

Art On Paper

Vol. 4, No. 4 / Mar.-Apr. 2000
US \$10/Can \$12

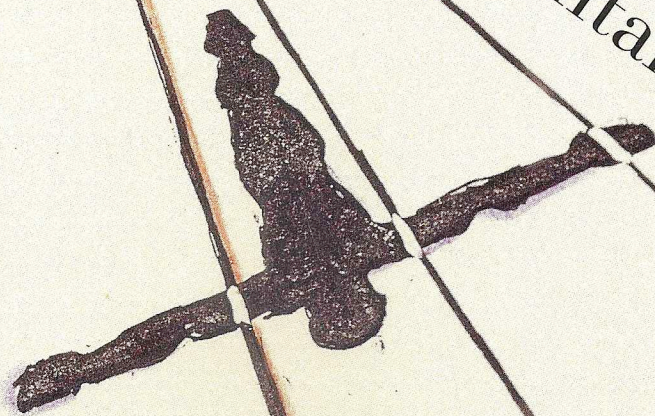
Richmond Burton

*William Kentridge and Luca Buvoli:
Drawing and Animation*

Will Barnet

From Matter to Light:

Lucio Fontana



In principle, a drawing never comes into existence all at once. Still less so is it received that way. Every drawing contains narratives, at minimum those of its own production and reception, and sometimes these implicit stories become more or less its explicit subjects. Of course, drawings often relate other kinds of stories as well. In any case, every time a drawing approaches narrative, it gives the lie to the idea of its own instantaneity. It denies that it or any other picture is essentially a matter of space and not time, a claim made by Lessing and his successors down to Greenberg and perhaps beyond.

So a drawing exists in time and contains time; that is, contains change, movement. Which is to say, perhaps, that every drawing tends to approach the condition of animation.

But wait. Doesn't the mere fact that there also exist animated drawings, constructed of still drawings sequenced through time, imply as forcefully as possible that those other drawings, the still ones, are indeed still? That a single image can never contain sufficient movement, sufficient animation, to fulfill its inner stress toward motion?

We are not dealing with a contradiction here, but with an antinomy.

Looking at it from the other direction, we should recall the observation of pioneering Canadian animator Norman McLaren that "animation is not the art of drawings that move,



William Kentridge,
*History of the Main
Complaint*, 1996
(installation view).
Photograph by
Mark Lewis. Cour-
tesy the artist.

DRAWING IN TIME

Reflections on Animation by Artists

by Barry Schwabsky

I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had.

—Andrei Tarkovsky¹

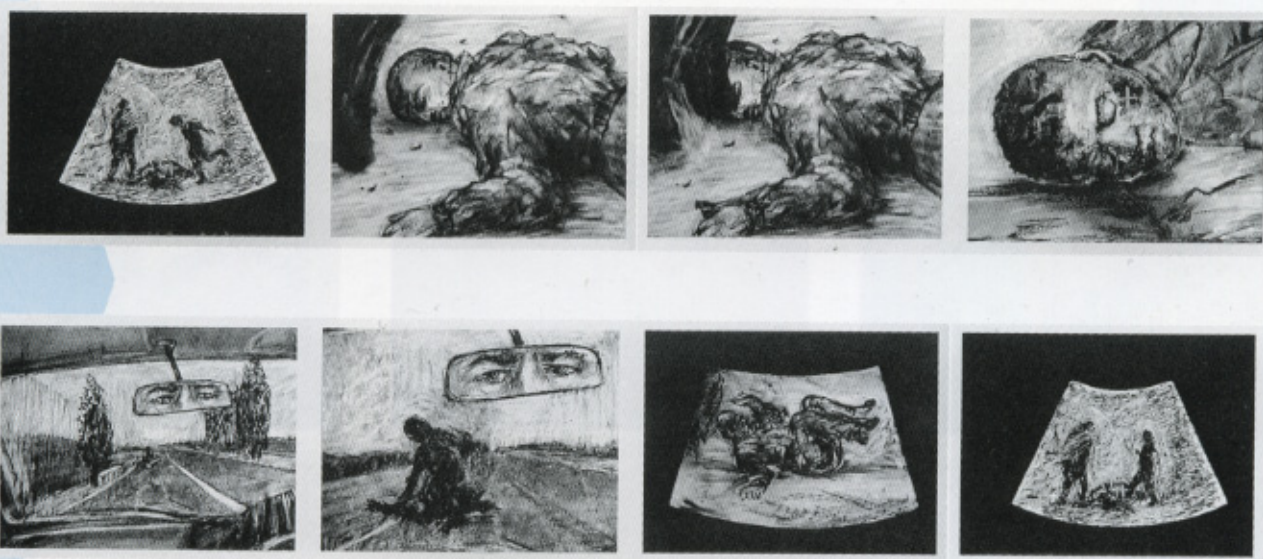
but rather the art of movements that are drawn.”² Such a statement, taken as seriously as it ought to be, roots the art of animation beyond the Italian Futurists, in the art of the Renaissance.

