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**‘Anything is Possible’: Rethinking the Politics of Transition through a Poetics of Failure in the Works of William Kentridge and Dmitry Gutov**  
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# **‘Anything is Possible’**

## **Rethinking the Politics of Transition through a Poetics of Failure in the Works of William Kentridge and Dmitry Gutov**

**Ksenia Robbe**

*(Im)possible transitions*

The metaphor of transition has produced one of the most powerful images that captured the global historical momentum of the late twentieth century – the final success of the struggles against the corrupt socialist regimes that occurred in a peaceful manner and at a breath-taking speed. Perceived at the time as continuing the 1960s wave of decolonisation, the political transitions of the late 1980s – early 1990s that inaugurated the end of the Cold War were imbued with endless hopes for freedom and societal transformation, far beyond the claims of a global triumph of capitalism. Quite soon after the political shifts, however, the narratives of transition started to reveal their hegemonic side, serving as political vehicles for establishing the dominance of neoliberal economy and culture on global peripheries (in the European and Asian East as well as African and Latin American South). Where the replication of models of democracy or establishment of socio-cultural relations did not succeed as theories of political transition would prescribe, global media started to refer to the processes of transformation as corrupted or failed. Even though transitology-based approaches have been criticised ever since, the metaphor’s impact on our imaginary has been so strong that we still seem to live in the shadow of transition or, perhaps even more, of its incipient failures.

On the global scene, countries that embarked on the process of democratisation are increasingly presented, within the described narratives, as wandering off the course, relapsing or even returning to a pre-transformation stage – think of the ways in which authoritarianism in

Russia or, more recently, anti-European tendencies in Greece are framed by the media. This inquiry into the ways of contesting narratives of transition that divide societies into success stories and stories of failure aims to address the *idea of erring* which these narratives imply. In his critical scrutiny of the narratives of ‘failed states’ – which emerged at exactly the same historical moment as the narratives of transition, the early 1990s – Peter Hitchcock observes that the idea of failure is constitutive of the very regime that institutes nation-state as the point of reference.<sup>1</sup> Thus, among the countries that signed the Peace of Westphalia (the document which ratified the idea of state sovereignty and hence the idea of state failure, and which has remained the model of polity in Europe until now) some enjoyed more rights in spite of declarations of equality.<sup>2</sup> Re-inscribing the failure into the core of the normative model itself, we can observe that within this logic some states inevitably must fail (or be declared failed) so that the irregularities within the centre would not be discovered. But while the failure is being displaced onto the postcolonial peripheries, or what Hitchcock calls ‘a constitutive non-space in the organic composition of capital’<sup>3</sup>, these can become spaces of creativity, as he shows focusing on the strategies of survival in Somalia during the 1990s. Reflecting on the ‘*sur-vivre* of Somalis’<sup>4</sup>, he evokes Derrida’s idea of living on, a state related to living by way of *différance* – an almost impossible state that ‘affirms a sort of triumph of life at the edge of death’<sup>5</sup>. These theorisations of failure that discover unexpected possibilities within what is seen as impossible appear to be particularly revealing when one engages local strategies of dealing with discourses of transitions and failed expectations as I shall do in reading selected works by two artists – South African, William Kentridge, and Russian, Dmitry Gutov.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hitchcock, ‘The Failed State and the State of Failure’, *Mediations*, vol 23, no 2, Spring 2008, pp 70-87

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp 73-74

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 73

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 83

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On’, James Hulbert, trans, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, A Continuum Book, Seabury Press, New York, 1979, p 95

Gutov and Kentridge are internationally renowned visual artists<sup>6</sup> whose work is taken to represent the trajectories of change in their respective countries. Indeed, their works most evidently reflect the major socio-political cataclysms their countries have been undergoing in the past decades. At the same time, both artists have stressed that their engagement with politics does not result in any direct forms of political art; rather they envision the role of their works as being in dialogue with their times – as critical responses to societal processes, they operate in the realm of artistic expression and aim at change precisely as art forms.<sup>7</sup> Both began their careers during the 1980s, on the wave of socio-political turmoil and change, and since then their work has consistently engaged with the problems of the transitions. While being preoccupied with the local dynamics, however, they place their reflections in a global context of power relations: thus, approaching transformations in the post-Cold War world they reflect on epistemologies of modernity, and particularly the ways in which revolutionary ideas unfolded during the twentieth century. Both Kentridge and Gutov embed their productions in artistic research, drawing on a wide range of discourses and practices in (art) history and philosophy. They work with a variety of forms and media including installations, videos, films, prints, drawings, etchings and metal works; Kentridge has also directed several multimedia theatre productions and operas. This reading will concentrate on the artists' more recent works that engage with the failures of transformation since the 1990s, placing their concerns within transnational contexts and the *longue durée* of history.

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<sup>6</sup> Both have participated in major international biennials over the past twenty years and their works have been exhibited in many of the internationally-acclaimed museums world-wide.

