this skull by superimposing portrait photographs of Mengele on photographs of his skull (Keenan and Weizman 2012). The likeness this produced was considered positive proof of Mengele’s death and provided a new technology for the identification of skulls.

In subsequent legal research into the fate of the victims of political repression in other Latin American states, the International Criminal Court used this forensic technology to identify the skulls of activists gone missing. Referencing the photographs made of Mengele’s skull, *Black Box* captures various registers of research on human remains and suggests that they were historically connected in rather uncanny ways (Fig. 5). Superimposing historical images in a palimpsest that references both classical works of art and forensic aesthetics, the installation questions the binary oppositions of victim versus perpetrator, art versus popular culture, *vanitas* paintings versus postmortem inquiry. Raising questions about the ethics of these interrelated fields of research and representation, *Black Box* points to the ambivalences and ambiguities in the scientific and judicial quest for truth, culpability, and justice.

Just as the projected images of the decapitated heads reference the scientific research to which the inmates of the concentration camps were subjected, *Black Box* reproduces the *Totenliste* that the German army kept in the concentration camps. Incorporating reproductions of these *Totenliste*, with names and numbers crossed out, effaced, corrected, and reinscribed, these palimpsest drawings reenact the body counts performed in the concentration camps. Incidentally, the revisions inscribed on these lists recall the revisionist debates about the actual numbers of victims of the genocide that sections of the German-speaking population of Namibia continue to contest today (Kössler 2008). Engaging the debate on numbers, the aesthetics of the charts drawn by Kentridge do not so much reproduce the accuracy of bookkeeping as convey the artifice of counting—and the inherent perversity of accounting for genocide. Projecting the names of the victims on lists, *Black Box* follows the convention of listing the victims’ names on memorials as it was established for (European) victims of World War I. With the lists of names fading into the future, *Black Box* situates the viewer in the presence of the dead, insinuating a temporality of future hauntings.

