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### Staging Post

Performance after apartheid

*Mettre en scène l'après. Performer après l'apartheid*

*Poner en escena el después. Performances tras el apartheid*

*Encenar o depois. Performar depois do apartheid*

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# Staging Post

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- 1 In conventional terms, a “staging post” is a locale that provides a mid-point, or a respite, in a journey.<sup>1</sup> It suggests a momentary pause during a passage from one circumstance to another. Let us imagine: a journey is begun, and its destination is foreseen; some preparations have been made, and some of the demands and urgencies of the trip have been calculated; yet movement is halted by fatigue or tardiness, and there is a halt at a staging post. The staging post provides a chance for renewal and restoration of energy for the portion of the journey yet ahead.
- 2 In such terms, the phrase “staging post” (with “staging” as a present participle, qualifying “post”) might suggest that we have not yet reached a “destination” as such, even though we may have begun to move away from our histories based in servitude and slavery. This posits that while a transition has been initiated, we are not yet “free” of slavery. A discussion on “post-slavery” certainly raises the question: “are we yet post-slavery?” The statistics that speculatively suggest how many people in the 21st century still live under conditions of slavery are truly shocking; and such statistics increase proportionately for women and for children, the world’s most vulnerable constituencies.
- 3 Another grammatical construction, in which “staging” is a verb, suggests a theatrical performance of the conceptual idea “post” or “after.” It asks us to imagine: can one perform a post-slavery? Does the condition of post-slavery call for performances of a particular kind? This paper, then, is dedicated to an exploration of stagecraft and what it might suggest about newly liberated selves, psyches, bodies, and languages.
- 4 Season 4 at the Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg (October 2018) sought to cross the traditional threshold between the conventions of the academic lecture and performance; and in these terms, too, it was a staging of a post-moment, as arts and the

academy agitated one another. It also provided a moment to consider the urgency of the circumstances. The global statistics provide a very grim sketch—with figures that really do weigh heavily upon us. There has been an estimate that in 2016 there were 40.3 million slaves globally, of whom some 10 million were children. It has been pointed out that such figures provide only a crude overview of the situation, not a nuanced indication of the modes and relations of servitude in our contemporary highly asymmetrical spheres.

- 5 Some lives are more valuable than others—that is the premise underpinning slavery. Several years ago I undertook some research on transplants globally and was struck to discover that via the open market on the internet, a kidney from a Swedish donor is valued at approximately ten times what will be paid for a kidney from a Mexican. This example provides a bluntly literal example of the asymmetries that hold and underpin the economy in the contemporary arena. There is a notional sense that a slave is someone held against their will while working without financial return: in such terms it would be difficult to calculate the numbers of married women across the spectrum of geographical regions and cultural systems who live as slaves in even such a narrow interpretation of the term. The shift of these terms is recent indeed: it is striking to note that women in France had no vote until 1945; and even then it was restricted to those who were literate.
- 6 Access to the vote is often taken as a measure of political autonomy and human agency. The 20th century saw the disenfranchisement of black South Africans, who, while notionally working for a wage as free labour, were effectively subjected to a highly inflected system of exclusion and subjugation. Early settler capitalism sought to break Africans' autonomy by using the law to compel the rural peasantry to work on the mines, through instituting a tax system which had to be paid in cash. Ironically, then, in the South African context, the servitude of working underground in the mines in brutalizing circumstances, and for a demeaning wage, actually drove subsistence farmers off the land and into industrialized servitude through the manipulation of a cash economy and wages.
- 7 The Centre for the Less Good Idea is a generator of creative playfulness which willfully disregards the usual economic logics of profit and gain. In a spirit of waywardness the artist-director William Kentridge has launched an arts incubator that is an extension of his own creative practice. The Centre opens itself several times a year to host a generative and multi-modal series of workshops through which ideas are precipitated into material form as performances, and then assert their autonomy as free-standing public events. Kentridge's interdisciplinary arts have never been so fulsomely reciprocal. For many years his drawing practice and his film-making emerged side-by-side, as if they were autonomous projects that produced rather awkward offspring through an alliance between the two arts. His engagement in the theater further drew on and fed his drawing, through the innovation of a theatrical idiom that deployed his "drawings for projection" as set designs, and also provided an animation field that took the staging beyond the constraints of the three-walled box.
- 8 In the interests of seriously playful disruption of the disciplines, Season 4 was loosely structured around "the Collapsed Conference" in order to bring academic and arts modes into a generative dialogue. Several of the performance events for Season 4 were selected because they themselves did, in their conception, explore the traditions and conventions of the lecture, while pushing at their limits.