<sup>7</sup> In a much-quoted interview, Kentridge described his approach as 'an art of ambiguity': 'I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings are certainly spawned by and feed off the brutalized society left in its wake. I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain things. An art (and a politics) in which my optimism is kept in check and my nihilism at bay.' (Pamela Ferris and Janet Moore, *Art from South Africa*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, Thames & Hudson, Oxford, 1990, p 52) Gutov uses very similar terms to speak about the political in his work: '... in principle, all works I'm going to show you do not have any direct political connotations or allusions – it is totally alien to my thoughts, I think that art inhabits a very different sphere, but the reality behind the window which in one way or another storms into our life somehow acts upon the works or rather on their rhythm.' (Dmitry Gutov, 'Open lecture "Turmoil: Искусство на фоне исторических катаклизмов" [Turmoil: Art against the Background of Historical Cataclysms]', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmnhVwOavh4>, 7:00 – 7:50, last accessed 7 August 2016, my translation)

Kentridge's work has been well-known for its critical tackling of the processes of transition in South Africa and the culture of remembering the past of apartheid and colonialism these processes have unleashed.<sup>8</sup> In his pertinent examination of the representations of procession in Kentridge's *Drawings for Projection* (a series of experimental films from the 1990s), Michael Rothberg argues that they employ visual narrative techniques which challenge ideas of historical progress typical of transition narratives, substituting them with notions of processuality. In concluding, however, he remarks that

...Kentridge's narrative of transition is not simply the opposite of the conventional liberal narrative. Indeed, his work banishes neither the importance of individual responsibility nor the hope for progress (something that is also visible in his recent engagement with the utopian energies of the Soviet avant garde, as in his Metropolitan Opera production of *The Nose*).<sup>9</sup>

This observation serves as a departure point for my reading of Kentridge's installation, *I'm not Me, The Horse is not Mine* (2008), accompanying his production of *The Nose*. How are ideas of time and memory in these recent works related to the artist's earlier reflections on the transition produced in the midst of that process? As discourses of failure (of democratic procedures, social equality and decolonisation) are proliferating in South Africa, particularly in the last few years, Kentridge's work seems to focus on remembering earlier, globally significant projects of transformation, that were hinged on desires for progress.

Gutov's works are equally critical of the expansion of neoliberalism in post-Soviet Russia along with the culture of forgetting resistances to the official ideologies or only ironic remembering of the past as demonstrated in postmodernist discourse. Like Kentridge, he engages these problems using a range of forms and techniques that metaphorically point at alternatives. In

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<sup>8</sup> Most prominently in his production of the theatre play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997) using original testimony of witnesses along with the themes and imagery from Alfred Jarry's absurdist play *Ubu Roi* (1896), he engaged with ethical, political and epistemological aspects of the public culture developed around the Commission's work. This involved the problems of complicity of white South Africans in the everyday workings of apartheid; the questions of how the oppressed can be heard within a Eurocentric framework of a semi-legal procedure turning into a mediated event; and the claims to knowledge and truth in this ethically charged context.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Rothberg, 'Progress, Progression, Procession: William Kentridge and the Narratology of Transitional Justice', *Narrative*, vol 20, no 1, January 2012, p 19

his consistent critique of modernist ideas of progress, Gutov draws on materials and metaphors from particular periods in the past – from the Soviet and international design of the 1960s to nineteenth-century realism, from old Russian icon-painting to Renaissance art and Japanese calligraphy. Behind this commitment to the outdated and unfashionable is Gutov's resistance to modern race for newness and his belief that discarded objects from the past may contain reinvigorating ideas for the present. In this conviction, he relies on the legacy of Mikhail Lifshitz, a forgotten Soviet theoretician whose philosophy of art represents a unique trend within Marxist thought: his critique of modernism uncovers the connections of avant-garde art to totalitarian tendencies and thus undermines any iconoclastic efforts. Thus, Gutov's projects that aim to apply and develop this philosophy present a case of Marxism without a teleology of progress.

My reading of Gutov's video, *Thaw* (2006), in dialogue with Kentridge's installation, will examine the two artists' current engagements with the narratives of transition that have seen a shift from enthusiasm and hope towards diagnoses of failure. In these examples, remembrance of the transitions is contingent on the cultural memory of other transitional periods, particularly the 1920s and 1960s. Along with many differences in the artists' philosophical approaches and aesthetic choices, there clearly appears a common point: their works embark on remembering the desire for creating a different culture that characterised recent and earlier revolutionary periods; this desire, however, appears as juxtaposed with their critique of progressivist narratives. In other words, mourning the failure of transgressing the authoritarian past (as both authors were active opponents of the apartheid and Soviet regimes) in these works is compounded by the realisation that failure lies at the heart of all emancipatory projects and is faced with a critique of conventional logic of failure (as outlined by Hitchcock). In spite of this critique, a type of cultural revolution – of transforming social consciousness and practices – remains an aspired

horizon for both authors. Using Gayatri Spivak's famous phrase, their performances of transition stage a 'persistent critique of what we cannot not want'<sup>10</sup>.