## ARCHIVAL FRAGMENTS

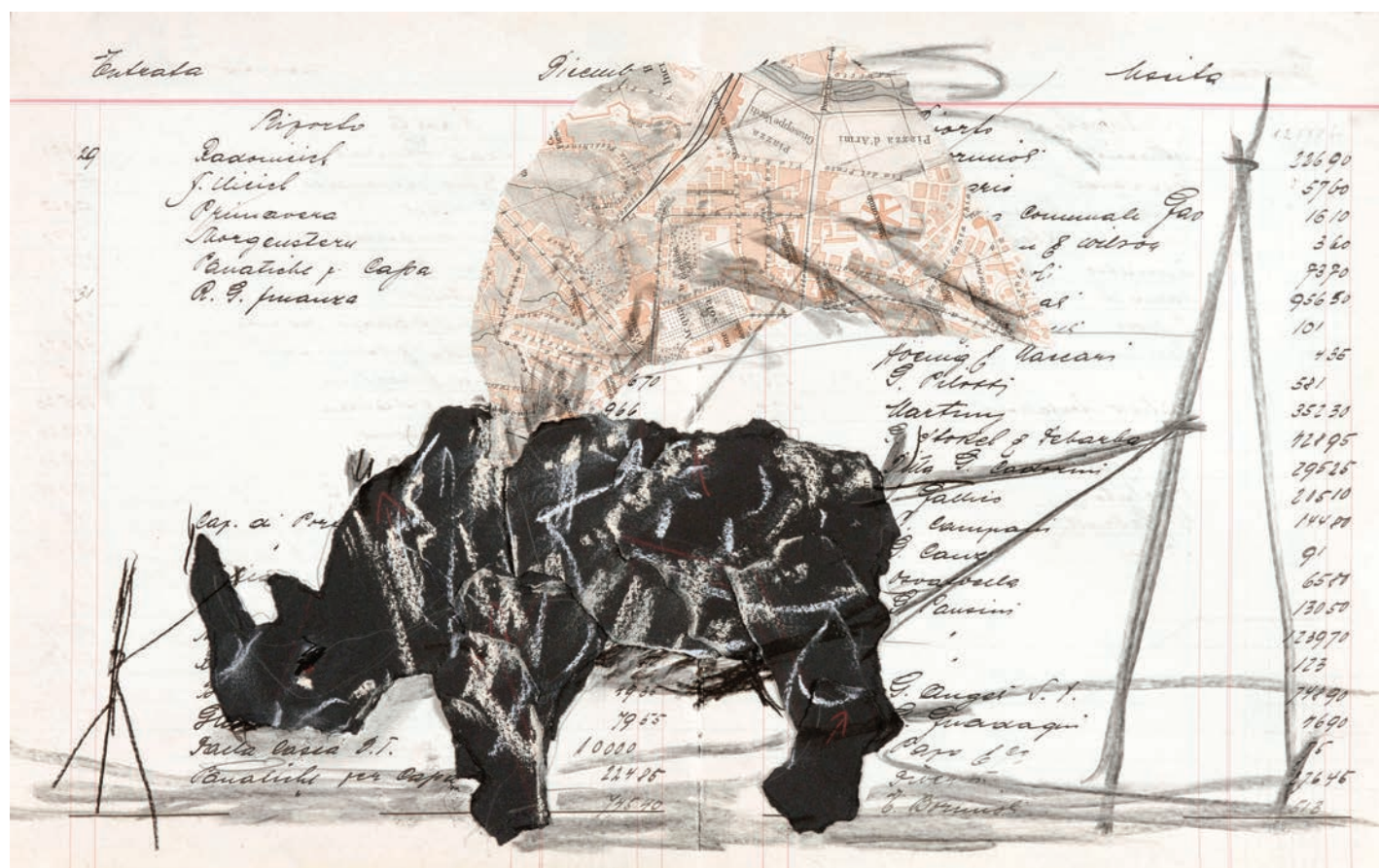
The projected images in *Black Box* reference specific images and texts in histories of art, science, biology, anthropometry, cartography, and imperialism. Deliberately blurring the boundaries of established genres, *Black Box* also marches Surrealist automata in its shadow play and juxtaposes Mozart's arias with a Herero lament (Fig. 6). The archive of documents that *Black Box* relies on is vast and varied: I have extracted a few examples from a long list of documents used by the artist, provided by the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, which exhibited *Black Box* in 2012:

- a photocopy of General von Trotha's 1904 order against the Herero people, from the Namibian National Archive
- Georg Hartmann's map of South-West Africa, 1904
- private correspondence from German South-West Africa, 1911
- lists of mines and shares
- a French textbook circa 1868, *La merveille de la science*
- a 1910 edition of the British handbook, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*
- a text on the relative value of gold coins
- an Italian ledger book, circa 1920
- a student's handwritten lecture notes on German law, 1911
- a vintage street map of Johannesburg, 1940
- indices from French scientific notes
- *Universale Tariffa*, circa 1833
- *Chamber's Encyclopedia*, 1950
- *Introduction to Telephony* textbook, 1934
- a 1924 copy of *Cyclopedia of Drawing*

- photocopies of advertisements featured in the German journal *Simplicissimus*
- share accounts of gold mines
- a Baedeker travel guide to Italy, circa 1900

In addition to these texts and maps, *Black Box's* sound track plays several excerpts from Mozart's *Magic Flute*, including its most famous arias, from a 1937 recording of Sir Thomas Beecham conducting the Berlin Philharmonic for the assembled Nazi leadership. The music score also incorporates original compositions by the Johannesburg-based composer Philip Miller, as well as a fragment of a Herero lament, a traditional Herero praise song, and traditional Namibian music for the musical bow. Miller's sound track reassembles fragments from different sound archives in an uncanny encounter. Understood as an opera that celebrates the spirit of the Enlightenment, the use of music taken from *The Magic Flute* in *Black Box* is intended to set up a contrast. As Kentridge himself states, "if *The Magic Flute* suggests the utopian moment of the Enlightenment, *Black Box* represents the other end of the spectrum" (Kentridge and Villaseñor 2005:51).

