

The Shadow-play as Medium of Memory in Global Art

Conference by Professor Andreas Huyssen (Columbia University, New York),
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Recent decades have seen the emergence of an art of memory different from that elaborated in Frances Yates's canonical book of that same title. Issues of political, especially traumatic, memory have been taken up by visual and literary artists across the world and in very different contexts. Not surprisingly the debates about the Shoah and artistic representation have played a key role in the ways artists not just in the Northern Transatlantic, but in Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America have taken up memory and forgetting in their own respective cultures. In earlier work, I have discussed how the Shoah migrated into other geographic and historical contexts, both closing down some and opening up other dimensions of understanding. Today I want to speak about two artists from the postcolonial periphery whose work articulates memory issues in aesthetically ambitious and conceptually robust ways in their respective shadow plays.

The theatrical shadow-play can look back on a geographically broad and historically deep tradition. Independently from each other, my two contemporary artists have deployed the shadow-play as part of that ancient and global art of performance. They each have invented a discrete medium which deliberately side-steps or even opposes a technologically advanced video and digital art practice. They also keep their distance from what has recently been described as a new relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud) that yet once again pretends to abolish the border between life and art. In Nalini Malani's and William Kentridge's works, the shadow-play has morphed into a medium of political memory and intervention. They have invented unique forms of the shadow-play not in order to represent traumatic pasts, but to create a flash of recognition of the past in the Now, as Walter Benjamin might phrase it (cf. Homi Bhabha, Townsend lecture). These works transport their political thematics in such a way that in the passage from aesthetic fascination to reflection the observer is challenged to think about memory politics, rights, and political economy in critically new ways. Memory of the 'partition' of 1947 and of the decades of apartheid and their respective after-effects determine these works in such a way that the very form of the shadow-play stages not just the content but the very structures of memory, forgetting, evasion. Spectacular theatricality is playfully and sensually bound to a rigorous formal exploration of what affective seeing might mean in contemporary artistic practice. New works by both artists marked highpoints of this year's documenta: Kentridge with a first version of his installation *The Refusal of Time*, Malani with her video shadow-play *In Search of Vanished Blood*.

Their technical treatment of the shadow-play, their relationship to European modernism combined with the simultaneous use of local Indian or African traditions, as well as the breadth of their praxis including theater, performance, installation, video and film all the way to painting and drawing makes them into paradigmatic figures for any discussion of global art, of transnational, even transcontinental appropriation, and of the role of the medium and the media in contemporary art. At stake are the specific forms of a geographic and temporal expansion and transformation of Western modernism and its privileged notion of the medium.

In this lecture, I want to focus on the respective Eigensinn, the obstinacy of these shadow-plays which nevertheless share certain dimensions that facilitate a comparison: both Malani and Kentridge belong to a generation whose experience is shaped by colonialism and de-colonization. Their works circle around

the long-term after-effects of historical trauma, partition and apartheid, always in aesthetically complex forms rather than in documentary or agit-prop style. Both artists studied in Paris, but neither was taken with the then dominant artistic trends of the 1960s and 1970s (Pop, minimal, concept)¹. As opposed to many other global artists, they are not permanently displaced to a Western metropolis. Malani comes from a secular Sikh family from Karachi, forced to flee to India in the chaos of partition. Kentridge comes from a family of Jewish refugees from Lithuania which settled in South Africa several generations ago. Migration and exile is in both their backgrounds. Both came to be known in biennales and international exhibitions during the 1990s: Kassel, Johannesburg, Istanbul. Both have worked in the theater mobilizing theatrical spectacularity, narration, and figuration to captivate their viewers. Both use literary models of modernism. Alfred Jarry is for Kentridge what Heiner Müller is for Malani: models to be umfunktioniert in South African or Indian contexts. European avant-gardist art and literature is present in their work as montage, bricolage, free appropriation, but never as canonical ideal or as nostalgic set-piece. In their privileging of a leftist avant-gardism, neither Kentridge nor Malani suffer from Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence".