To unravel this aporetic complex of ideas concerning the (im)possibilities of transition and transformation this reading will inquire into the artists' representations of failure. Such inquiry is ifacilitated by the fact that both artists draw on the aesthetic and philosophy of the absurd which involve failure as a central category. In the works of Beckett and Camus, failure of representation or the absurdity of the world are openly confronted and become a foundation of performance. Drawing on these perspectives, I will focus on failure in the works of Gutov and Kentridge as a performative practice that denotes unsuccessful realisation of a project *and* addresses this infelicity, treating it as part of a larger social condition. It inquires into the experiences of this condition, its histories and consequences, trying to imagine what alternatives an exploration of failure could open. My examination suggests that problems of failure are not only a theme, but also an epistemological issue that underlies much of the artists' production; hence I speak of a *poetics of failure* – a term which Sara Jane Bailes, using it in her study of contemporary performance theatre, defines as “a practice where failure underlies the activity”<sup>11</sup>. Treating failure, along these lines, as a productive opportunity<sup>12</sup>, I approach artistic performances as a laboratory where what is perceived as political drawback can be confronted, rehearsed and reimagined. The reading that follows will explore the meanings yielded by the performative dwelling on the events of failure and using absurdist techniques in representing transition. This discussion will then be placed in the context of the artists' more programmatic works to explore how they contemplate ways out of the states of failure through their critiques of modernity and modernism. Finally, the article will reflect on the imaginative resources provided by art which can be used for teasing out alternative political meanings and effects, thus turning failure into a possibility.

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<sup>10</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London, 1999, p 100

<sup>11</sup> Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Politics of Failure*, Routledge, London, 2010, p xvi

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp 2-3

*Encountering the absurd: performance of failure and the affect of nostalgia*

Gutov's video, *Thaw*, features the protagonist, performed by the artist himself, attempting to walk through a sludge in a field touched by first signs of spring. The landscape is typical of Central Russia, ordinary and bleak, the field stretching monotonously to the horizon showing a thin forest. For the three minutes, the viewers are observing the protagonist's attempts to raise himself from the slush, each ending, with predictable inevitability, in him slipping and falling. The futility of his efforts, partly explainable by the hostility of the landscape, partly by his inability to resist, calls in mind the image of Sisyphus engaged in endless labour that never reaches its goal. Gutov himself has referred to this video, recapping the evolution in his work since the late 1980s, as reflecting a change from the optimism of perestroika to the depressive mood of the 2000s<sup>13</sup>. I read it also as symptomatic of critical intellectuals' remembering of the transition: nostalgic recollection of a sense of lightness and endlessly open future serves as a means of countering the sense of loss and the state of being paralysed in the wake of political reaction. The focus, as in this work, is on the state of perceived disablement and futility of action. And yet the protagonist keeps trying, and the video concentrates precisely on capturing his repeated effort; in spite of predictable failure, the action has to be performed, endlessly. We are faced with an aporetic situation: crossing the field (read as a metaphor of transitioning) is impossible due to the weather (political) conditions, but one has to carry on, in an almost absurd fashion.

In his theorisation of the absurd, Albert Camus describes this condition as emerging from a 'confrontation between the human need [for meaning-making] and the unreasonable silence of

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<sup>13</sup> Dmitry Gutov, 'Open lecture "Turmoil: Искусство на фоне исторических катаклизмов" [Turmoil: Art against the Background of Historical Cataclysms]', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmnhVwOavh4>, 7:50 – 8:00, last accessed 7 August 2016, my translation



the world’<sup>14</sup>. The drama involving these three characters – the irrational, the nostalgic and the absurd, born of their conflation – ‘must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable’<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the recognition of the absurd, bearing the traces of the two conflicting forces, eventually leads to abolishing the conventional logic of being, or at least revising its essential principles. Along these lines, the conflict between the impossibility of traversing the slushy terrain and the necessity of attempting to do so can be read as a confrontation between the unintelligibility of being and a longing for meaning. The absurd condition which this representation suggests can be interpreted as a call for reconsidering the conventional logic of failure precisely through involving failure as a creative principle.

In terms of revising the historical logic of transition narratives, the video’s title is suggestive. The ‘Thaw’ refers to the period of liberalisation between Stalin’s death in 1953 and the tightening of political control during the 1960s with the final closure marked by the suppression of the Prague spring. Bringing together the failed transitions of the 1950-60s and the 1980-90s, the video provides historical depth to the interpretation of contemporary situation; this perspective is reinforced by its reference to Fyodor Vasiliev’s eponymous painting, one of the prime examples of nineteenth century realism, which the chosen landscape intentionally reflects<sup>16</sup>. The endlessness of historical failing is alluded to by the unresponsiveness of nature which keeps repeating its cycles as different generations struggle to realise their dreams of transformation. Finally, according to art critic Victor Misiano, who described Gutov’s work as developing a ‘poetics of soil’, ‘the very motif of the thaw’ represents ‘a state of nature in transition, with its changeability and connecting of opposites’<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, the video represents a dialectic interaction between the material, non-negotiable authority of the earth that pulls the

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Vintage Books, New York, 1991, p 28

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> A photograph of the painting appears on the page describing the *Thaw* on Gutov’s official website: <http://gutov.ru/works/thaw/thaw.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Viktor Misiano, ‘*Thaw and the Poetics of Soil*’, 2014, [http://gutov.ru/works/thaw/ott\\_eng.html](http://gutov.ru/works/thaw/ott_eng.html), last accessed 6 August 2016

character down and the aspired state of zero gravity suggested by the attempts of raising oneself from the mire.