7 William Kentridge. 2005. Cut-out of rhinoceros and drawn map, mounted on found document.









“originals” and “copies”—as the process of transmission depends on mechanical reproduction. To convey this in the register of an exhibitionary complex, documents that have served as the substrates for the drawings for projection in *Black Box* are displayed in glass cases in the gallery space in which *Black Box* is staged (Figs. 7–8).<sup>11</sup> Turning documentary evidence into an object of aesthetic contemplation, *Black Box* questions the authority of historical documents and the role they have played in the colonial encounter, not by presenting more “truthful” documents, but by interrogating their role in the authorization of genocide (Demos 2013:60). As self-proclaimed fabrications, these “documents” draw attention to their historical conditions of possibility. By incorporating both official, historical documents and contemporary Herero laments that remember the “darkness” of genocide, *Black Box* goes beyond the verification of artifacts towards an inquiry into the very structures of transmission of trauma.<sup>12</sup> *Black Box* is not an archive of authentic documents of the Herero genocide, but an archival simulacrum that investigates the conditions of possibility of genocide and its remembrance.

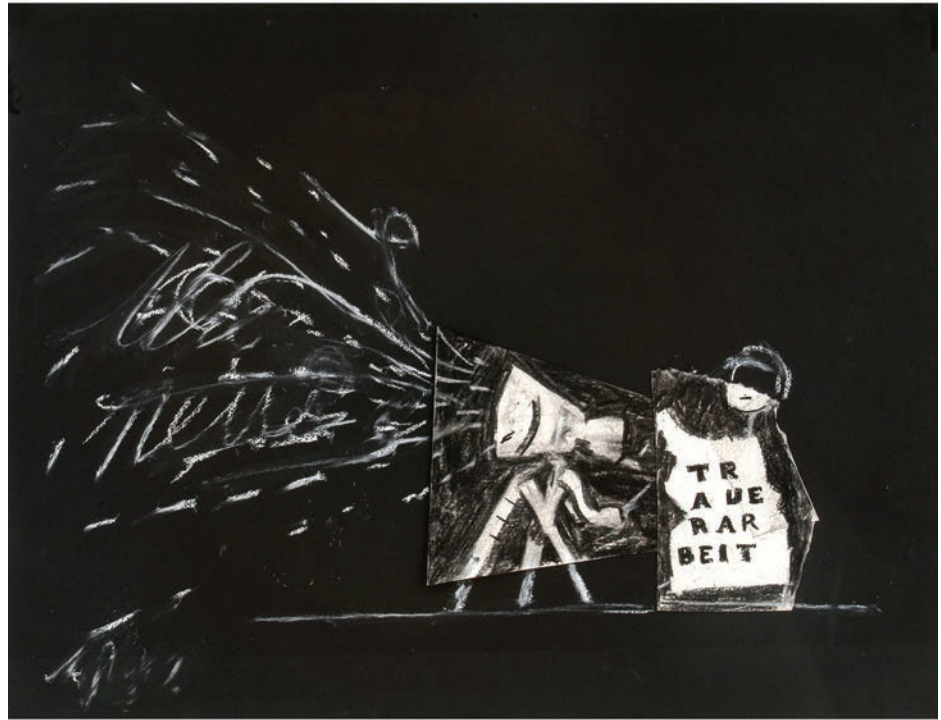
In its archival exploration, *Black Box* explicitly questions the authority attributed to writing, print, and the dissemination of documents in the imperial public sphere. Inserting the documents of death into a wider archive of arts, science, and visual culture, *Black Box* provides an epistemological context for the Herero genocide. Such a wide range of documents recalls the conditions of possibility Michael Rothberg has delineated for the making of multidirectional memory. In his thoughtful and highly acclaimed study on multidirectional memory, Rothberg claims that the spread of Holocaust memory and consciousness around the world has set the stage for a competition between different victimage memories. However, such memories need not necessarily be in conflict, and Rothberg suggests that the acknowledgment of Holocaust memory has in fact enabled the articulation of other histories of victimization (2009:6). His model of multidirectional memory proposes that memories and commemoration of the slave trade, colonialism, and the Holocaust