Animation has often hovered around the edges of the fine arts (Robert Breer, whose work with kinetic sculpture led him to animation in the 1960s, and whose early works have recently been brought back into view at the Staff USA Gallery, New York, would be just one example), but today it is coming into new prominence. This is in large part due to the acclaim garnered by the work of South African artist William Kentridge, especially since its appearance in both Documenta X and the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial in 1997. Another artist who has been very actively involved with making animated films is the Italian-born, New-York-based Luca Buvoli. They are hardly the only examples I could name—and in particular I would like to at least mention as another ambitious effort in animated drawing the film *Tuberama* by the English artist Georgina Starr, which was shown as part of the large-scale installation of the same name at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 1998. Through a brief comparison and contrast of the two very different oeuvres of Kentridge and Buvoli, however, we can get a glimpse of

what animation has to tell us about the art of drawing today.

Kentridge has made a series of films chronicling the lives of a pair of Johannesburg characters, Felix Teitelbaum and Soho Eckstein. Artist and businessman respectively, they are antagonists but also alter egos. And if there were any doubt that Eckstein, the protagonist of the later films in the series, is also a sort of alter ego or persona of Kentridge, it is largely banished by the observation that his physical resemblance to Eckstein is unmistakable.³ In *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), we find Eckstein lying comatose in a hospital bed. Suddenly a doctor is examining him by stethoscope; the physician exactly resembles the patient. As the film continues, the number of doctors keeps magically increasing, each listening for the same heartbeat, the same vital signs, but they are all identical: Eckstein himself.

This is self-examination with a vengeance. Through a series of intercut scenes, we become privy to the nature of Eckstein's "complaint": its name is memory. Eckstein is haunted by the involuntary recollection of an incident in which, while driving, he witnessed a black man being brutally kicked and beaten by two shadowy figures. With each horrible blow a red target mark briefly flashes across the victim's body—the same marks



William Kentridge, stills from *History of the Main Complaint*, 35mm film transferred to video, 1996.

that appear on Eckstein's own body under medical treatment. And another memory: again, Eckstein is driving, this time at night; someone abruptly running across the road is hit by his car. According to J. M. Coetzee, this is a "moment of misrecognition," in which Eckstein's memory of his part in his country's racially motivated horrors has been transformed into that of a simple road accident.⁴ Perhaps, but what visual code could determine which memory is the true one? We can only say that Eckstein must remain burdened with feelings of guilt mingled with those of mitigated responsibility.

Either he has failed to intervene in the brutality he witnessed, though he was not its perpetrator, or else he actually harmed someone, though unintentionally. In the end, Eckstein's hospital bed is transformed into a sort of office, in which he sits up surrounded by his telephones and other "instruments of power," as Coetzee calls them. His convalescence and his worldly competence have become indistinguishable.

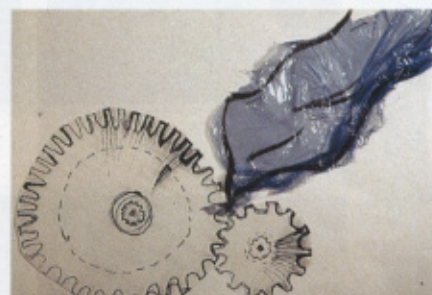
So much for the manifest level of narrative in *History of the Main Complaint*. There is also another, more subterranean story in the film, which is that of drawing itself.

Through it, we become aware of the connection between Kentridge's technique and his subject matter. Both have content, and memory is its burden in both cases. As with

many of Kentridge's films, this one has been made by an odd method which, as far as I know, is unique to him. Basically, each "shot" in the film is rendered through a procedure that literalizes the process of revision in the making of an individual drawing.

The image is drawn in charcoal on paper (with colored highlights in pastel). The illusion of motion is created not by photographing a sequence of individual drawings, each slightly different from the last. Instead, the same drawing is photographed over and over again, but having been partially erased and revised between shots. What we see on the screen, then, is not a sequence of a great many drawings, but many revisions of a relatively small number of drawings. It is as though we were seeing the sequence of images out of one of those old *Art News* articles detailing an artist's working method ("So-and-So Paints a Picture"), or a book like James Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait*, but transferred to film.