- 9 In the most abstract of ways, the program was designed in order to unsettle the principles of “work” and “play,” or “utility” and “creativity,” inventing a paradigm that might engage in fresh ways with the principles of post-apartheid and post-slavery. We sought to erase the limits of the categories of the lecture and the performance in the interests of inflecting affective and intellectual processes with a generative exuberance.
- 10 The first of these performance events was the opening lecture by artist Walid Raad, a New York-based artist originally from Lebanon who has made a distinctive intervention in the art world through his sustained disruption of the history/fiction and archive/invention thresholds. Raad gave an overview of his artistic practice over the past several decades, while the lecture at the same time exposed the ways in which the art market is implicated in the manipulation of value. The cynical merchandising of such conceptual categories as “marginal” and “peripheral” attempts to provoke the acquisitive appetite of capital investors who deploy art to inflate value in a precarious and uncertain global economy. Raad also alluded to his powerful and sustained engagement with “Gulf Labor,” which he has deployed as a creative motif to expose the metropolitan galleries that have given their names to replica institutions on Saaiyat Island in the Gulf States. Raad has documented and critiqued the ways in which migrant labor has been effectively enslaved during the construction of these faux museums, and his “Occupy Guggenheim” project over the past several years has sought to call out the NY Guggenheim for giving its name to the regime of violent labor practice in the Gulf region.
- 11 In some ways Raad’s talk was the equivalent of the “keynote address” of the traditional conference. Audience members were provoked into a kind of instability as they could not easily determine which elements of the lecture were grounded in world-historical fact and which played on habits of thought arising from cliché and ideological manipulation or media caricatures. During the talk Raad also introduced his audience to several of his own beguiling art works, which were complex and fragile in their allusive playfulness.

Walid Raad and William Kentridge in Conversation post Walid's Lecture Performance, October 2018.  
<https://vimeo.com/300123940>



Photograph by Zivanai Matangi © The Centre for the Less Good Idea.

- 12 A major intellectual and creative strand of the program was the stringed instrument. There were several wondrous and unusual performances, and in combination these gave a kind of exposition on sound and musicality. There was a focused inquiry on the piano, which was staged in several iterations which foregrounded the strings and not just the keyboard, as is often the case.
- 13 *The Collapsed Concert* was a double bill that brought together two pieces in an unlikely juxtaposition. Jill Richards, a virtuoso pianist and a “great interpreter of the Western tradition,” performed Pierre Boulez’s notoriously difficult serialist “Piano Sonata No. 2.” Rigor and discipline are cornerstones of the performance of this piece. This was followed in the second half of the program by a “counter-example,” a jazz composition by Kyle Shepherd. Shepherd introduced vocal recordings of Lionel Loueke and Zim Ngqawana along with ambient loops, to conjure with time and space in relation to the live piano improvisations.
- 14 With great generosity both musicians made themselves available across the program of performances: playing incidental music in dance pieces; and playing the manipulated piano. The events generated a cycle of substantial “piano lessons” that were indeed softly spoken, not declaring themselves to be “instruction.” These “piano lessons” were lessons on the piano as instrument as well as models of how to perform on it.

Jill Richards in *The Collapsed Concert*, October 2018. <https://vimeo.com/301810043>



Photograph by Zivanai Matangi © The Centre for the Less Good Idea

Kyle Shepherd in *The Collapsed Concert*, October 2018. | <https://vimeo.com/301815995>



Photograph by Zivanai Matangi © The Centre for the Less Good Idea

- 15 Another exemplary study of the stringed instrument in all its uncanny strangeness was a work conceived and performed by artist Gerhard Marx. Marx deconstructed a Mercedes-Benz car and wired its doors to the necks of a cello, a double-bass, and a violin. The doors became marvelous resonating chambers, and when performed by musicians Shane Cooper and Kyle Shepherd they demonstrated the sonic potential of

materialities in our everyday world. It seemed indeed as if the car doors themselves were filled with a “voice” which they had been waiting to liberate. The syncopations of the car’s windscreen wipers seemed like additional bows; and the melancholy text from South African spoken-voice performer Toast Coetzer conjured up the all too familiar scene of the rural car accident on the South African country road. Marx titled the work *Vehicle*, clearly pointing to the metaphorical conception of the instrument as a medium. Marx has long been interested in the philosophy of Heidegger and his conceptions of the object that is “ready-to hand.” Heidegger explores the human capacity to denigrate the object world that exists outside of the person because it is presumed to be “standing by,” waiting to be deployed at the will of the human agent. Such living outside of the consciousness of the profound autonomy of others has substantial consequences for the human being who imagines itself to be absolute and in a sphere of its own making.