have actually enabled each others’ recognition beyond national identifications and narrow political affiliations. Following this argumentation, one might ask whether the Herero genocide also owes its recognition to the multidirectionality of Holocaust memory. However, as I have argued throughout, Germany’s Holocaust *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has in fact obliterated engagement with its colonial history. Only after the completion of the process of German unification did some space for public debate on this subject emerge, even though public interest in it remains restricted to this day. Nonetheless, the public acknowledgment of different victimage memories proceeds apace in a process that is truly multidirectional in Rothberg’s sense. For instance, German diplomatic demands that Turkey acknowledge the Armenian genocide have instigated retorts from the Turkish government demanding German acknowledgment of the Herero genocide (Zimmerer 2016). Genocides committed in the Age of Empire are subject to political negotiations between successor nation-states that may favor national “forgetting,” but historians working on the Herero genocide have established that Namibian and German pasts are intricately entangled and acknowledge that its commemoration, too, is interdependent (Kössler 2008:314, 2015; Zimmerer 2008; Eckert 2016; see the bibliography in Kössler 2015 for more extensive discussion in German). To demonstrate such entanglement of history and memory, the archival documentation required is of course not to be found in a single archive. Rothberg argues that, “Far from being situated—either physically or discursively—in any single institution or site, the archive of multidirectional memory is irreducibly transversal; it cuts across genres, national contexts, periods, and cultural traditions” (2009:18). Here, I have demonstrated that *Black Box* mobilizes such a transversal archive for the remembrance of the Herero genocide in multidirectional commemorations. By including maps, shares of mines, technologies in eugenics, and the forensics of Mengele’s skull, *Black Box*’s archival fragments interrogate transversal forms of objectification and enter unexpected conversations with other specters of the Enlightenment.



9 Installation view of *Black Box/Chambre Noire* at Deutsche Guggenheim, 2005.  
Photo: Mathias Schormann

10 William Kentridge. 2005. Collage including cut-outs of automata megaphone and sandwich-board man.



#### BLACK BOX/WHITE CUBE

In *Black Box*, Kentridge transposes his signature technique onto a new set of media. Situating itself in histories of opera, installation art, cinema, popular theater, and forensics, the piece raises questions about screens, exhibition space, site-specificity, spectatorship, and spectrality. Any analysis of *Black Box* has to privilege a particular genealogy of the work over others that might be equally justified, and an evaluation of the work's accomplishments will be inflected by this choice. As a multimedia work, it distances itself from modernist media-specificity and intervenes in debates about intermediality and the cross-over between media. This is particularly apparent in the way in which the work situates itself in parallel genealogies of screen-based installation art and post-cinema. This particular art form that, says Alison Butler, "cannot quite articulate its name" (2011:531), is situated between the history of experimental art studied by art historians and expanded cinema studied by film theorists. It is a field mined with opinions entrenched in separate critical histories. In this minefield, *Black Box* addresses the debate about the illusionary nature of cinema and its anti-illusionary critique as it has set the parameters for the entry of cinema into the gallery space.

The art form without name examines the site-specificity of the screen in the "post-medium condition" where moving images have become ubiquitous and their materiality has taken many forms. In this respect, the complexity of *Black Box* as a multimedia installation and its multiplicity of frames and screens merit some attention. With projectors situated both before and behind the box, the installation's moving images are projected on proscenium, coulisses, and front and back screens. Double projection is of course well established in cinematic art, having its origins in a genre of screen-based artworks that posited the cinematic process itself as object of investigation (Trodd 2011; Uroskie 2014). Screen-based installation art of the 1960s and 1970s grappled with at least three screen spaces simultaneously: the space behind

the screen, the space before the screen, and the spatial presence of the screen itself. In her discussion of Michael Snow's seminal work *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), Kate Mondloch observes that "to experience the piece fully, viewers must perambulate around the projection surface and explore the screen-based spatial environment from both sides" (2011:82).

