

History on One Leg

**William
Kentridge**

p. 6

— A walk through the notebook:
William Kentridge in conversation with Josh Ginsburg

p. 14

1 *Scenography*: printing pages from notebooks

p. 16

2 William Kentridge – *30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg)*, 2024

p. 20

3 *Scenography: parcours d'atelier* wall mural

p. 22

4 *Scenography*: handpainted wall phrases

p. 24

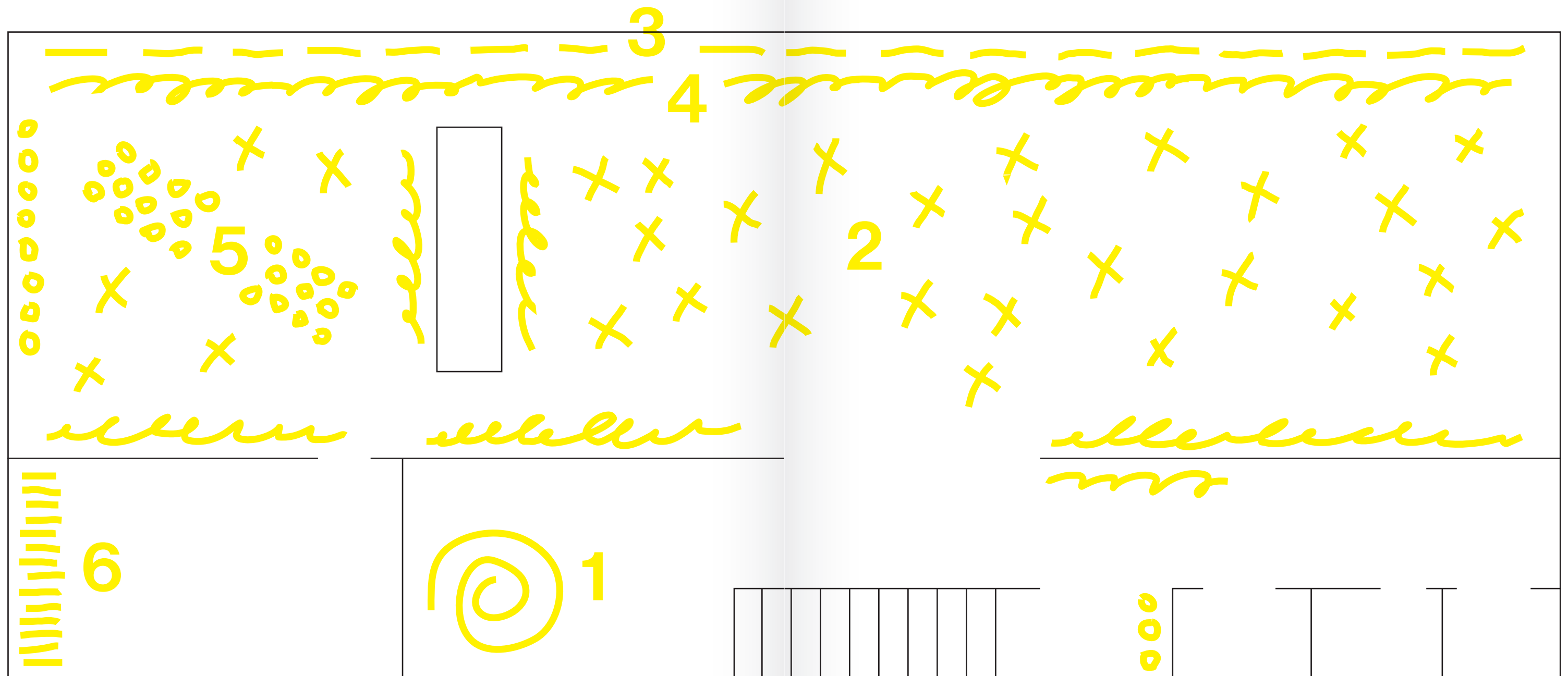
5 *Scenography*: studio ephemera and video fragments

p. 26

6 William Kentridge – *Fugitive Words*, 2024

p. 30

— About the artist





A walk through the notebook

William Kentridge (WK) in conversation with Josh Ginsburg (JG)
Thursday 22 August 2024

JG I've been thinking back to when I visited your studio in 2012. I spent ten days doing...well, you allowed me to do whatever I wanted really – the whole atmosphere in your studio was collaborative and generous. I focused on the Norton Lectures, which were mapped out in the notebooks. These had an impact on me – they were formative for me in many ways. But at the time, those performance lectures were still quite ephemeral, aside from, I suppose, a selection of videos in the form of the *Drawing Lessons*.