The avant-gardist moment of their work, however, is neither captured with the category of shock nor does it aim at some utopia of a sublation of art into life; the claim to aesthetic autonomy is not abandoned, but the traditional static and unitary notion of autonomy is medially fractured and fraying (verfranst). Central to both artists is the issue of medially transmitted perception of a hidden after-life of past violence that keeps erupting time and again in India as in South Africa. It is important to note that both artists utilize the shadow-ness of the shadow-play to stage the unreliability of memory without, however, lapsing into relativism. They interweave avant-gardist montage with their respective local traditions of popular culture: reverse painting and 19th-century Kalighat figuration in Malani; charcoal drawing, etching and expressive renderings of everyday scenes in Kentridge². And both artists combine these very traditional modes of representation with obsolete support technologies: stop animation film in Kentridge (he himself speaks ironically of stone-age animation), slide projection and simple motor functions that rotate Malani's Mylar cylinders. All their projects are unabashedly figurative and narrative, post-modern on one hand, but always with an umbilical cord to classic modernist experiments with mediality.

The list of affinities could be continued. In what follows, I will focus on two shadow-plays, Kentridge's *Shadow Procession* of 1999 and Malani's *In Search of Vanished Blood* of 2012.

Let me begin by showing the first part of Kentridge's short film.[clip] He himself called *Shadow Procession* a kind of residue of his theater work on *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1996-97)³. In the play the film's three parts functioned as supplement to the stage action. And yet, the seven minute long tripartite film can be read as a work in its own right, and as such it has become known in art galleries and museums.

In a lecture of 2001 entitled "In Praise of Shadows," Kentridge argued against Plato's cave parable that shadows have a pedagogic epistemological value. Rather than confronting us with naked and

¹ Cf. Kentridge in his interview with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, J.M. Coetzee, *William Kentridge*, London, Phaidon, 1999.

² Siehe William Kentridge, "Ubu and the Procession," in Mark Rosenthal, ed., *William Kentridge: Five Themes*, cat. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Yale University Press (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 131.

³ Zur Bedeutung der Kohlezeichnungen von Mslaba Dumile Geelboi Mgxaji Feni, des "Goya der Townships," für Kentridge vgl. Kate McCrickard, *William Kentridge* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012) 7.

transparent truth, they stimulate the visual imagination to fill in the gaps of that which is not or only barely visible, a process that can lead to insecurity and productive ambiguity. In that way they teach us to negotiate the blind spots of vision and knowledge. Shadows promote sensuous, that is aesthetic, reflection on the practices of seeing and the inescapable dialectic of light and shadow. I quote from Kentridge's recent Harvard Norton lectures: "It's in the very limitation and leanness of shadows that we learn. In the gaps, in the leaps we have to make to complete an image, and in this we perform the generative act of constructing an image [...] Recognizing in this activity our agency in seeing, our agency in apprehending the world⁴." The production of images through shadow art is described here as a dialogic process that activates the spectator toward an always worldly understanding.

The figures of the *Shadow Procession* hover in a realm of undecidability. We know neither where they come from nor where they are going. Processions and marches always have a goal: the realm of the sacred or its secular equivalent such as the progress of society, the protest against injustice, or the migrant's search for a new home. After a century of murderous utopias and colonialisms, thus Kentridge, it is just not possible to name a goal or telos of the procession. And thus the procession simply peters out and breaks off at the end. It is never made entirely clear whether its purpose is mourning, supplication, flight or protest. The parts of the film simply differ too much from each other. The music underlying the first part is elegiac, hymnical, and repetitive. The falsetto voice and the melancholy refrain played on the accordion by Alfred Makgalemele, a Johannesburg street musician, are mournful and plaintive. But being based on the melody of the religious hymn "What a friend we have in Jesus", they also contain a moment of hope. Both the music and the images point toward apartheid whose collapse has set in motion a migration, a march into an unknown and insecure future. Or could these be the shadows of those who did not survive apartheid—a kind of ghostly death march toward the beyond? A miner hanging from a gallows suggests something like that. Two other figures carry a corpse. Yet others move on prostheses—perhaps resulting from injuries suffered in the war with Angola? The ending of the first segment then shows a group of bent over figures who carry a whole city on their backs—no doubt the black workers who built Johannesburg for their colonial masters. And then there are the miners who mined the gold around Johannesburg that provided the basis for the wealth and rule of the white colonizers.