As a result, within each segment of the film lies the memory of the presently visible drawing's earlier states. Past states may be erased, but they leave their traces and condition what can be done. In this way Kentridge exemplifies filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's intuition that, in contradiction to the Eisensteinian tradition in film theory, "time courses through the picture despite editing [in the specific sense of montage] rather than because



Luca Buvoli, stills from *Inside and Outside Time*, 16mm animated film, 1997. Courtesy the artist.

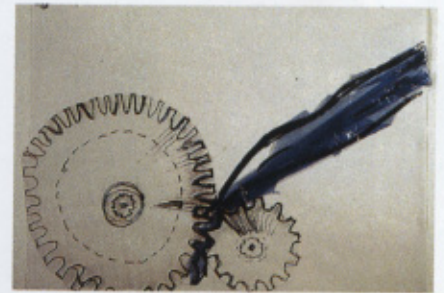
of it."⁵ And although Kentridge's films can contain abrupt juxtapositions—cuts like those in a conventional photographically made narrative film—at the core of his conception of animation lies the idea of revision rather than supersession.

Luca Buvoli's animated films have also been part of a serial, episodic narrative—in this case one that is carried forward primarily by his drawings, which in turn become a series of handmade comic and flip books; and by the gallery installations that Buvoli considers to be narrative episodes developed three-dimensionally. They concern the adventures of a character called Not-a-Superhero, who, in an even more abstract way than Kentridge's protagonists, may be considered an alter ego of the artist. Not-a-Superhero believes he was once the hero Supermark, but that he catastrophically lost his powers and identity when he met Dr. Logos and was betrayed by that villain's promise of absolute knowledge. "I used to fly in a liquid space and time, traveling through infinity. No margins could limit my actions. I was stronger than steel, lighter than paper." (As was the case with Kentridge's *Eckstein*, the truth status of Not-a-Superhero's recollection is always questionable.) Now, instead, to cover his emptiness, he wears a costume stitched together from rags and a mask made of words. He is a frag-

mented identity trying to piece itself together. The narrative is always equally fragmented; each episode is something like a shard of a story, or a pile of stories that never quite add up.

In films like *Where You Are Not* and *Inside and Outside Time* (both 1997), Buvoli has essentially pushed his comics into an explicitly temporal dimension just as his gallery shows extend them into three-dimensional space. "But that looks like it's made of paper!" objected my eight-year-old daughter, scandalized, as we watched *Inside and Outside Time* together at Buvoli's recent exhibition at John Weber Gallery in New York.

(One portion of the film's action is actually a flick through a flip book; another, a succession of stills panning through the space of one of Buvoli's installations—appropriately, at the Clocktower in New York—turning the figures drawn on the wall there into a sort of primitive animation.) In fact, one of the salient elements in Buvoli's style of animation is his rejection of any complete identification between the plane of drawing and that of its photograph. In conventional cel animation there is never any sense of a pictorial surface distinct from that of the photographic plane; a successful illusion means the analytical distinction between the drawing and its photograph is effaced. But in



Buvoli's films this is not the case. Either the drawing is shot at some small but noticeable angle to the paper, or the camera moves wildly toward and away from the paper, or else three-dimensional relief elements (made of "childish" materials like crumpled foil or plastic, colored pipe cleaners, and the like) are positioned to emphasize the space between the lens and the paper. And in a tactic similar to one also used by Kentridge, a predominantly black-and-white palette with occasional admixtures of color keeps reminding us that this is a color film of what are mainly black-and-white drawings. This is another way in which the non-congruence of the animation's two constitutive media is highlighted.

However, in Buvoli's newest film, *Flying: Practical Training for Beginners* (1999; it can be seen April 27–July 2 at his exhibition of the same title at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge), a new light is cast on the chronicle of Not-a-Superhero. Superficially, this film would seem to have no direct connection with the ongoing Not-a-Superhero series, were it not that the desire for flight represents precisely those more-than-merely-human powers Not-a-Superhero has lost. Essentially a pastiche of the genres of instructional and motivational films, and with language that is an odd mixture of scientific boilerplate and

New-Age-style uplift (instead of echoes of philosophers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, as in Buvoli's earlier works), this film could well be one that Not-a-Superhero himself might study in his efforts to defeat Dr. Logos.