With its set pieces and multiple screens, *Black Box* invites the audience to do the same. However, while *Black Box* performs its 22-minute play of projected images, the audience is immobilized in their chairs and cannot get up and view the screen from two sides. When film footage of bush foliage—recorded at Waterberg, one of the principal arenas in the German-Herero war—is projected from different directions onto screen and proscenium, the projected images produce illusions of ghostly presences. Restricted as seated spectators, viewers must content themselves with these specters as they appear on the transparent screen, and they are left to wonder how these illusions have been produced. The reverse of the screen remains inaccessible, hidden, and conceals its secrets (Cassar 2008). While the screen shows us the specters of Waterberg, an automaton representing a Herero woman strides across the podium lamenting her losses. Light reflecting from the screen permeates her translucent dress, revealing a spring for her skeleton.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the sound track reproduces sung laments that constitute the form through which the Herero remember the atrocities of their annihilation. The songs remember that those who survived the annihilation had no time to bury their dead and carried with them the "darkness of death" on their flight to Botswana.<sup>14</sup> A Herero lament is played that hints at this trauma, but instead of rendering the unspeakable intelligible, no translation is offered: *Black Box* only projects shimmering shadows of bush foliage. Although *Black Box* lifts the historical curtain, it does not provide easy access to the historical reality of the genocide and its afterlives, but through illusionary tricks creates impressions of overwhelming loss and returning specters. Exploring the potential of projected images, *Black Box*





11 William Kentridge. 2005. Drawing for projection of rhinoceros alongside automaton of megaphone in *Black Box/Chambre Noire*.

in fact probes the limits of representation and engages with the call to move beyond the binary oppositions of cinematic illusion and anti-illusionism. It reenacts for its viewers the experience of prisoners shackled in Plato's cave, but in this case, although they remain incapable of piercing it, the viewers know they are watching an illusion. As an installation piece, *Black Box* provides a full experience of the screen by projecting illusions—emphasizing the impossibility of piercing these illusions. Rejecting a Brechtian refusal of illusionism, *Black Box* mobilizes a positive contribution from the cinematic illusion in a black box, exploring, as Kentridge states, what can be clarified through shadows (Kentridge and Villaseñor 2005:51).

After the performance of *Black Box*, the lights switch on and the audience can walk around the miniature theater and inspect the structure, paying close attention to its mechanics.<sup>15</sup> The moment at which the audience is released from its seats repeats the moment in Plato's parable when the prisoners are released from their shackles. Exposed to the mechanics with which they have been deluded, this revelation should now lead to their enlightenment, but they find themselves seated in a white cube, burdened with the memory of *Black Box*. In the exhibition room are exhibited the documents, the collages, the maps and montages, the automata that Kentridge has used for the making of his shadow play. Like the viewers of other screen-based art, the

audience is invited to examine the materiality of *Black Box* and the drawings that have served to produce its illusions. Walking around the exhibition space, the audience becomes witness to the artistic process and is invited to position itself in relation to the projected images on screen. Mondloch (2011:84) observes that in such installations the screen itself is an object and a window at the same time. Spectators are asked "to see double" and realize that there are "two sides to every story," resulting in a "double consciousness" of the experience of the *Black Box* theater and the objects on display (cf. Uroskie 2014:2).