The second part of *Shadow Procession* is a kind of intermezzo that provides a transition to a very differently structured procession in the third part. [clip part II] We see Alfred Jarry's grotesque Ubu figure with his typical pointed headgear, dressed in a loose black cape, huge tummy and with gigantic shovel-like hands. In front of a lit screen reminiscent of early cinema, Ubu climbs up to the stage from below. Moving in a lumbering way to the rhythm of drums, Jarry's grotesque scatological dictator cracks a whip as a non-audible laughter rocks his heavy body: Ubu as slaveholder and colonizer. Explosions and screams fill the soundtrack at the beginning of this sequence. But seeing and hearing are not in sync. We hear the cracking of the whip, but we don't see it. We see the laughter, but don't hear it. The elegiac melancholy effect of the slowly moving burdened figures of part one is turned into political satire and burlesque. No question here who is the target of the whip's lashes.

The third part returns to the procession. But now it is very different figures who cross the space before the screen that formed the backdrop for Ubu's pantomime. [clip part III]. This procession moves rather chaotically and is accompanied by inflaming toyi-toyi songs and slogans known from the rallies of the

⁴ Erste Norton Lecture, "Drawing Lesson 1: In Praise of Shadows," Harvard University, 20. März 2012.
<http://mahindrahumanities.fas.harvard.edu/content/william-kentridge-drawing-lesson-one-praise-shadows>

anti-apartheid movement of the 1990s. Objects such as a scissors, a compass, a stamp, a megaphone are anthropomorphized, taking their place in the procession which comes across rather as a revolt of objects—yet another homage to the cinema of attractions. A woman in a headscarf and with a wandering staff suddenly turns around and attacks a lady of upper crust who appears as an Italian espresso pot with a tiltable lid. A live cat, stretching itself as if awakening from sleep, covers the whole screen and a gigantic eye gazing in horror is suddenly interspersed in the procession, reminding us of Buñuel's *Chien andalou*. Surreal, anarchic violence threatens the orderly progress of the procession. The earlier melancholy shadow procession has become a surreal and chaotic *danse macabre*. It shows us other actors, white actors and their objects, which of course also appear as black shadows. But then it suddenly breaks off. Perhaps this third part with its spasmodically twitching cat performing an aggressive dance on its hind legs points already toward the social chaos and the conflicts of the post-apartheid period. But nothing here suggests transition to democracy or equality of white and black.

The silhouetted figures of the filmic animation are inspired by the puppet theater,[specifically the puppets of Adrian Kohler with whose Handspring Puppet Company Kentridge created the Ubu production.] In Kentridge, of course, we do not have puppets, but two-dimensional flat figures, coarsely and schematically collaged out of scraps of thick black paper. Rivets and wire join their limbs and make them movable shot by shot. Once projected as film they feature those abrupt choppy movements we know from early cinema. These flat monochrome black figures first appear before a grey blurry background, but then in the third part in front of a brightly lit screen, both times accompanied by emotionally loaded music. The materiality of bodies and things as well as their texture is eliminated. We don't always know exactly what we see, but that is precisely what fascinates the spectator who tries to comprehend this being on the road of people and things. It is this process of seeing and understanding in which Kentridge wants to engage the spectator. It is a training in insecurity and ambiguity, leading to doubt in the transparency of seeing and the seen. This process is aesthetically staged in the three parts of *Shadow Procession*, as well as in the way in which memory is materialized in the by now well-known series of filmic animations entitled *9 Drawings for Projection* about which I now want to speak briefly before turning to Nalini Malani.

But first a comment on the politics of visual ambiguity. The instability of vision and the play with shadows does not mean that Kentridge would have espoused an ambiguous position vis-à-vis apartheid or its after-life. In his early years he participated in anti-apartheid protests and designed posters for a political theater in Joburg. His theater work culminated in the 1990s with a sharp critique of the TRC in the production of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. The *Drawings for Projection*, with their key narrative figures of the entrepreneur Soho Eckstein and the intellectual dreamer Felix Teitelbaum, demonstrate clearly enough that he tried to sidestep the binary opposition of perpetrators and victims that dominated the hearings of the TRC. Instead Kentridge focuses on fellow-traveling, beneficiaries, and personal responsibility for colonialism and apartheid. A process of memory as recognition is set in motion which resists the all too common evasions and forgetfulness.