That aspect of your practice – the performance lecture aspect – **when I came upon the notebooks it was this *aha* because the notebook felt like a raw home for that kind of work**. The work in which the studio is a character and where you are a character – that's now very well articulated and represented. At that time in 2012, these appeared to be like scores that opened up into this world. And although there were obviously many aspects of that kind of work and thinking appearing more widely in your practice, **the notebook was all of it happening together: thinking, making, performing**.

WK And you feel differently now?
Or the practice feels different to you?

JG The question of sense-making is now inherent in everything. For example, *What is the studio?* Or the question, *What does the artist do?* *What are these actions?* Whereas, at that time...

WK You felt like it was a side question – more of an aside. Yes, that's the trouble. I mean, you start with a new question, and it sticks with you, and then it's no longer new. **This is that fantastic moment when you didn't know what you were doing**. And it now seems that whatever I do, it is going to be a repetition of something that's happened in the past, whether the idea of a lecture performance or the *Drawing Lessons*.

Within this exhibition, even the notebooks themselves are becoming a kind of work, which they've never been until now. The notebooks

themselves have had several functions. **The one is a kind of a repetition of symptoms**. A lot of the notes in them – and I'm going through them now, and we're looking through them as we prepare for the exhibition – are lists. What has since turned into the nine-part episodic series, *Self Portrait as a Coffee Pot*, got its start as a list of 15 possible episodes, and then, three pages later in the book, 12 possible episodes. **The list is repeated again, almost identically, with one change, and this gives the sense of a list with its history. In other words, the notebook holds how thinking changes, not through extensive writing, but through, for example, simply listing headlines: *The defence of optimism, provisionality of coherence, vanishing point***. I used to do this on sheets of paper, but then I could never find them. They were all lost. The notebook became sensible, what notebooks are for – to keep things in an order, whether that's the question of what you think, or the fragment that is key to an idea or statement, or the 'headline' that leads in one way or another onto the next note in a list.

Simple lists of tasks like anybody makes – go to the shop, buy fish, things like that – are not what I'm talking about when I talk about the studio lists. In the studio notebook, this would be an example of a 'to do' list: *to do notes on warfare, to read the second book of Orfeo, to do the coffee-lift etching, to work on the coloured sheets, to glue the drawing sections together, to make another coloured sculpture*.

Those are tasks to be done over the weekend or over the week. There's a list of the different editing projects to happen in the next month: *Fugitive Words, another short film, The Orfeo opera, a short film I need to make for Paris, making Pepper's Ghost for Dresden, the facade of a building that might need a thing*. **Task lists function as a kind of *aide memoire***.

And then there are notes from books that I've read – either phrases or notes to remember. For example, one book has the libretto and some notes on the libretto. And then, fragments from Rilke, transcriptions of bits of his poems, notes from academic articles – a working book for a project that is live is used concurrently with another book

that's more like a journal-slash-repository of immediate ideas that arrive, of what gets put down in the notebook first.

JG Do you go back to the notebooks to revisit and reference things quite often?

WK I do, periodically. **The ones I tend to reference the most are the ones that are lists of phrases called Words.** There are several different *Words* notebooks.

They used to be bland...now when I'm hunting for something, I can know which notebook to find. On this one, I have a sticker saying *glyphs*. So I know where to look if I'm hunting for *where did I do the quick sketches for the small sculptures?* That helps me.

Another use is for the actual writing down of lectures or essays. Those all usually start as handwriting: they may start as a list of possible subjects or topics, and then the actual 'writing' starts at some point in the middle of the list.

JG You have a solid writing practice. You write a lot.

WK I write. I write when I have to. I don't write voluntarily. Over the years, there's been a lot of writing, some of which – most of which – I can still read, some of which we have long arguments about in the studio, trying to decipher what I meant when I wrote it. The writing could be for lectures, or for scripts, or for a film: I might jot that down in some brute form. But it's not journaling or keeping a diary.

JG Writing for speaking, writing that's for something to be said out loud?