A quick tour through the gallery enables viewers to recognize several of the drawings on display as the constituent elements

of the projected images (Fig. 9).<sup>16</sup> But in spite of occasional recognition, it is impossible to reconstruct the intricate, technical process whereby this archive of still images has been transformed into moving images for projection. Indeed, the spectator cannot quite fathom how the “documents” on display have been transformed into the cinematic “illusions” she has just witnessed. Which of these drawings have been used? Which have been discarded? Which voices have been privileged and which silenced? How has this filmic structure been arrived at? Reproducing the quandaries of genocide reconstruction in fiction, the work of art reenacts the aporias of traumatic memory and precludes a proper understanding of the process, preventing healing and closure. The exhibition invites a reflective engagement, one in which the process of cognition is not a rationalist movement from the darkness of *Black Box* to the bright light of the white cube, as the order of visitation is not prescribed. One may visit the exhibition before watching the cinematic images of *Black Box*, exploring the possibilities of enlightenment through cinematic illusions, or vice versa, exploring the illusions of enlightenment through fabricated, would-be documents. The seemingly irreconcilable logics of the black box and the white cube are thus brought in dialogue, inviting the spectators to think about fact and fiction and acknowledge the illusions of shadow play while taking on the burden of memory. Moving backwards and forwards as in a work of mourning, the public can intimate the tragedy of the Herero genocide and reflect on its own amnesiac memory.

Situated in a white cube, *Black Box* accentuates the antinomies between cinema and the art gallery, sites of display that have their own histories of spectatorship and criticality. *Black Box* revisits these antinomies, creating a third space for perception. In this hybrid space, this *Gesamtkunstwerk* enables the articulation of affect and *Trauerarbeit* in ways unsupported by conventional media (Fig. 10). *Black Box* turns on site-specific associations as its performance opens itself up to the gallery it is exhibited in. For example, the exhibition in the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam afforded multidirectional associations touching on traumas beyond those of colonial history. Made by an artist of Jewish descent whose family moved from Lithuania to South Africa and presented in a former synagogue in a former Jewish ghetto, this archive of darkness recalled Nazi *razzias* in Amsterdam, and elsewhere. Devoid of a linear historical narrative, the affect of loss that *Black Box* produces is site-specific yet translatable to other times and places. Through statements of empathy and atonement, visitor testimonies attest that *Black Box* touches on multiple traumas.

#### ANIMATING THE ARCHIVE

After the cinematic projection of rapid sequences of simulated violence, the archival excess that *Black Box* presents provides an experience that is not available for narration and requires a proper “working through.” The performance closes with an *Elegy for a Rhinoceros*, a recurring protagonist in Kentridge’s work. Initially the rhinoceros is projected in archival footage of a colonial trophy hunt, in which the killers saw off its foot as a souvenir, an image juxtaposed with Sarastro’s great aria to peace, *In diesen heiligen Hallen* (in these sacred halls). In the final scenes, the rhinoceros returns dancing on its hind legs and meets the automaton megaphone. In this meeting of the rhino with the megaphone, it is not hard to see Germany’s colonial history meeting the nation’s

*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. After a light-hearted *danse macabre* to the tune of a Berlin waltz, the rhinoceros makes a somersault and disappears in the coulisses as if the excessive violence we just watched was only a circus act. But this dance of the rhinoceros reenacts the parade of Clara, the rhino that toured Europe as an exotic exhibit in the mid-eighteenth century (Fig. 11).<sup>17</sup> Reenacting this history as traumatic repetition, the rhinoceros returns like a specter that has come to haunt us. Indeed, *Black Box* is full of such revenants: General von Trotha, reincarnating Mozart’s Sarastro; the Queen of the Night, returning as wailing Herero woman; skulls hidden in museums in Berlin repatriated to the Herero.<sup>18</sup> Elusive materialities, these specters stumble from the back stage of this shadow theater like so many shadows on a surfeit of surfaces, demanding recognition, restitution, and reparation.