In a 1999 interview, curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev asked Kentridge—provocatively or naively—about the implications of his 'moral relativism.' Kentridge's answer couldn't be any clearer:

I don't think it's relativism. To say that one needs art, or politics, that incorporate ambiguity and contradiction is not to say that one then stops recognizing and condemning things as evil. However, it might stop one being so utterly convinced of the certainty of one's own solutions⁵.

In the *Drawings for Projection*, a charcoal drawing is photographed, minimally changed, photographed again, and so on and on. Drawing by drawing, scene by scene a film of moving images emerges from this stop animation technique. Remembering and forgetting are constitutive for Kentridge's practice of charcoal drawing which anchors all his animations. While the shadows we see in *Shadow Procession* are based on paper cut-outs, mounted one behind the other and manipulated between shots, the shadow structure of the *Drawings for Projection* is of a very different nature. Here the shadow is the preserved trace of the erasure, a stain or a barely visible outline of bodies, buildings, objects which point to the respectively preceding version of the drawing. The medium of drawing becomes palimpsest in the drawings themselves and then again in their cinematic motion. Continuous metamorphosis of things, faces, landscapes is the guiding principle in the progression of drawing. Erasure, effacement, wiping out turn into the material manifestations of the very structure of memory. What remains in the movement of time is the trace. Erasure and effacement become a metaphor for the instability of historical memory. The *Drawings* thus offer not only self-reflection of the fascinating bricolage of charcoal drawing and animation. In their specific form they reflect the structure of political memory itself which is always subject to erasure, effacement, evasion, and forgetting. The metamorphosis of that which is remembered corresponds to the metamorphoses in the creation of the charcoal drawings. Synchronic images emerge which, as palimpsests in motion, carry their own diachronic negation along with them. The commonplace binary of memory vs forgetting as an either/or is belied by the preservation of traces of the past as shadows, stains, mnemonic outline in the present all the way to the traces of charcoal dust visible on paper and in the film. The past remains materially present, even if only hinted at in trace elements, in shadow-like residues. Different shapes of forgetting are inescapably part of memory. To remember means to read traces, it demands imagination, attentiveness of the gaze, construction. This becomes especially palpable in the ways in which Kentridge treats the Johannesburg landscape, a landscape that, in its industrial depravation and stony fallow flatness seems rather a negation of landscape in any emphatic sense, most certainly a negation of traditional landscape painting which in the South African context was always invested in lush phantasies about Africa.

In Kentridge's work, landscape becomes a space of visible and invisible social conflicts, a place of exploitation, manslaughter, and murder. Kentridge draws an industrial landscape with telegraph poles, electrical pylons, sinkholes and gigantic mine heaps. The surface of this landscape is molded by the work in the veins of gold underneath, the exploitation and oppression of the black miners. The film *Mine* shows the depth dimension and exploitative structure of this landscape; *Felix in Exile* deals with manifestations on the surface. [[Central figure in *Mine* is Soho Eckstein as real estate mogul and mine owner. He gains access to the brutal reality of mine labor only through the surreal metamorphosis of his cafetière into a power drill. The cafetière as drill imaginatively translates the relation of capital to labor. From Soho's table it drills downward penetrating the surface of the earth all the way down to the subterranean shafts and tunnels of the mine, to the worker's shower-room and sleeping stalls which resonate with photographs from Dachau and Buchenwald. In the end, however, it is only profit and the bottom line that Soho Eckstein is interested in, and the film ends with the appearance of a toy-size

⁵ Interview mit Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in Dan Cameron, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, J.M. Coetzee, *William Kentridge* (London: Phaidon, 1999) 34.

rhinoceros on Soho's bed, a pet, as it were, which gives African identity to the white entrepreneur. Indeed, it is the colonial history of the Johannesburg landscape that Kentridge compresses into his image animation. By comparison with *Mine, Felix in Exile* seems more conciliatory. Here, too,]]

Landscape as history is a main theme. A female black landsurveyor with her theodolyte points to the time after apartheid, when the land is surveyed anew by its original inhabitants. At the same time, the past intrudes as she sees the land littered with slain bodies which are then metaphorically and literally 'covered' by newspapers, melting into the landscape and becoming invisible. Here Kentridge used documentary press photos of the Sharpeville massacre (1960) as basis for his drawings. In a surreal mimetic mirror scene, Felix, the artist-intellectual, stands eye to eye with this black land surveyor who is shot in the end, with her body metamorphizing into a sinkhole in the landscape. The film ends with a naked Felix standing in that sinkhole, helpless and at a loss, before this film too breaks off. Kentridge's words remind me of one of the first scenes in Lanzmann's *Shoah* where Simon Srebnik, survivor of the mass killings at Chelmno, returns to the killing fields. Kentridge says:

I'm really interested in the terrain's hiding of its own history, and the correspondence this has [...] with the way memory works. The difficulty we have in holding on to passions, impressions, ways of seeing things, the way that things that seem so indelibly imprinted on our memories still fade and become elusive, is mirrored in the way in which the terrain itself cannot hold on to the events played out upon it⁶.