WK **It's not an interior sort of writing. It is often writing for talking.** And this is separate from that which is *not* a notebook, which is what I call a studio diary. The studio diary is a schematic drawing or diagram that is a representation of every work made in the studio – a list of the work that happens in the studio, week by week or month

by month. The studio diary holds a drawing that's enough to identify what it refers to and it goes strictly chronologically. It doesn't need to have text because it's a record. Here's an example: a record of a series of puppet heads that was made.

JG So this kind of diary that isn't the notebook is not about what you plan to do but rather records what was actually done, what has already been made?

WK There might be something conversational listed, like the *Coffee Pot* conversations, the *Whiskey Conversations* in Venice and things like that, as well as diagrammatic drawings and relief sketches.

JG An inventory.

WK Yes, an inventory, just so that people can say, *when was this done?* And if it was made over the past ten years, you'll likely find it there.

JG I never looked at those when I was there. It performs a different function to the notebook.

WK Yes, a very different function.

JG **The notebooks would be more of a propositional kind of recording.** To what extent is the notebook an extension of the studio, an expression of the studio – specifically, the studio as a kind of extended mind?

WK **I talk about the walk around the studio as the preamble to the drawings, the 'unconscious' part of the drawing. And in a way, the notebook is similar.** In fact, in some of the *Episodic Series*, there's a lot of 'walking' in the notebook, physically walking in the studio and placed inside the book. And more recently, just last month, for the first time I made a film specifically in a notebook, for the notebook to be a film. That's a departure from the notebook's use. The notebook performed as a kind of studio in its function for that film.

JG Does a notebook always travel with you? For example, when you go downtown?

WK I would take one depending on what I'm working on at the time. Right before we have our studio meeting every week, I'll make a list of all the projects and what everyone in the studio is doing. And I'll usually make a list for myself of things I've forgotten – that I was meant to do in the last week, and that I should do this week, and then I check a week later and find that they are still not done.

JG Are you saying that you're aware of the notebook as a site that is going to be drawn into the world?

WK Some of it. I'll know, for example, that these three pages are going to be displayed as part of a film. There's a big supply of empty notebooks in the cupboard. One is taken out if something new needs to be made. There are ones that will end up very empty, with only a few pages filled. But others, like the first one I showed you – of the lists and notes and things – those go on until right up to the edge.

JG If the studio is this place that, so to speak, gets washed down every so often – you know, the work is made, and then it leaves, then it's quiet for a moment. To some extent, the notebook carries the history of all the things made in it while the studio sees a kind of reset. Of course, there's a new notebook, so to some extent, there's also a blank page.

WK **It doesn't go away. It's this infinite record of confusion.** Individually, things move out of the studio, say works for exhibition or drawings that might get placed in a drawer, but there are so many different needs of the studio. It's different to, for example, a painter's studio where more things might stay the same save for the fresh canvas in front of you. This week we have a piano in for a conductor who's coming to work on an opera. We had to clear space for that. There are big drawings on the wall that move across to the table for ink and then will go back up onto the wall. It's a very flexible space. There is an analogy with the note and the notebook.

JG So you wouldn't say that the notebook is a portable studio that you can carry with you wherever you are?

WK No, I'm sorry, it's not quite like that. It is one of the tools of the studio. I do take a notebook with me when I travel. And I think upfront that I'll make drawings and things like that. But often, I don't. However, there are notes that I will make in it. Like so many artists, I'm sure you know, I would, in the past, have made a quick sketch of a picture I'd seen or a sculpture I'd seen that I wanted to remember. Now, it seems that one uses one's phone. And then I'll come back at night and sometimes go through those notes on the phone and place some reference to them in the notebook, if I can find them.

JG Where do you walk when you're away? Do you walk around your hotel room as a substitute for the studio?

WK I don't ever walk around my hotel room. Perhaps after this, I will. **I walk through other cities. I always thought I would draw.** There are some artists who have to do a drawing every day, wherever they are, even if it's a little apple. And I discovered that I'm not very much like that. Very often, there are things that I'll see in an exhibition while I'm travelling that will excite me, and I'll make a note of them. Sometimes I'll make a note in my notebook to remind myself of the exhibition.

JG So William, I might have read this somewhere, or maybe it was something you told me: it was about walking on the beach – the beach you visit in the summer – how walking on the beach is very different to the studio, where the studio walk affords this peripheral vision, whereas the beach...