- 16 Marx’s work engaged in a process of deliberate and focused precision in the making of the instruments, while his musicians engaged in improvisational playfulness. In this collaborative ensemble, it was difficult to determine who (or what) was the vehicle and who (or what) was the tenor in the complex metaphorical field of meaning. This work engaged in a dialogue with the piano concert, in part because of the transfer of performers from one sphere into the next.

Gerhard Marx’s *Vehicle* performed by Shane Cooper and Kyle Shepherd, October 2018. <https://vimeo.com/300121521>



Photograph by Zivanai Matangi © The Centre for the Less Good Idea

- 17 William Kentridge engaged in a wild performance that was both intensely individual and deeply collaborative: a staged performance of Kurt Schwitters’ *Ursonate*. Almost a Dadaist manifesto, the work requires an intense and dedicated process of internalizing an extensive text of meaningless gibberish—this borders on monomaniacal madness. The final beat of the performance calls for a cadenza in which Kentridge is joined onstage by a great riot of improvisational mayhem – with horns, hallooing, Jill Richards

on the piano, and Kyle Shepherd conducting. So, once again, the program drew together a meditation on the dialectical relationship between improvisation and scripted work.

William Kentridge's *Ursonate*, October 2018. <https://vimeo.com/301783578>



Photograph by Zivanai Matangi © The Centre for the Less Good Idea.

- 18 The work I contributed to the program, *Pan Troglodyte*, was a lecture performance drawing together the history of primate studies, race theory, and artificial intelligence (AI) research.



Jane Taylor's *Pan Troglodyte* performed by Jane Taylor, Tony Miyambo, Terry Norton, and Mon, October 2018. <https://vimeo.com/303661812>



Photograph by Zivanai Matangi © The Centre for the Less Good Idea.

- 19 The play began with a piercing whistle which inaugurated two distinct events. One of these was a lecture, while the other took place alongside the lectern and was a staging of a small scene. These simultaneous “beats” were contrapuntal. The lecture, arising from the early primate research of Wolfgang Köhler, outlined a particular intersection of primate research, race theory, AI studies, and theater history. Structured alongside this—and in some ways competing with it—was a dramatic event using a combination of sophisticated puppetry—with a carved wooden chimp puppet made by master-puppeteer Adrian Kohler from Handspring Puppet Company—and the fine performance skills of South African actor Tony Miyambo.
- 20 The lecture took place alongside the scenes. The switching of attention from lecture to performance requires a particular kind of *discipline of mind*: that is, the competence to read the simultaneous and alternating events precipitates a dual mode of audience participation. This provides the point of departure for a theoretical question I am exploring.
- 21 My paper is interested in considering the ways in which manifestly distinct discourses intersect, and become mutually constitutive, entangled; they figure over-determining modes of thought via a kind of osmotic transfusion. This porous intersection of ideas and modes suggests, for me, the ways in which intellectual histories and ideological habits inform one another—“clouding the water,” so to speak. The mutuality of informing attitudes becomes opaque, and a generative rereading of the intellectual history calls for a deliberated dissection of the various skeins of thought.
- 22 How has race theory been informed by primate research? What place do these play in the modeling of mind in theories of artificial intelligence?
- 23 The chimp puppet was designed for two manipulators, and was performed by Tony Miyambo and Terry Norton in Season 4. Terry Norton is a rather elegant and

apparently fragile female performer; Tony Miyambo is a black South African male. In other words, the chimp as performed was a conglomerate of these two distinct embodiments and sensibilities; and we were unconsciously provoked to remember the ways in which the history of 20th-century primate research was dominated by white Western women, who were, in some way or another, “saving” African primates from African men.<sup>2</sup>