Even landscape, a cipher of invariability and consistency, cannot hold on to the past and provide witness. Felix remembers the violence done, but he is the intellectual outsider who does not convert his memory into political agency. One may well read this as a comment on the problem facing the artist William Kentridge himself.

Malani's video/Shadowplays are radically different from those of Kentridge. The movement of images is created with very different, mainly non-cinematic technical means. Luxurious coloring clashes with the black and white of the projected shadows while in Kentridge's animations there is at best the blue of water, a minimal utopian moment in the stony Johannesburg landscape. Regional and popular traditions of the great Indian epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are foregrounded in Malani much more than appropriations of indigenous black African art in Kentridge. Malani deploys the narrative potential of Greek and Indian mythology, while Kentridge invents prototypical contemporary figures, the entrepreneurial mogul Soho Eckstein and the artist intellectual Felix Teitelbaum. The gender difference of these invoked figures is immediately visible: men in Kentridge, women like Medea, Sita, Cassandra in Malani. Malani's image narrations proceed in repetitive loops, while Kentridge's *Shadow Procession* breaks off inconclusively and *Felix in Exile* gets stuck in no-man's land. Malani herself speaks or sings (often digitally distorted) on the soundtrack of her works. Kentridge's films use music composed by his close cooperator Philip Miller or standard tunes from classical or popular archives. Kentridge's animations work with the black box which creates a fixed observer position. Malani's mylar cylinder installations permit the observer to move freely in a space of multiple projections and objects and to try out different perspectives, even to become part of the shadow-play itself. Despite all these differences, their projects can be compared since both stage the problematic of memory and forgetting of political trauma with subtle aesthetic means that aim at a deeply textured understanding of the present in the past and the past in the present.

⁶ William Kentridge, "Felix in Exile: Geography of Memory," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, William Kentridge (Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux Arts de Bruxelles, 1998) 96.

Ever since 1991, Malani's work in a variety of media has focused on issues of political religious violence in India. Key here has been the violence toward women during the partition of 1947, a violence repeated in the murderous pogroms of Hindus on Muslims in 1992 and 2002 in Gujarat. Unreflected and mostly repressed political memory of the events of 1947 is mobilized by Malani in order to shed light on the nationalist ideology and religious fanaticism of the BJP Party, an ideology that articulates itself, as it were, over her dead body, the body of women. Malani's goal is not to generate melancholy memory about past injustice; she is rather concerned with repetitive cycles of violence in the present. Her central question is this: how can human pain and social suffering, past and present, be rendered visually in such a way that its representation nurtures and illuminates life, rather than indulging in aesthetic stylization, voyeuristic titillation, or succumbing to fatalism in the face of mythic cycles of violence? How can art contribute to blocking the repetition compulsions of gendered violence? Her video/shadow-plays draw on an expansive lexicon of Asian and European figures and images, developed in her earlier oil and watercolor painting, her drawings, video installations and theater projects. Mythic figures from the great Indian epics appear in the style of popular Kalighat painting of the 19th century; Greek mythology is represented by figures like Medea and Cassandra whose fate is set in relation to women figures in Indian myth like Draupadi or Sita. Recent literary texts such as Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*, Heiner Müller's *Medeamaterial*, or Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories* mediate the mythic material for and in the political present.

Malani's political commitment is more up front and on the surface than that of Kentridge. And yet, Malani's works are not to be read simply in terms of their message. I'm not even sure whether her work is politically more effective than Kentridge's, especially since at a time of an anti-feminist backlash Malani's coolly understated feminist anger may seem obsolete to many. But even skeptics can hardly avoid the lure and fascination these shadow-plays provoke. Anyway, an attempt to read her anti-phallic engagement only in the context of local Indian conditions would founder on Malani's transnational claims. In her work, Western feminism comes back boomerang like from the 'periphery' to metropolitan Europe and America. Not for a minute do I doubt the legitimacy of Malani's feminist claims. The question is: how is this engagement rendered aesthetically, translated into form?