WK It's very different. I've often gone for long walks thinking, *Oh, well, you just walk to clarify an idea*, to let a project settle like swimming a length in a swimming pool. Instead, I found quite often, with that sort of walking, that the ideas I have are a bit like the ideas one has in a dream, which seem so brilliant in the dream, and then you wake up, and you examine them in the

light of day and find that they are quite feeble.

The walking in the studio has an endpoint, which is: the gathering of energy to begin.

A conversation is another productive way for me to clarify ideas, but just thinking on my own is not a productive way of thinking. Of course, one needs physical activity, but this studio walking is a spur to start the work. This is where there might be the first glimmer of an idea, but then, the idea meets the paper and pen or charcoal, too. Drawing as a way of thinking is also like that.

JG If the beach is this long, open space and the studio offers a frame, why is there peripheral vision? Just because you're looping in your head, or looping in some way?

WK In your head? Yes. I talked about repetition as being one of the things that is an inevitable part of the practice, which is why I described it as a kind of neurotic symptom. When you look back through the notebooks – for example, at the moment, I'm in the middle of drawing a big tree, which is for the opening sequence of this new opera. And I'm hoping that, as I'm getting further along in the drawing, it's going to become clear to me how it transforms – not into something different, but how it is able to move in a way that I can't anticipate yet. Which is both a technical thing, because it is a mixture of charcoal and ink, and you can erase charcoal, but you can't erase ink. And when it's drawn all in ink, would it be possible to have an overlay of another ink drawing that can shift and move within it? It'll take a very practical test to know how the larger idea will emerge.

JG Do you have to trust that it just will?

WK It will.

JG Is there ever a time when it doesn't?

WK Oh yes.

JG The less good idea is just a less good idea?

WK Well, it has to work. No, not really, but if I have a question, how do we shift from charcoal? We need the ink for the intensity of the drawing. We needed the flexibility of charcoal. Thank goodness, I've done this for enough years. I should know all about this by now, but strangely, I don't. I have to get this tree to the next stage this afternoon. I'm sort of in the middle of the second stage of it. The third stage will be this afternoon. So it will either take off – or not.

JG That's a conversation there between you and the materials.

WK Talking through an idea is different. It doesn't help to talk through an idea for a drawing. You draw.

JG I found this in one of my notes. It's something you said or wrote:

This act of reordering, dismembering and reordering is always the essential activity of the studio. The world is invited into the studio. It's taken apart into fragments. The fragments are reordered and then sent back out to the world as a song, as a drawing, as a piece of theatre.

WK Looking through these notebooks, I've discovered how much I repeat myself and how far back so many of the projects go. A phrase that I am using now, I might think, Oh, this is a new phrase. Here's a new idea. And then, there it was 12 years ago – the same phrase, the same set of ideas. That's either reassuring or shocking, depending on how you look at it.

JG Whichever page you open, there you are. I'm paraphrasing that line of yours. I'll attempt a silly way of understanding this: there's an inherent question one has to try and locate an answer to in the world, a question that is being endlessly negotiated. The notebooks reflect this.

WK It may feel like a different question, but looking from the outside, it may well be the same question.

JG Years ago, I did this project where I digitally tagged something like 30,000 images of my own – largely snapshots, phone images and whatever else – very associatively. If anything was moving about this experience, it was that, inevitably, very different things were pointing at very much the same idea. It was not possible to distil that idea, and yet, I found it oddly relieving to think that there was a question underlying things, a question I couldn't put my finger on, but a question that was being negotiated through different sets of forms. When you open the pages of these notebooks, do you see that line – are you there on every page? And if so, is this confronting?

WK Not confronting, no. I think that's rather reassuring. Anything can happen on the page because it is still going to be you, right?

JG I suppose what I'm asking is, when you open it up and you see these similar queries played back, on the one hand, you're jokingly saying, Okay, well, you know, I'm asking the same question over and over. But do you see a portrait of yourself through this reiteration of the questions and ideas?

WK I don't. I think there probably is one to be seen, and to avoid looking at. Thinking again, I don't conceive of the notebooks as a mirror. Notebooks are thinking forward, not retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, how can this be done? For the job, what is the next practical thing? What are eight ideas for how this might be accomplished? Only in retrospect does it seem like each of those eight ideas points to who you are. They also become a score. So rather, it's perhaps that I don't want to interrogate any mirror too closely.