A dialogue between the two – the irrational givenness and nostalgic aspiration – taking place within the acting subject produces the absurd condition. This dialogue also involves the soundtrack to the video – a romance by Dmitry Shostakovich composed in 1965 (the time of the Thaw) using a fragment of a reader's letter published by the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil*: 'Even though that hooligan Fedulov beat me up, I didn't complain to the organs of our outstanding militia. I decided to confine myself to the beating I had already received.'<sup>18</sup> This strange text reveals connections to the protagonist's situation: like him, the author of the letter recognises the repressive character of the police/ the state and resigns himself to this condition. But the stoic resignation, as the video suggests, is not the only possible reaction to the failure of cultural transformation; the nostalgia for justice implied in the lyrics and the character's will to move forward indicate a degree of hope.

Much of Kentridge's work is indebted to the legacies of absurdism, but most explicitly these connections appear in his projects around Shostakovich's opera *The Nose* based on a short story by Nikolai Gogol. The story uses conventions of the absurd to talk about the excesses of social hierarchy in Russia of the 1840s – a critique that can easily be projected on twentieth-century authoritarian regimes such as the Soviet or apartheid. One morning, Major Kovaliov wakes up not being able to find his nose in its proper place; he walks around the city looking for the run-away, finally meeting it in a church and realising that it has become a higher-up government official. The installation features several short films devoted to the adventures of the Nose in the Soviet Russia of the 1920s. The central drama, however, unfolds within the episode presenting the trial of Nikolai Bukharin, one of the leaders of the October revolution who became a victim of Stalin's repressions.

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<sup>18</sup> Dmitry Gutov, *Thaw*, <http://gutov.ru/works/thaw/thaw.htm>

What strikes one in Kentridge's representation of the Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee is the absurdity of the entire dialogue. Each of Bukharin's replies, calling for his former comrades' sensibility and feelings, is met with laughter. This laughter, reflecting the paranoid character of a totalitarian regime which distorts one's consciousness like a false mirror, seems to become a weapon stronger than the actual accusations as it forces Bukharin into confession. He is first moved into speaking against his earlier writings which were proposing alternative economic theories (the installation's title, 'I'm not me, the horse is not mine', a Russian saying used to deny one's complicity, alludes to this process of disconnecting oneself from one's convictions). Later he is asking to be sent into exile where he would be useful for the party and society, thus not only assuming guilt but also completely submitting to the oppressive power. Yet, this loss of the self seems to be mirrored by the regime of power as Bukharin's last reply, 'It's very difficult for me to die', is mimicked by Stalin's sarcastic, 'And it's easy for us to go on living?'

In the middle of the conversation, Bukharin appeals to the committee, saying that in the atmosphere that has been created recently, 'no one believes in human impulses anymore', which is again met by laughter. On another screen, at the same time, we see scenes of the nose riding a horse and a quote from a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky who, unable to bear the burden of post-revolutionary censorship, committed suicide in 1930. The poem titled 'A Good Attitude to Horses' captures the incident of a horse falling down on the pavement, a crowd gathering around and laughing at it. The quote features the moment when the protagonist approaches and speaks to it:

Horse, you mustn't.

Horse, listen –

You think you are more worthless than they?

Ahh, my little one,

We're all part horse,

Each is horse in his own way.<sup>19</sup>

Thus both the scene of the trial and the lyrical encounter with the horse fuse representations of the irrational, revealing itself in the laughter that dehumanises the victim, and the nostalgic, evident in the longing for genuine confession and humanity. Within the absurd condition produced by this tension, laughter can also be interpreted as undermining normative ideas about political transition: instead of a purely rational approach that would read the change in terms of the slogans proposed by the ruling elite, we are moved to acknowledge that post-revolutionary situations produce all sorts of distortions and non-coincidences (such as the nose becoming a hero) and thus can be better understood in terms of the absurd.<sup>20</sup> Using his work on *The Nose* as an example, Kentridge himself has stressed the importance of using principles of absurdism to arrive at a deeper understanding of historical reality: 'The absurd with its rapture of rationality, of conventional ways of seeing the world is actually the productive [...] way of understanding the world.'<sup>21</sup>

The absurdity of Sisyphus' labour, in the discussed works, reveals the artists' engagement with conceptions of change and failure in the situations of post-transitional crisis. In spite of the seeming permanence of crisis, the persistence with which Gutov's protagonist carries on makes us believe that the idea inspiring him will not be forsaken even if it cannot be realised at present. A similar tension between trying to overcome an obstacle and repeated failing can be observed in the episode of Kentridge's film where the nose is climbing up the stairs of a podium (in the text