- 24 The performance concluded with a pseudo-biographical sketch—a kind of rejoinder to Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy”—in which Tony Miyambo gave an account of his miserable life. He had, in an act of quasi-scientific “research,” been subjected to deep hypnosis in order to raise him as a chimpanzee by stripping education out of him. The performance was deeply affecting as we saw the character’s attempts to recall his early love of literature. This sequence provided an allegorical critique of the ways in which the intellectual violence of “Bantu Education” (introduced into South Africa by Grand Apartheid) sought to keep Africans outside of the world of complex philosophical and creative thought through downgrading school and tertiary institutions meant for black learners. The ambition was to educate people just enough to train them to be instruments for labor. The legacies have been catastrophic, as young people are now second-generation learners studying with teachers who were themselves taught in an impoverished educational system.
- 25 There have been a handful of exemplary sites of education that have sought to keep complex education and creative arts available to this next generation. It is worth mentioning a few: Indiana University facilitated an independent learning system by providing degrees for South African scholars who were trained by Indiana’s proxy teachers and scholars in South Africa, through an institution known as Khanya College in Johannesburg. We celebrate them for the generations of young thinkers who were given access to some of the great scholarship of the latter 20th century. The University of Minnesota helped to fund an annual winter school that brought scholars from the USA to teach and engage with emerging South African scholars. I myself am a researcher at the Centre for Humanities Research, based in Cape Town, a site that has been a generous and generative funder of research through the arts. The venue at the heart of the present paper, meanwhile, William Kentridge’s Centre for the Less Good Idea, is a site committed to the principle that the arts allow for the education of the senses, and that hearts and minds are most generous when in a free-flowing play back and forth between thinking and feeling.

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## NOTES

1. This text, written by Jane Taylor, is the result of an ongoing dialogue with Bronwyn Lace in the frame of season 4.
2. Here I am deliberately invoking Spivak’s provocative assertion that in standard imperial narratives, white men were saving brown women from brown men (in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”).

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## ABSTRACTS

Founded by William Kentridge in 2016, the Centre for the Less Good Idea, based in Johannesburg, South Africa, aims to find “the less good idea” by creating and supporting experimental, collaborative, and cross-disciplinary arts projects that pursue process and secondary thinking. The Centre’s focus is to create two six-month-long seasons a year. Core curators from South Africa and from varying artistic disciplines are identified; the curators then engage practitioners with whom they would like to collaborate, and with that the seasons grow. Alongside the seasons, the Centre has a monthly *For Once* programme in which new work is incubated and shown for one night only. In 2020 the Centre has launched SO, the Academy for the Less Good Idea. For Season 4, writer, academic, and playwright Jane Taylor was engaged by William Kentridge and Animateur/Director for the Centre Bronwyn Lace to create a Collapsed Conference—a series of talks, presentations, and ideas all told through performance.

The title “Staging Post” contains an ambiguity. On one hand, it suggests the idea of a temporal break, and points to the idea of “after” in the formulation “post-apartheid.” There is no doubt that there has been an epistemic, geopolitical, ethical, and cultural break and that South Africa is no longer inside the regime of apartheid power. Yet the idea of a “staging post” points to a place in an onward journey. The “staging post” is a place where one might rest, change the horses, refresh oneself with renewed vigor for the traveling to come. The ambiguity in the title thus suggests that while the political rupture may have happened, much is still to be done in order to realize the transformation necessary for a genuine and profound transfer of power.

Fondé par William Kentridge en 2016, le Centre for the Less Good Idea, situé à Johannesburg en Afrique du Sud, crée et soutient des projets artistiques expérimentaux, collaboratifs et interdisciplinaires qui poursuivent un processus et une réflexion jugés de second ordre, qualifiés comme étant « the less good idea » (« la moins bonne idée »). Le centre a conçu deux saisons par an, pendant lesquelles des curateurs sud-africains issus de diverses disciplines artistiques sont invités à travailler avec les artistes de leurs choix. Parallèlement à ces saisons, le centre établit le programme mensuel *For Once* dans lequel les nouvelles œuvres sont expérimentées et montrées pendant une soirée. Enfin, depuis 2020, il existe « SO », l’académie « for The Less Good Idea ». Pour la quatrième saison, l’écrivain, universitaire et dramaturge Jane Taylor a été engagée par William Kentridge et par l’animatrice/directrice du centre, Bronwyn Lace, pour créer la Collapsed Conference – une série de discussions, de présentations et d’idées narrées par le biais de la performance.