To answer that question, let me now focus on the video/shadow-play Malani created for this year's Documenta 13. It is entitled "In Search of Vanished Blood" after a poem by Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, a poem that conjures up the excess of violence that accompanied the partition of Bangladesh from Pakistan. [clip 4 minutes]

Installed in the lowest room in the deep reaches of the Dokumentahalle this all-around image Malani calls a 'video-frieze' consists of five Mylar cylinders hanging from the ceiling and turning slowly in the manner of prayer wheels. In the technique of reverse painting, the cylinders are covered with colorful mythic figures, animals, and objects floating disconnectedly in space. Shadow effects on the walls of this high-ceiling gallery hall result from the light projection of other painted, drawn, or simply reproduced images which six projectors cast through the Mylar cylinders onto the respective opposing wall. These projected images, some of them themselves in motion, are superimposed palimpsest-like by the shadows cast from the figures painted onto the turning cylinders. The projections consist of drawings, some of them set in motion, as in Kentridge, by a stop animation technique; of filmed faces; photos of office towers; comic-like drawn figures and scenes; reproductions of Muybridge's famous running dogs and so forth.

The superimposition of cyclical shadow effects and the moving projections make it difficult to read and establish meaning of images and scenes. Mythic material casts shadows on image montages that

concern problems in the present: mutilations by landmines, executions, oppression of women etc. In an interview this past spring Malani commented on her new project:

Darkness is more potent than light. It just needs a shadow and you can obliterate light. [...] If you take that further with ideas: how quickly something that has to do with enlightenment or revelation can be completely destroyed, and very quickly by the 'shadow of doubt' or a moment of skepticism. I think that that's one aspect of the shadow. Because a shadow is very strong, it has no materiality and yet it's so strong⁷.

Even if shadow threatens and dissolves the light of enlightenment, there also is that other enabling aspect: it is only shadow that makes us aware of what stand in the way of enlightenment. As in Kentridge, light can only be understood by detour through the shadows. In a key projection, we see the head of a young woman, wrapped completely by a white bandage onto which the beginning lines of the title poem are projected. In repetitive loops the shadow of a vile mythical creature passes over this bandaged head. The creature, an invention of Malani, holds two captured human bodies in its cancer like fangs/pincers and gulps down a naked child into its beak like maw. The motif of the destructive monster must be linked to other images of the shadow-play: a Cassandra figure foretelling doom; the matriarchal goddess Kali painted on the cylinder in Kalighat style together with two regionally dressed female figures, etc. As always, the unifying theme is violence. That much can be intuited, but only as one considers the soundtrack with its literary citations does it become evident that Malani's cyclical narrative aims at resistance and revolt.

Just as other earlier shadow-plays by the artist, *In Search of Vanished Blood* superimposes different times and multiple spaces: the space of Indian and Greek mythology, the time of partition and its repetitive violent after-effects, the time of global capital and its destructive effects in the agrarian Indian hinterland. The multiplicity of this montage is not formally united by some defined spatial perspective. It is obvious that the monstrous creature represents an ultimate threat as drops of blood drip onto the face of a young woman [not in the clip] or when that tightly bandaged head appears, as it were, a perversion of the veil. The poem by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, projected onto the bandaged head as if onto an empty page makes it clear that it is not only partition that is at stake:

There is no sign of blood, not anywhere.
I've searched everywhere.
The executioner's hands are clean, his nails transparent.
The sleeves of each assassin are spotless.
No sign of blood: no trace of red,
not on the edge of the knife, none on the point of the sword.
The ground is without stains, the ceiling white.