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<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'Good Attitude to Horses', P. Lemke, trans, in John Glad and Daniel Weissort, eds, *Russian Poetry: The Modern Period*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa, 1978, p 31

<sup>20</sup> A similar effect is suggested by Wolfgang Iser in his reading of the function of 'stifled laugh' in Beckett's theatre with respect to the viewers. Instead of releasing tension (as is the case in comedy), he argues, it indicates a deeper crisis by pointing at the 'failure of our emotive and cognitive faculties' (p 143) and continuously toppling down our concepts of reality (p 155). Wolfgang Iser, 'The Art of Failure: Stifled Laugh in Beckett's Theatre', *The Bucknell Review*, vol 26, no 1, January 1, 1981, pp 139-189

<sup>21</sup> William Kentridge, 'Anything is Possible', video, [http://web.avrotros.nl/closeup/player/AVRO\\_1499877/](http://web.avrotros.nl/closeup/player/AVRO_1499877/), accessed 5 August 2016

accompanying the etchings he refers to a podium designed for Lenin by El Lissitzky<sup>22</sup>) only to tumble down just before he reaches it. The figure of the nose falls into pieces, but every time they reassemble and he runs up again. This movement, like Kentridge's reference to Tatlin's model of the monument for the Third International that forever remained just a model and about which he also speaks as a living memory<sup>23</sup>, involves a nostalgia for ideals that were once inspiring action, even in the face of the impossibility of their realisation. I read this tension, in both works, as inspiring projects of transformation while developing a critique of straightforward political solutions suggested by the concept of transition.

### *Out-of-timeness and critiques of the (post)modern*

To understand the nuances of these critiques of art's direct involvement in big politics we should take a glance at the artists' engagements with the histories of modernity and modernism, and with conceptions of time inherited from these philosophical and artistic strands. The characters in the above-discussed works (the intellectual crossing the field and Bukharin) appear as obviously out of sync with the present: they fail to keep up with the modes dictated by the politics of the day. This out-of-timeness of the protagonists is consonant with the artists' generous use of 'outdated' techniques and materials (eg, Kentridge's hand-drawn films and Gutov's use of old metal constructions) as well as the inspiration they draw from the aesthetic projects of earlier periods (most importantly, 1920s for Kentridge and 1960s for Gutov). This employment of the old-fashioned goes far beyond postmodernist nostalgia that mythologises the

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<sup>22</sup> William Kentridge, 'His Majesty, Comrade Nose', *Nose: Thirty Etchings*, David Krut, Johannesburg, 2010. This note in the book of etchings, and also its title, captures the absurd logic behind revolutionary leaders' assertion to power: while being referred to as a 'comrade', the Nose, just like most of those who came to power on the wave of popular uprisings, imagine themselves as or are being imagined as new royalty. Thus, Kentridge writes, the photograph of Lenin giving speech on a balcony of the Bolshevik headquarters in Petrograd served as a model for El Lissitzky's design of a podium. The building where this headquarters was located had been a villa of the ballerina Matilda Kschessinskaya – a figure associated with the past regime. This confluence of the old and the new, the memorial and aspirational interpreted by the artist as a paradox of power in post-revolutionary times becomes the basis of his absurdist aesthetics.

<sup>23</sup> William Kentridge, 'Tatlin's Ghost', *Nose: Thirty Etchings*, David Krut, Johannesburg, 2010

past<sup>24</sup> and indicates, I suggest, a profound interest in the politics of time. A paradox observed in the works of both artists is their use of (post)modernist techniques accompanied by their critique of the politics of (post)modernism and their search for overcoming the latter's hegemony through returning to artistic programmes from the past.<sup>25</sup> It involves, as I tried to show, the artists' preoccupation with the memory of failed and unrealised ideas and has a direct link to their reflection on the problems of transformation.

For Kentridge, a critical attitude towards modernism is rooted in his postcolonial approach to inequalities in South Africa which have not disappeared since the transition. His inquiry into the past goes beyond the history of apartheid and formal politics, reaching to the global workings of colonialism and its epistemological undergirds. Art, in this context, is scrutinised as partaking of political projects of the day. For instance, his staging of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* examines the ideologies of Enlightenment that underlie major art works in their relation to colonial violence<sup>26</sup>. In his use of avant-garde symbolic, Kentridge employs a similar approach: rather than using commodified images that have become part of popular culture or postmodernist art that withdraw themselves from social engagements, he focuses on failed projects associated with revolutionary avant-garde<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, he doesn't withdraw such quotes from their original contexts, but inquires into the social situations that produced them (as in the discussed re-workings of *The*

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<sup>24</sup> For one of the first cultural critiques of this type of nostalgia in films from the 1970-80s see Frederic Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, no 146, July-August, 1984, pp 66-68