The thing is, every time I've tried writing poetry, I wrote it in one of these notebooks. I think those are the only pages I've torn out and thrown away, and with great disdain. When I came across those poems a couple of years later, they were so bad. You know, you read a good poem, and everybody assumes they could be a poet. They can see how the poet

wrote it – how can that be so hard? It's just words, not even fillers. When you try to do it, one understands the difference.

When you look in the notebooks and you find a torn page, you now know it was once a poem. Or something, an attempt at a poem. Oh, boy, so bad.

JG I found this wonderful line...one second...it's another line of yours – I don't know where this one is from, I have it in one of my notes. What does the poem say? Very little, if you understood it. That's you. And then there's a counterweight to this. Near the opening of the Norton Lectures, I think, your dad says to you, don't be discouraged. This is the line: don't be discouraged, he urged, you'll be understood in the end. He's making this proposition to you of being, in some way, understood. But it does feel to me that, at least across the matrix of things, there's a proposition that poetry isn't understood. Apply this to what is poetic in the arts, what need not be understood. How do you situate between some kind of knowing and sense and nonsense?

WK The hope is that the accumulation of nonsense adds up, not just to nonsense, but to saying something about the world. I like the story about Leonard Cohen reading his poem on a radio programme. The interviewer asked Cohen if he could please explain what the poem means. And Leonard Cohen said, Yes, I can. And then he simply read the poem again. This suggests perhaps that the poem really does not mean very much in itself or, rather, that the interpretation is never the same as the poem.

JG I would say that in your world, you construct the conditions for engaging with poetics while not demanding that one must interpret. There's a comfortable negotiation, an invitation to allow associations to emerge.

WK The wish is always that the work is more than that. The poem should always be more intelligent than the poet. The poem should know things that the poet doesn't yet know, which he

discovers when he's written the poem.

JG That's the surprise, both for the artist working and for the viewer: those associations you hadn't anticipated, which are deep in the work. Is that some measure of whether you feel your work is successful – whether it surprises you?

WK To some extent, yes. Certainly, when it doesn't surprise me, when it looks, *Oh, how pedestrian*, it's a measure of a lack of success. It works both ways.

JG And then, William – this is a crude reduction and I apologise, but for the sake of finding a way through to the title of the exhibition: **I think I joked with you about this once before, a challenge to stand on one leg and say what your practice is about. Like an elevator pitch. You've got to be succinct.** I'm thinking of two parts to your 'history' on one leg: the first is your engagement with complex historical conditions in a way that allows time and space to think through them. Using your materials and tools, you render other worlds that afford association, access and engagement without being prescriptive. Then there's another aspect, which is you as the character, starting all the way back in the *Soho* films. Then there's the Norton Lectures performance moment where you begin to present as overtly *you* in the performance lecture and in the studio. The dynamic of you the artist, engaged in a historical moment and you the character, and the role you play as the artist. How do these come together?

WK **When I appear as a performer or a character, it is almost always in the context of the studio.** Not so much in the first *Soho* films, but in the *Episodic Series*, for example, they're all strictly inside the studio, never getting outside of the studio. That's a subset of questions about the world. That's a subset of questions about making sense of the world in the way that the studio does. It would be stupid to employ an actor to perform the artist doing it, so I use myself. I'm sure there's a defensiveness of being in the studio, keeping the self in the studio, that comes with a sense of awareness of what it is to

be a political actor out in the world from my own experience as a student within the cultural politics of a country. Twenty years ago, I was least effective in that, and acknowledging that ineffectiveness meant that whatever I had to say about the world, it would be from the studio, rather than making statements outside. And each time I've shifted and been outside the studio, the experience has made me realise very quickly that the studio is where the practice is at.

JG **When you say that the studio is a safe space for stupidity, what do you mean by that?**

WK There are no statements which are considered stupid in psychoanalytic spaces. You give all things – any statement, any association, anything that bubbles to the surface – the benefit of the doubt in the belief that it doesn't come from nowhere, that it isn't arising randomly, even if you can't make sense of it at the time – even if it appears as complete nonsense. **The studio needs to be a place where propositions don't need to be censored before they are made. They can be allowed to come forward. Either they will hold their own – or not.** Not to say that everything that comes up is of value or of interest, but that it need not be shut down in advance. Sometimes, this means a lot of rubbish comes to the surface.