Le titre « Staging Post » contient une ambiguïté. D’une part, il suggère l’idée d’une rupture temporelle, et renvoie à l’idée d’« après » dans la formule *post-apartheid*. Il ne fait aucun doute qu’il y a eu une rupture épistémique, géopolitique, éthique et culturelle et que l’Afrique du Sud n’est plus sous le régime de *apartheid*. Pourtant, le « post » souligne l’idée d’un « relais » employé par les voyageurs comme lieu où changer de cheval, où se reposer et se restaurer pour le voyage à venir. L’ambiguïté du titre suggère donc que la rupture politique a bien eu lieu mais qu’il reste encore beaucoup à faire pour réaliser les transformations nécessaires à un transfert réel et profond du pouvoir.

Fundado por William Kentridge en 2016, el Centre for the Less Good Idea, ubicado en Johannesburgo en Sudáfrica, crea y apoya proyectos artísticos experimentales, colaborativos e interdisciplinarios que desarrollan un proceso y una reflexión considerada de segundo orden, calificados como “the less good idea” (“la menor buena idea”). El centro ha concebido dos temporadas por año, durante las cuales curadores sudafricanos de diversas disciplinas artísticas son invitados a trabajar con artistas de su elección. En paralelo, el centro establece el programa

mensual *For Once* en el que nuevas obras son experimentadas y presentadas durante una velada. Por último, desde 2020, existe “SO”, la academia “for The Less Good Idea”. Por cuarta temporada, la escritora, universitaria y dramaturga Jane Taylor ha sido invitada por William Kentridge y por la animadora/directora del centro, Bronwyn Lace, para crear la Collapsed Conference – una serie de discusiones, presentaciones e ideas narradas a través de la performance.

El título “Staging Post” contiene una ambigüedad. Por un lado, sugiere la idea de una ruptura temporal, y remite a la idea de “después” en la fórmula “posapartheid”. Sin lugar a duda, existe una ruptura epistémica, geopolítica, ética y cultural y es un hecho que Sudáfrica ya no está bajo el régimen de apartheid. Sin embargo, el “post” subraya también la idea de “posta”, lugar utilizado por los viajeros para cambiar su caballo, descansar y comer antes de seguir viajando. La ambigüedad del título sugiere, entonces, que la ruptura política se ha producido pero que todavía, queda mucho por hacer hasta concretar las transformaciones necesarias para una transferencia real y profunda del poder.

Fundado por William Kentridge em 2016, o Centre for the Less Good Idea, baseado em Johannesburg na África do Sul, pretende criar e apoiar projetos artísticos experimentais, colaborativos e transdisciplinares, que desenvolvem um processo secundário de pensamento, procurando « the less good idea » (« a menor boa ideia »). O objetivo do centro é criar duas temporadas de seis meses por ano. Curadores oriundos de África do Sul e de diferentes disciplinas artísticas são convidados, designando então os artistas com quem irão colaborar. Em paralelo as temporadas, o Centro tem um programa mensal, « For once », durante o qual um novo trabalho é elaborado e apresentado somente uma noite. Em 2020, o Centro conta também com o « SO », a academia « for The Less Good Idea ». Para a quarta temporada, a escritora, académica e autora de teatro Jane Taylor foi chamada por William Kentridge e a diretora do Centro, Bronwyn Lace, para criar a Collapsed Conference – uma série de falas, apresentações e ideias, todas realizadas por meio de performances.

O título « Staging Post » contém uma ambigüidade. Por um lado, sugere a ideia de uma ruptura temporal e aponta para a ideia do « Depois » na formulação « Post-apartheid ». Não há dúvida que houve uma ruptura epistémica, geopolítica, ética e cultural, e que a África do Sul não é mais por dentro o regime do poder apartheid. Porém, a ideia de um « staging post » evoca também um pouso durante uma viagem. O « staging post » é um lugar onde se pode descansar, trocar os cavalos, e revigorar para a viagem. A ambigüidade deste título sugere assim que mesmo se a ruptura política aconteceu, há ainda muita coisa para fazer e realizar a transformação necessária para uma verdadeira e profunda transferência do poder.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** performance, , transition, justice, interdisciplinaire, effondrement, collaboration

**Palavras-chave:** performance, apartheid, post-apartheid, transição, justiça, inter-disciplinar, colapso, colaboração

**Palabras claves:** performance, apartheid, posapartheid, transición, justicia, interdisciplinario, caída, colaboración

**Keywords:** performance, apartheid, post-apartheid, transition, justice, interdisciplinary, collapse, collaborative

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