<sup>25</sup> In his discussion of Gutov's *Thaw*, Viktor Misiano places the artist among other Russian intellectuals such as Shostakovich and Tarkovsky who 'consciously shun[ed] the two main intellectual-cum-aesthetic mainstreams of modernity: the artistic avant-garde with its hands-on utopianism, and modernism with its claim to creating a new artistic language' (Viktor Misiano, 'Thaw and the Poetics of Soil', 2014, [http://gutov.ru/works/thaw/ott\\_eng.html](http://gutov.ru/works/thaw/ott_eng.html), last accessed 6 August 2016). Interpreting Kentridge's employment of Expressionist techniques along with the distance he takes from both Conceptualism and Neo-Expressionism, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev notes that '[h]is questioning of authority runs parallel to his doubts about modernity as a whole. Modernity is the culture of progress and the Enlightenment, but also of colonialism and industrialisation, of idealism and historicism, as well as of scientific thought'. (Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, William Kentridge, *Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles*, Brussels, 1998, 32-34)

<sup>26</sup> Serena Guaraccino, 'The Dance of the Dead Rhino: William Kentridge's *Magic Flute*', *Altre Modernità/ Otras Modernidades/ Autres Modernités/ Other Modernities*, no 4, 2010, pp 268-278

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Van Caelenberge describes Kentridge's major influences as stemming from the 'rebellious' art of Goya, Daumier, Man Ray, Malevich and Max Beckmann rather than the art that supports the status quo. Elisabeth Van Caelenberge, 'Visual Storytelling: A Progressive Strategy? The Animated Drawings of William Kentridge', *Image & Narrative*, no 23, 2008, <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/Timeandphotography/vancaelenberghe.html>, last accessed 5 August 2016

*Nose*, or more recently in his references to Chinese modernism in the installation *Notes Towards a Model Opera*<sup>28</sup>).

In his recent work closely engaging with time and modernisation – in the documenta-installation *The Refusal of Time* and opera *Refuse the Hour* – Kentridge practices an even more revisionist approach to the culture of modernity. The text accompanying the installation, written by professor of the history of science Peter Galison, reveals Einstein's theory of relativity as implicated in the creation of 'a vast, open theatre stage on which all the actions of the world would perform'<sup>29</sup>. This story of globalisation and the creation of information society includes an exploration of alternative theories of time. These theories insisting on time's absolute nature and a possibility of total destruction of information, the article notes, existed throughout the twentieth-century, overshadowed by Einsteinian physics. Their existence has been vital in that out of the confrontations between relativists and absolutists, it has appeared that time itself is failing: contemporary physics 'refuses time much more completely: time becomes an illusion, like our sense that water is smooth because our hands are too coarse to sense the atoms that make it up'<sup>30</sup>.

With this proposal Kentridge's critique of the narratives of progress enters a new stage – of treating not just temporalities, but time itself as invented and errant. This idea is realised through his accentuation of embodiment and non-synchronicity as creative principles. In *Refuse the Hour*, the materiality of bodies (those of performers on the scene, those projected on the screen, including figures of people and objects created of scraps of paper which fall apart and reassemble into new shapes<sup>31</sup>) is foregrounded through their movements that follow but also disobey the pulsation of the huge metronomes that measure institutionalised time. Together with

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<sup>28</sup> William Kentridge, *Peripheral Thinking*, lecture, <https://vimeo.com/129526429>, last accessed 6 August 2016

<sup>29</sup> Peter L. Galison, 'The Refusal of Time', 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts, no 009, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, 2011, p 6

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p 7

<sup>31</sup> Kentridge has used this technique in a number of productions since the film *Shadow Procession* (1999). Its function is similar to the technique of erasure employed in the artist's earlier works, such as *Drawings for Projection* which serves as a metaphor of processuality and perpetual change. For a pertinent examination of this see Leora Maltz-Leca, 'Process/Procession: William Kentridge and the Process of Change', *Art Bulletin*, Vol 95, no 1, March 2013, pp 139-165

the music's dissonant counterpoint, the figures of the shadow procession progress stumbling and erring, moving against the rhythm and in a cunning dialogue with it. The more this performance urges us to perceive the materiality of bodies, the less we are likely to trust the reality of time - the most important commodity of the twentieth century.

In *The Nose*, such disobedience to the established order is rendered through figures of non-coincidence (the nose acquiring his own agency and acting in discord with his owner's body) which open up alternative perspectives on historical events. While unpredictability of transformations has been a major theme in Kentridge's works<sup>32</sup>, his refusal of time, the time of (post)modernity, focuses on the possibilities of transforming the past by discovering unexpected paths within it. If, along the lines of contemporary theories, all information is forever retained, is it possible, he asks in *Refuse the Hour*, to go back in time and undo the damage that has been inflicted?<sup>33</sup> This brings Kentridge's preoccupation with the predicaments of societal transformation to a new level: thinking of change not in terms of transition but (re)turning to what has already been said and done in the past and how this can inform our future.