JG You create a zone where that's acceptable and productive. Do the notebooks provide a distinct opportunity for that? When looking back at the notebooks, is there something different happening in there? Your line, for example, the notebook drawings, that's the roughest line I've seen of yours. It looks like you're just trying to make a note for yourself. Is there a way for the studio to interpret...

WK A way to identify the primitive image? Say, instead of a detailed drawing of two lovers, it may just be a diagonal line, with a finger pointing above and below, enough for me to remember what I was thinking about the diagonal, the horizontal, the vertical. **So, yes, sometimes it's a very brainstem kind of an image – a start.**

JG How did you choose which notebooks to include in the exhibition?

WK **We veered, I suppose, towards the majority of them being quite legible,** rather than the illegible handwriting – which is fine, but no one is going to spend 40 minutes trying to read a paragraph that you and even I can't quite make out. In a few sections, we've actually created transcriptions of the handwriting that will be stuck alongside the illegible parts so that it can be read. These aren't pure facsimiles. They're edited – **it's a collection.** We're making a total of 30 studio notebooks out of the 120 or 130 books. And we've included the new one, which is the film that is made from inside the book, *Fugitive Words*.

JG Live, like that, drawing for the camera in the book? Am I correct in saying you drew and erased as you would normally...there were no pre-drawings before those drawings?

WK And the pages are adjusted under the camera.

JG They were rubbed out and left, just like that.

Scenography: Epson L3210 printer suspended from steel cables, recycled book paper

Printer programmed by Mitchell Gilbert Messina

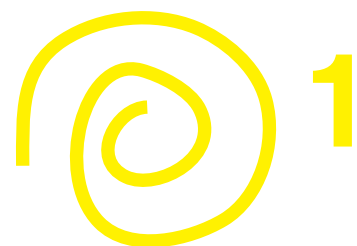
Every five minutes, a page is printed at random from a selection of William Kentridge's studio notebooks made over the past fifteen years. Pages are collected at the end of the day, fed back into the printer, overprinted – to recycle paper, to establish texture, to layer chronologies and thoughts, to amass like leaves in autumn, to do without a hierarchy of ideas. This process is repeated.

It may be inevitable that thinking about notebooks, pages and paper in the context of Kentridge's practice leads to thinking about trees, specifically their significance in the artist's work as personas and as metaphors.

Find, in Kentridge's notebook included in this exhibition, titled *Studio Life, Episode 5 Translations*, Nov 2020:

*Reclaim the Sunday afternoon
The smell of the cherrywood cabinet*

*Looking at a Tree (white stinkwood)
A wood hoepoe.
An unspecified anxiety.
The ease of balance.
Yesterday's noun from Aleppo.
Two private thoughts.
The bracchi of a lung.*