As a black box situated in a white cube, *Black Box* projects a shadow play on multiple screens. Exposing the doctrine of cognition through exposure to light to critical scrutiny, *Black Box* explores the possibilities of cognition through shadows that illuminate (Kentridge and Villaseñor 2005:51). In a phantasmagoria of silhouettes, shadows, and specters projected on transparent screens, *Black Box* provides the scene for a haunting Derrida has identified as proper to our age or mourning.<sup>19</sup> To understand how *Black Box* enables the observers to come to terms with Germany’s colonial past, it may be useful to revisit Kentridge’s studio as site of investigation. To make his drawings for projection Kentridge repeatedly moves backwards and forwards between the drawing on the wall and the viewfinder of the camera, performing a time-consuming labor. His production of superimposed images for projection on screen requires an ambulatory movement, which turns the studio, as Kentridge states, “into a machine for the alteration of time.”<sup>20</sup> Replicating this movement in its observers, *Black Box* enables *Trauerarbeit* in the ghostly archive of colonial genocide, turning spectators into witnesses (Bennett 2005:35). In a logic of the spectral, *Black Box* enacts a “redemptive return” whereby archival material, as Kobena Mercer says, “instead of being dead and buried in the past, flashes up into contemporary time in a critical moment of delayed awakening that reveals the unfinished afterlife of the colonial relation” (quoted in Demos 2013:67; cf. Baer 2005:14). Exploring the temporality of *Trauerarbeit*, *Black Box* has made a significant contribution to the utopian potential of archival art by enabling mourning in an archive animated by colonial specters.

*Black Box* blasts the past into the present, animating an archive of images through transformation, rather than narration.<sup>21</sup> In a complex political and legal context in which claims for reparations have been articulated but not granted, the skeletal remains of a slain people reappear as ghosts demanding justice. Addressing questions of moral guilt and political debt, *Black Box* provides an archive for the calibration of conflicting demands for justice, reparation, and reconciliation. In the year in which the monumental Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was inaugurated in Berlin, commemorating the Holocaust with 2,711 concrete slabs or “stelae,” *Black Box*’s projections of specters complemented and commented upon Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by presenting a ghostly archive to counter colonial aphasia. This archive, however spectral, reminds us of Derrida’s injunction “to learn to live with ghosts but to live with them justly” (1994:xviii).



## Notes

1 Since the start of the centenary commemoration of the German-Herero war (1904–1908), more attention has been given to the Herero genocide and German colonial history in the German public sphere. In 2016 the German government announced that it intends to offer public apologies to Namibia, but negotiations seem to have stalled (Burke and Oltermann 2016). In 2017, the Deutsches Historische Museum in Berlin staged an important and critical exhibition, “German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present,” on the history of German colonialism. The excellent catalogue (Deutsches Historisches Museum 2016) includes articles on the issue of the Herero genocide.

2 Ironically, at the time the Deutsche Bank itself was defendant in an American court case in which the Herero claimed reparations (Cooper 2006). This article argues that such reparation payments are unlikely to be granted. For an account that argues in favor of the culpability of colonial crimes committed before 1948, see Anderson 2005; for a more sociological discussion of the Herero reparations claim see Bargueño 2012.

3 <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/07/2015-07-10-regpk.html>; accessed 15 June 2017.

4 The most important studies on *Black Box* include the exhibition catalogue (Villaseñor 2005), as well as Hagström-Stahl (2010), Coumans (2011), and Geldenhuys (2007). An early but comprehensive overview of Kentridge’s art was published by Godby (1999). The most authoritative statement on Kentridge’s signature technique of the drawings for projection is Krauss (2000), but other substantial discussions of his techniques exist, for instance in Krauss et al. (2012) and Garb and Bradley (2016). There are several insightful articles on the significance of Kentridge’s conceptualization of history: Dubow and Rosengarten (2004), Rothberg (2012). In addition, several catalogues include essays on Kentridge’s work: Cameron et al. (1999), McCrickard (2012). In 2012, the artist gave the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University (Kentridge 2014).

5 Krauss’s contention with the spectacularization of memory in the process of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee retakes Hannah Arendt’s (1961) evaluation of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

6 This debate between Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin occurred in various publications and various media throughout the 1920s and 1930s (see Hansen 2012).

7 It is likely that the concentration camps afforded the collection of skulls for scientific study, a subject broached below (Kössler 2015:277).