This is similar to the move practiced by Gutov, increasingly in his recent works, in relation to the projects of modernity. The artist is well known for his apology of realism, by which he refers to a wide range of works from the past including Renaissance art, old Russian icon-painting and even cave drawings<sup>34</sup>. In placing major value on pre-modern art, he draws inspiration from Soviet art theorist Mikhail Lifshitz whose approach developed within the Marxist-Leninist tradition is notorious for his outright critique of Western modernism. Despite the fact that

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<sup>32</sup> In his animations based on charcoal drawings, Kentridge uses the technique of whereby each fading image lives on, as a haunting memory, within the subsequent one, and each transformation is to a big extent dictated by the medium and the physical process of walking and taking camera shots (see William Kentridge: Transformation with Animation, <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/william-kentridge-transformation-with-animation/>, last accessed 6 August 2016). In a much-quoted interview, he stresses this unpredictability as a creative principle: 'I believe that in the indeterminacy of drawing, the contingent way that images arrive in the work, lies some kind of model of how we live our lives.' (Neal Benezra, 'William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection', *William Kentridge*, Dan Cameron et al, Harry N Abrams, New York, 2001, 12)

<sup>33</sup> The theme of reversing time and undoing wrongs are developed in Kentridge's recent films (*Journey to the Moon*, *Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès*) through the techniques of running film backwards and imitating this movement by the artist himself. Fragments of these films are used in *Refuse The Hour*.

<sup>34</sup> Ekaterina Degot, 'Russian Culture Torture: A Conversation with Dmitry Gutov', *WAM*, no 26, 'Thinking Realism', 2007, pp 27-30, [http://www.gutov.ru/texti/ED\\_eng.htm](http://www.gutov.ru/texti/ED_eng.htm), last accessed 7 August 2016



Lifshitz's celebration of realist art as attaining 'ontognoseological truth'<sup>35</sup> is considered a failed line in (Marxist) aesthetics, or perhaps even because of it being condemned and forgotten, Gutov has embarked on the project of popularising the theorist's legacy<sup>36</sup>. It must be noted, however, that his engagement with this strain of anti-modernism has nothing in common with the current wave of neo-traditionalism in Russia inspired by Stalinist approaches to culture and is in fact entirely contrary to the latter in its goals.

Even more interesting are the ways in which Gutov applies Lifshitz's theory in his own works which can hardly be considered instances of socialist realism. Returning to Rembrandt's drawings as examples of clarity, he produces a series of metal works that transform these pictures into three-dimensional sculptures; the shapes of the drawings can be seen, however, only from two angles (front and back) while all other perspectives present incomprehensible tangle of metal wires. This play with clarity and obscurity and the move towards materialisation of images brings Gutov's engagement with pre-modern works onto the stage of contemporary art. Furthermore, 'the effect of weightlessness' that emerges when sculptures are 'welded according to the same logic by which a pen moves in making a drawing'<sup>37</sup> can be read as lifting the works of classical art up from their times and introducing them into the present. But this gesture reaches beyond relativizing and refuses easy translation as it does not simply reproduce the original drawings but encourages the viewers to approach their various potentialities by deciphering the chaos of lines. According to Anatoly Osmolovsky, 'this series demonstrates a synthesis of twentieth-century art history in its entirety, thus giving rise to a new reflexive element'<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> This project started with the establishment of 'Lifshitz Institute' gathering a group of like-minded artists and academics in 1994. It has further included a film *Lifshitz Institute*, telling the story of the theorist's life against the background of twentieth-century history, and an exhibition *Lifshitz Institute 2012*, shown at the Shanghai Biennale and featuring fragments of his writings and drawings along with Gutov's own works employing Lifshitz's phrases and images. More recently, together with David Riff who is translating Lifshitz's works into English, Gutov is planning a series of events reflecting on the theorist's legacy and its relevance for the present.

<sup>37</sup> Dmitry Gutov, 'Rembrandt's Drawings: Introduction', David Riff, trans, [http://www.gutov.ru/works/rembr/rembr\\_2.html](http://www.gutov.ru/works/rembr/rembr_2.html), last accessed 7 August 2016

<sup>38</sup> Anatoly Osmolovsky, 'Rembrandt's Drawings', *Base*, no 1, 2010, p 3, [http://www.gutov.ru/works/rembr/death\\_4.html](http://www.gutov.ru/works/rembr/death_4.html), last accessed 7 August 2016

At the core of his commitment to the principles proposed by Lifshitz, such as the absolute value of the pre-modern and refusal of relativism, is Gutov's critique of consumption culture that urges constant adaptation to political tides and aesthetic tastes. This involves the modern idea of time that subjects one to this culture's imperatives. Central to many of Gutov's projects is his idea, derived from Lifshitz, that modernist culture, in its rush for innovation, has been implicated in most destructive political projects; hence his criticism of ultra-left art in Russia as borrowing from the dominant ideology and simply negating its postulates<sup>39</sup>. Countering this pseudo-relevance, the artist positions himself as being out of step with political and artistic fashions; his engagement with the outdated and forgotten, in this context, serves as a lens for seeing beyond the impasses of the present. This positioning explains why Gutov and his associates chose to establish Lifshitz Institute in the early 1990s, at the peak of the transition period. The untimeliness of this gesture appears to be intentional, as the film *Lifshitz Institute*<sup>40</sup> repeatedly stresses that the return to the philosopher's oeuvre was a politics adopted against the prevalent spirit of toppling Soviet authorities and idols and finding freedom in political art. Gutov's critique of this forward-looking temporality suggests a different way of dealing with Soviet past – aiming not to transgress, but re-engage with the legacies of failed projects. Ekaterina Degot unravels his approach to Soviet (philosophy of) art as 'hypothetical' – interested not in recreating but re-actualising potentialities of a Marxist aesthetics beyond utopia:

Gutov thus presents us with a hypothesis of what communist art might have been in its time if it had been supported by the proper technological base, or today, if it had the social and political base that it now obviously lacks. He creates a historical hypothesis whose goal is to achieve, correct, and understand a project (or, to be more precise, to endow it with dignity and meaning, to justify it historically). But he does not try to recreate it. This would be unbearably pretentious. Instead, he

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<sup>39</sup> Dmitry Gutov, 'Effect Kobry' [The Cobra Effect], March 2012, <http://www.gutov.ru/texti/kobra.htm>, last accessed 7 August 2016

<sup>40</sup> Dmitry Gutov, 'Lifshitz Institute', script, 2004, [http://www.gutov.ru/video/lifshitz\\_inst\\_eng.htm](http://www.gutov.ru/video/lifshitz_inst_eng.htm), last accessed 7 August 2016

leaves behind the realm of history, which is ruled by necessity, and finds himself in the far more problematic realm of the possible. This realm of possibility, in his view, is also the realm of art.<sup>41</sup>

### *Possibilities within the failure*

This reading of works by a Russian and a South African artist has started from the question of how one lives, as a critical thinker and creative author, in the shadow of failed transitions. In the times when the political transitions have been deemed unsuccessful and the societies are urged to return to a mythical past, how does one think of transformation? Kentridge and Gutov who started their careers in the times of approaching transition and in opposition to the apartheid and Soviet regimes are both, as their work demonstrates, confronting the aporia of imagining historical change: while recognising the failure of progressivist narratives, one keeps aspiring for transformation. Their works, dwelling on failures as a way of tackling this predicament, I have argued, develop a poetics that relocates imaginaries of transition from the realm of political immediacy to a sphere of creative engagement with the past and the politics of time. My reading has thus treated ‘failure’ in their works as an epistemological issue and a creative principle. It examined performances of failure as involving the aesthetics of the absurd and tried to further elucidate their meanings by discussing the artists’ critiques of time in modernity.

Reading Gutov’s *Thaw* and Kentridge’s *I’m not me, the horse is not mine* along the lines of Camus’ conception of the absurd reveals that performances of failure in these works convey not a denunciation of a concrete act or process (the attempts of transition), but rather point at the absurdism of the entire condition, rooted in current visions of history that are based on narratives of transition. Whereas earlier analyses have focused on the artists’ critiques of majoritarian progressivist ideologies and their scepticism towards practices of forgetting, this reading engaged with their responses to the contemporary narratives of failed transition. Against these

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<sup>41</sup> Ekaterina Degot, ‘Dmitry Gutov: Art Without Utopia’, catalogue, State Tretyakov Gallery, Marat Guelman Foundation, 2006, [http://www.gutov.ru/texti/degot\\_eng.htm](http://www.gutov.ru/texti/degot_eng.htm), last accessed 7 August 2016

narratives of doom, the artists embark on remembering past projects of transformation that have been considered failed and try to tease out creative possibilities out of these experiences. This results in accentuating not only the irrational, but also the nostalgic within the absurdist performances, which produces representations of failure endowed with hope.

Revising the past in these ways, the works urge us to think about transformation differently – as experimentation that re-actualises forgotten images, techniques, materials and ways of seeing and knowing. Despite the different reference points in their critiques of the (post)modern (Kentridge being inspired by the avant-garde, Gutov subjecting it to scathing critique), both artists are preoccupied with forgotten cultural projects. Engaging with traditions in art and thought that have been written off as failed in terms of their politics, their performances re-enact these experiences of failure and observe new, unexpected visions they produce. Countering the perceptions of fatality, they foreground continuing effort and, dwelling on repetitions, they create openings and assert that, using Kentridge's words, 'anything is possible'<sup>42</sup>.

Within the broader context of historical thinking, the politics of time implicit in these representations can have significant implications. The politics of thinking about socio-political transformation can be revised by including the experience and consciousness of failure as a necessary and productive moment within processes of change. Involving 'failure' as a creative principle would allow for critical voicing within the narratives of change. This way of historical comparative thinking implies a different temporality: not of unidirectional 'uses' of the past for projecting a future, but acknowledging the history of desires and failures in the present and creatively engaging these ambiguous pasts to imagine future possibilities.

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<sup>42</sup> William Kentridge, 'Anything is Possible', video, [http://web.avrotros.nl/closeup/player/AVRO\\_1499877/](http://web.avrotros.nl/closeup/player/AVRO_1499877/), accessed 5 August 2016