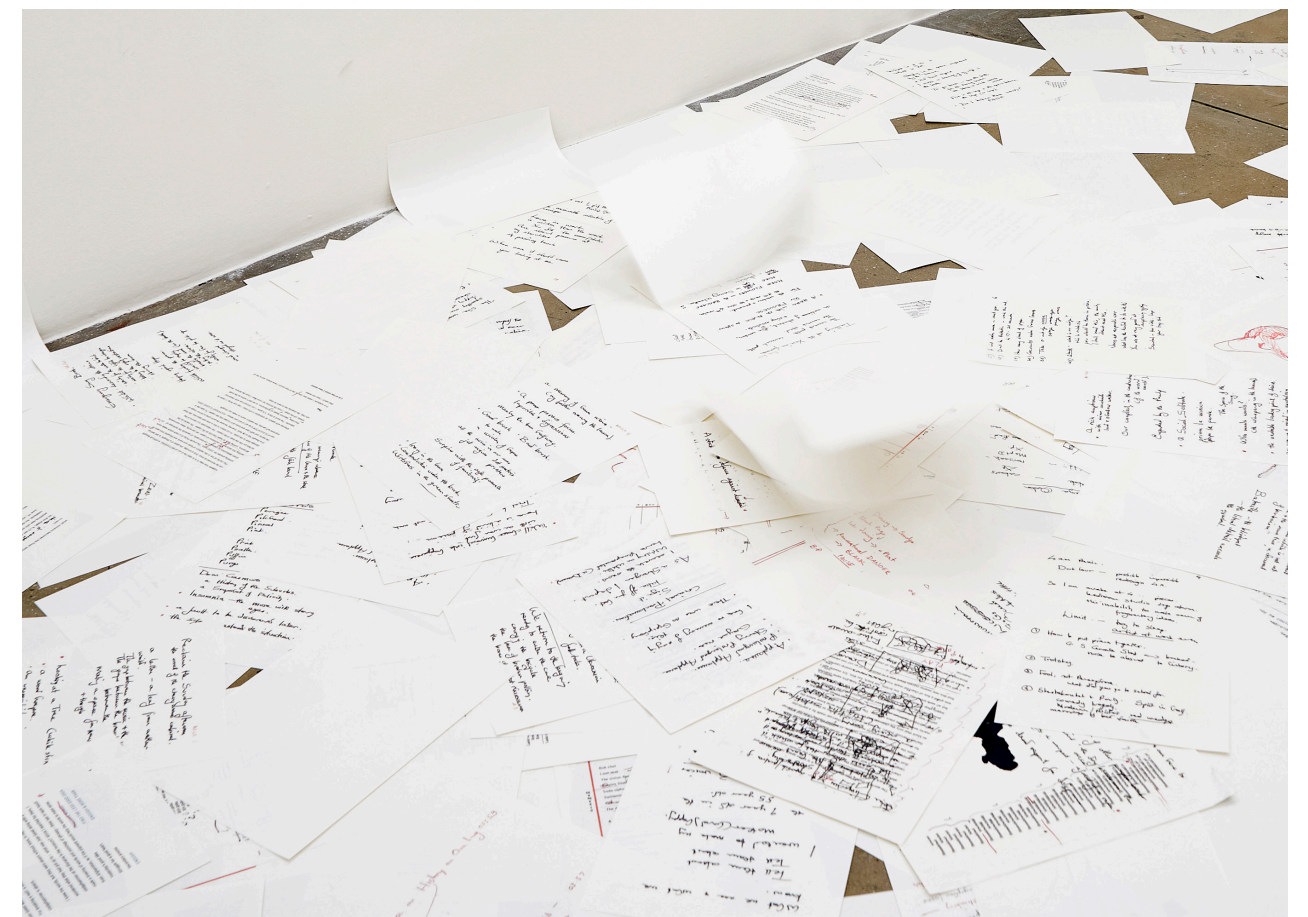
*The 53 (67) years of the tree
A prisoner in the garden*

Or take the trees appearing in Josh Ginsburg's notes made over a 10-day research trip to Kentridge's studio in 2012 where he copied and associatively assembled phrases from the studio notebooks:

Shrapnel in the Wood – The landscape indifferently recording its history. It has the pressure of perfect memory. The Tree as Landscape – The horse and the paper are both here; closeness of your face to your assailant can help. Good Brush/Bad Brush – Meeting the world halfway. Acuminate; gradually diminishing to a fine point. Uses for Trees – As Witness (Tree of Knowledge); As Courtroom (Treason Trial); As Executioner; As Timekeeper; As Paper. Writing takes the place of remembering.

And, in *That Which We Do Not Remember*, Kentridge tells Jane Taylor:

I'd really meant to write about the making of the tree page by page, growing it from the trunk up, filling the branches with paper leaves and with the marks of the bad brush, the ink in the bark: a tree you could disassemble into its pages and hide in a library, like hiding a book in a forest.¹



1 — Prepared on the occasion of the exhibition *That Which We Do Not Remember* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Art Gallery of South Australia, 2018–2019, p. 76, available online: https://issuu.com/kentridgestudio/docs/kentridge_twtdnr_final/41

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by Pulp Paperworks, Johannesburg,
on Arena Ivory 70gsm