Literary historians will tell us that the poem was written as a reflection on disappearances in Kashmir and the violent excesses of the secession of East Pakistan which led to the foundation of Bangladesh in 1971. The monster, however, says Malani, must be read as an allegory of the land grabbing multinational corporations in cahoots with the Indian elite who drive the indigenous rural poor in West Bengal and other areas from their land in order to mine bauxite. Resistance against these expropriations from above is organized and led by the Naxals, the so-called tribals, who have resorted to arms. Here

⁷ Daniel Kuraković and Linda Jensen, "Quarries of Blindness and Shadows of Hope: A Conversation with Nalini Malani," *Torrent* (Summer 2012): 6-28.

again Malani draws on a mythical literary figure from the *Mahabharata*, rewritten and modernized in Mahasweta Devi's *Breast Stories*, to represent resistance: Draupadi, Dopdi in Naxal dialect, the story of a woman who refuses to abandon her land and is gang raped by the police. In a stop animation drawing, projected through the cylinder with the corporate monster, we see the metamorphoses of a young woman in a sari holding a baby into a uniformed resistance fighter holding a rifle. Both drawings reproduce newspaper photographs from the Naxal milieu. The soundtrack then transforms the Draupadi figure into a Cassandra in revolt:

This is Cassandra speaking./In the heart of darkness./Under the sun of torture./To the capitals of the world./In the name of the victims./I eject all the sperm I have received./I turn the milk of my breasts into poison./I take back the world I gave birth to./I bury it in my womb./Down with the happiness of submission./Long live hate rebellion and death.

This of course not Christa Wolf's Cassandra, but the text spoken by Electra at the conclusion of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine*: radical revolt against a male dominated world. Cassandra-Draupadi stands for the armed resistance of the tribals defending their land, who are officially denounced as terrorists.

Of course one must ask what kind of spectator is required to decipher all these subtle and complex references without commentary. Maybe it requires the still rare globally conversant spectator familiar with both the Indian and the European sources and able to unlock their present-day transformations. Clearly, Malani does not simply bank on creating experiential fascination overwhelming the spectator with theatrical sensuous effects. Her multi-layered montaged narrative—and there is indeed a narrative here—requires attentive reading, reflection, and translation. It is not easy to enter into this palimpsest of shadow figures and projections that mix European and Indian, ancient and modern, art historical and in-your-face political motives in their aesthetic construction. The knowledge of Wolf's *Cassandra* and Müller's *Hamletmaschine*, whose bound and bandaged Ophelia is itself referenced in Malani's bandaged head, is of course not enough to understand the specific Indian dimensions, but it provides an entry for the Western spectator who is challenged to develop a transcontinental hermeneutic to distill aesthetic and cognitive experience from the fascination by colorful images and shadowy palimpsests. Translation is demanded, even if there are always moments that appear untranslatable. Malani's moving image worlds want to be read slowly in multiple viewings of this looped 11-minute long video shadow play. Ultimately the reader may then get lost again in the aesthetic charm of circling images, but now with a deeper knowledge of an installation that, in its structure of repetitive loops, may point to the simultaneous futility and unavoidability of ongoing political memory work.

What conclusions can be drawn from the preceding comparison? Without overrating my two examples, I might suggest the following: in negotiation with and a simultaneous distancing from classical modernism there emerges an alternative art praxis that may strike us as avant-gardist in its self-conscious coupling of aesthetics and politics. But it is an avant-gardism quite different from that of the historical avant-garde. Avant-gardism not as a model of progress or utopia dependent on the experience of shock or on the most advanced, cutting-edge state of the artistic material or on the disavowal of realism; avant-gardism rather as a challenge to think politically through spectacular sensuous installations that create affect both on the local and the global stage. Avant-gardism not as programmatic destruction of traditional notions of autonomy and the work, but as insistence on the *Eigensinn*, the obstinacy of aesthetic work and with that the reinscription of a boundary between art and all that is part of a presentist culture of quick consumption and careless forgetting. In Kentridge and Malani's work, the remembrance of historical trauma and contemporary politics are aesthetically mediated in such a way that depth structures of domination and social conflict in our world are illuminated for the spectator. In

this sense, their work is political through and through. Their use of traditional, even obsolete techniques of representation marks a turn against a presentist technological triumphalism that privileges only the digital. It is no longer a philosophy of history that anchors this kind of avant-gardism, but on the contrary a sustained doubt in merely technological progress combined with a political critique of a failing present that has not redeemed the promises of modernity. And in this way—and here comes a final twist in the argument—this avant-gardism from the periphery can itself be called quite traditional since it transforms the critique of modernity, which was always already part of European avant-gardism itself, for a postcolonial globalizing world.