8 The question to what extent colonial genocides such as the Herero genocide have paved the way towards the Holocaust are currently debated among German historians. Hannah Arendt was the first to posit that Germany’s totalitarian regime had its origins in the peculiarities of German imperialism but the terms of debate have since shifted. The discussion seems to move toward comparative analysis of colonial regimes, within and across empires, especially with regard to settler colonies (Kössler 2012:237). The literature on the subject is vast and mostly in German. Amongst the most recent contributions to the debate are Steinmetz (2007); Moses (2008); Zimmerer and Zeller (2008); Parraudin and Zimmerer (2010); Sarkin (2011); Lanbehn and Salama (2011); Zimmerer (2011); and Kössler (2015).

9 Published in Germany during the genocide, this image recalls the early twentieth-century lynching photographs that were circulated as postcards for the purpose of national education in the United States (Apel 2004).

10 Decades later, this scientific research fed into the eugenics of Nazi ideology. However, it should be noted that continuities in German history such as those alleged between the Herero genocide and the Holocaust are severely contested in German historiography. The decapitation of colonial subjects and the use of their skulls for racial science has been the subject of extensive research (Dubow 1995; Legassick and Rassool 2000; Crais and Scully 2009; Lalu 2009; Roberts 2013).

11 Removed from their performance in *Black Box*, the still images on display in the gallery space enable the public to scrutinize the process of their production. *Black Box* is indebted to Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, understood as the technique that renders the object as “historical”—constructed by human beings—and enables the observers to think about its production (Jameson 1998:51).

12 Van Alphen (2014:235) pointedly suggests that archival art verifies “the structures through which knowledge is lost or transmitted.”

13 In his Norton lectures, Kentridge (2014) reveals the origins of some of the effects used in *Black Box*. The spring used for the Herero woman is a spiral egg whisk Kentridge purchased in Paris. For a flat skull, which explodes on stage, Kentridge used the struts and bolts of a Meccano set.

14 Although relatively little information can be gleaned from archival sources about the Herero experience of the genocide, anthropological research has demonstrated that these laments remember the flight from German prosecution (Alnaes 1989:274).

15 As the curator of an exhibition on shadow plays notes, *Black Box* shares with puppet theaters the exposure of its own construction (Colombo 2008).

16 On “recognition,” see Kentridge’s view in *In Praise of Shadows* (2014), where he expands on this notion and differentiates it from other forms of perception and cognition. An analysis of Kentridge’s concept of recognition is provided by Saltzman (2006); see also McCrickard (2012:ch. 3).

17 Kentridge’s rhino references Albrecht Dürer’s first European representation of a rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros*, 1515), as well as Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s *Rhinoceros* (1749), and Pietro Longhi’s *Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice* (1751). McCrickard (2012:109) suggests the rhino also invokes the play *Rhinocéros* (1959) by Eugène Ionesco, which critiques conformity and the rise of mass political movements before World War II.

18 In her work on shadows and silhouettes in contemporary art, Saltzman (2006:53) has astutely observed that “such forms establish an ethics of representation that is predicated on a logic of spectrality, on marking precisely that which cannot be represented, yet making it somehow, legible.” Their lack of legibility does not imply an absence of reference, even though the historical referentiality of these ghosts is rather ambiguous (cf. McCrickard 2012:109).

19 Here, one can invoke Kentridge’s words used as epithet: “We have reached a point where all destinations, all bright lights, arouse mistrust. The light at the end of the tunnel turns too quickly into the interrogator’s spotlight” (2014:11).

20 Kentridge considers this movement between original object and viewfinder of the camera as pivotal to his work: “A sheet of paper on the wall of the studio. A camera in the center of the room. A walk between the camera and the wall. Altering the drawing, walking to the camera, recording the alteration. The studio becomes a machine for the alteration of time” (2014:90, see also p. 95).

21 Kentridge himself states that “Transformation, metamorphosis is of course the bread and butter of animation” (2014:146). On animation of the archive, see de Jong (2016).

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