Filled as it may be with pastiche and parody, *Flying: Practical Training for Beginners* is, nonetheless, something of an *ars poetica* for Buvoli. (Incidentally, that kind of formal irony is something that can hardly be imagined for Kentridge. It is as though his moral earnestness with respect to his subject matter had rendered intolerable too curious or overt a reflection on the stylistic means by which that subject matter can be communicated, despite the fact that *History of the Main Complaint* and other of his films contain a good deal of what can only be called a kind of unreflected pastiche of 30s social realism. More recent works by Kentridge, like his 1998–99 *Shadow Procession*, show a broader range of stylistic resources, and a correspondingly more pointed sense of their divergent, perhaps even conflicted, meanings.) Flying, in this work, is defined as the art of taking off from a surface by means of a continual process of transition between the imaginary and the real, but transition is exactly what the film itself shows as almost unattainable. Gravity, the pull of the surface (also to be understood in the sense of the



Luca Buvoli,
stills from *Flying:
Practical Training
for Beginners*,
16mm animated
film, 1999. Cour-
tesy the artist.

surface of drawing), is only fitfully to be resisted. Motion is herky-jerky, seemingly amateurish, even in the live-action portions of the film, which have been subjected to a sort of time-lapse process that turns the expected temporal flow into something flickering, mechanical, and awkward. Something similar is true as well of the voice-over soundtrack; a lecturing professor's voice (Buvoli's own) sounds almost automated, a succession of snapshots in sound. This effect lessens as the film goes on, though it never quite disappears. It's almost as though the film were talking itself into its own illusion of mastery, even as it points to an awareness that this mastery can only mean, as the stentorian professor intones, that "every time you think you are achieving something you cast it away."

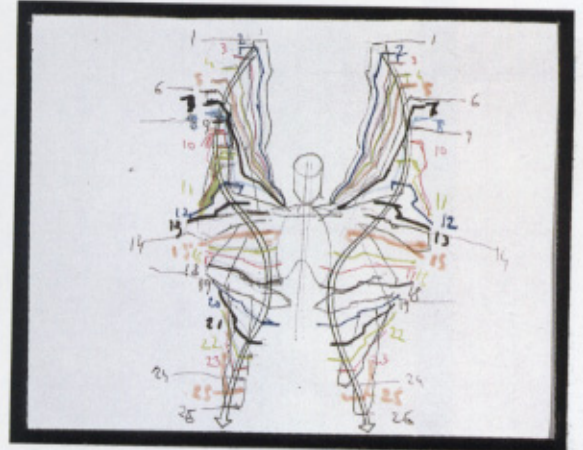
Likewise, what Buvoli most believes in is what he most relentlessly makes fun of—a practice of what the professor in *Flying* absurdly characterizes as "the interminably affirmative no." Where Buvoli's film appears motivated by an impossible desire for sufficiency, Kentridge's is freighted by the burden of excess. In the work of both artists, memory is seen to be undependable, or in any case unverifiable, so that narrative can never attain complete coherence or closure (which is one reason why the serial format

suits both of them). But for Kentridge, there is always too much memory, more than the mind can handle, and this is already implicit in the way he uses drawing as a sort of palimpsest, its ongoing process of revision continually visible but incomplete. The problem Buvoli faces is the opposite. Memory is constituted primarily by its gaps. The smooth flow of filmic time is supposed to be guaranteed by the mental phenomenon of the persistence of memory, but neither the viewer's nor Not-a-Superhero's memory is strong enough to persist across the gaps in his story. Smooth motion, true memory—both turn out to be only fitfully attainable, according to both Kentridge and Buvoli. If all drawing aspires to the condition of animation, their work shows that animation itself always tends to subside into the stasis of drawing.

¹Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin, 1989), p. 63.

²Quoted by Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (New York, 1998), p. 10.

³For instance, see the photograph accompanying his interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, in *William Kentridge* (London, 1999), p. 23. The artist's resemblance to this character, to whom he has attributed an evidently Jewish surname (like that of his other main character), provokes a



question: Since Kentridge (though he does not possess an ethnically telltale surname) is Jewish too, and this fact is clearly related through his characters to the content of his work, why is this so rarely discussed? (Even the title of Kentridge's film, *History of the Main Complaint*, contains a not-too-distant echo of that prototypical Jewish novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*.) Notice how gingerly a South African art historian touches on this: "Descending on the two sides of his family from Lithuanian and German immigrants, Kentridge learned early on to relate the South African experience, and his own position within it, on the one hand, to the utopian moment in the history of the Russian Revolution and, on the other, to the catastrophe of the Holocaust"; Michael Godby, "William Kentridge: Retrospective," *Art Journal* LVIII/3 (Fall 1999), p. 75. That last word is a curiously deferred clue. Is there some unspoken conflict between seeing Kentridge as a South African artist and seeing him as a Jewish one?

⁴J. M. Coetzee, "Focus," *William Kentridge*, p. 93.

⁵Tarkovsky, p. 117.

Barry Schwabsky is the author of *The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge University Press) and a contributing editor of *Art On Paper*.