Courtesy of William Kentridge and A4 Arts Foundation

Scenography: 30 steel notebook stands

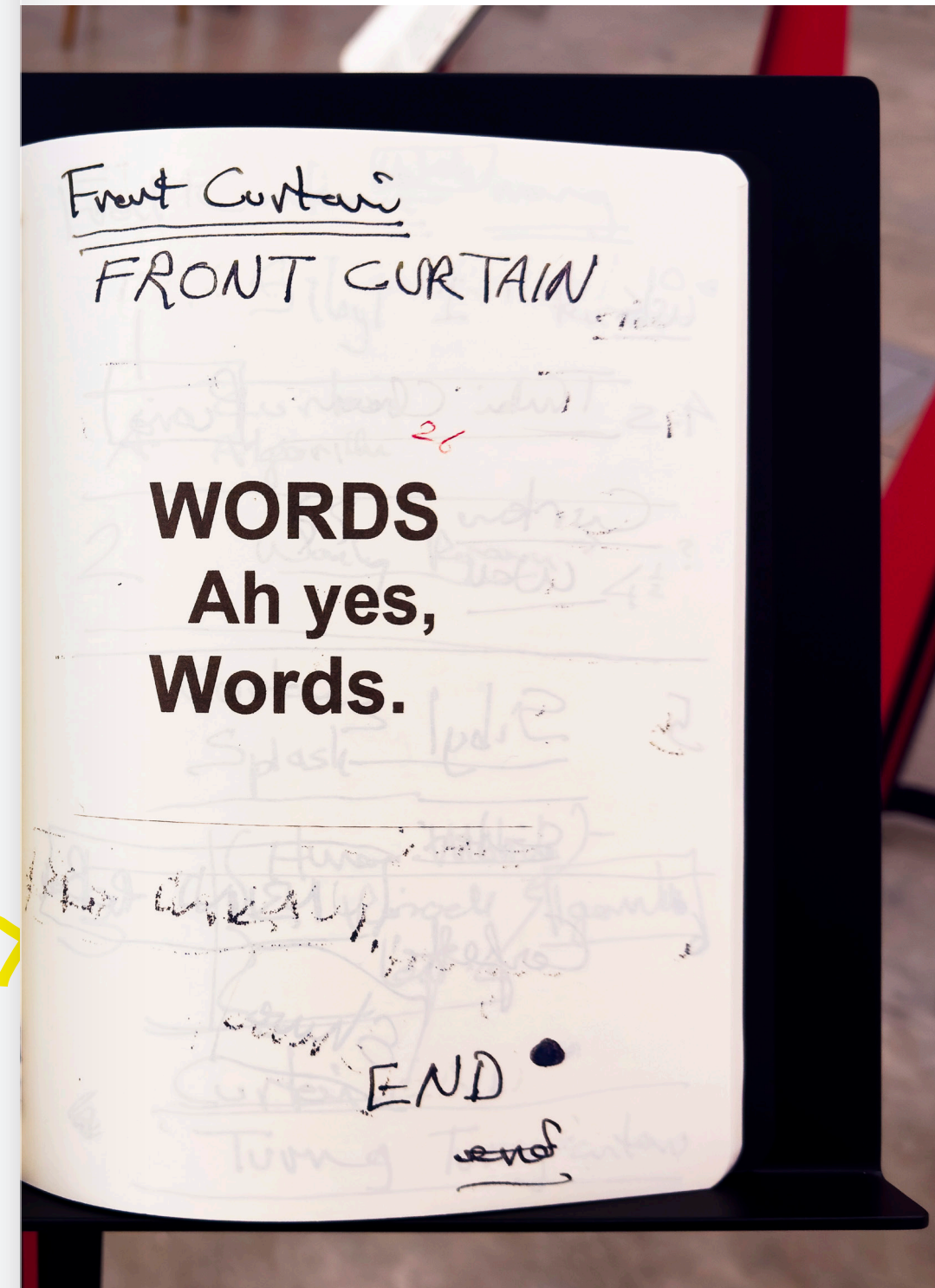
Made and installed by Kyle Morland with design
support from Chris Van Niekerk

The 30 notebooks created for this exhibition (selected from more than 120 made over the last 15 years) are significant tools for working in William Kentridge's studio. Composed for different kinds of tasks, they help the studio perform its various functions. Among these are notebooks for projects with their diagrams, scores, librettos, lectures, sketches, plans; notebooks of drawings for film; notebooks of studio 'to-do' lists; notebooks for meandering in the margins; notebooks of walks; notebooks of Words.

Josh Ginsburg's engagement with Kentridge's notebooks began in 2012. He spent 10 days in the artist's studio where he came upon Kentridge's Norton performance lectures scripted in notebooks, finding a "raw home for this kind of work." Twelve years on from this first encounter, the notebook is now the focus for engagement at A4. Presented on custom-built structures that resemble the music stands for an orchestra, time spent browsing their pages – deciphering the handwriting and diagrammatic sketches – reveals a portal into a particular mode of thought that is, according to the artist: "thinking forwards, not retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In Words (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

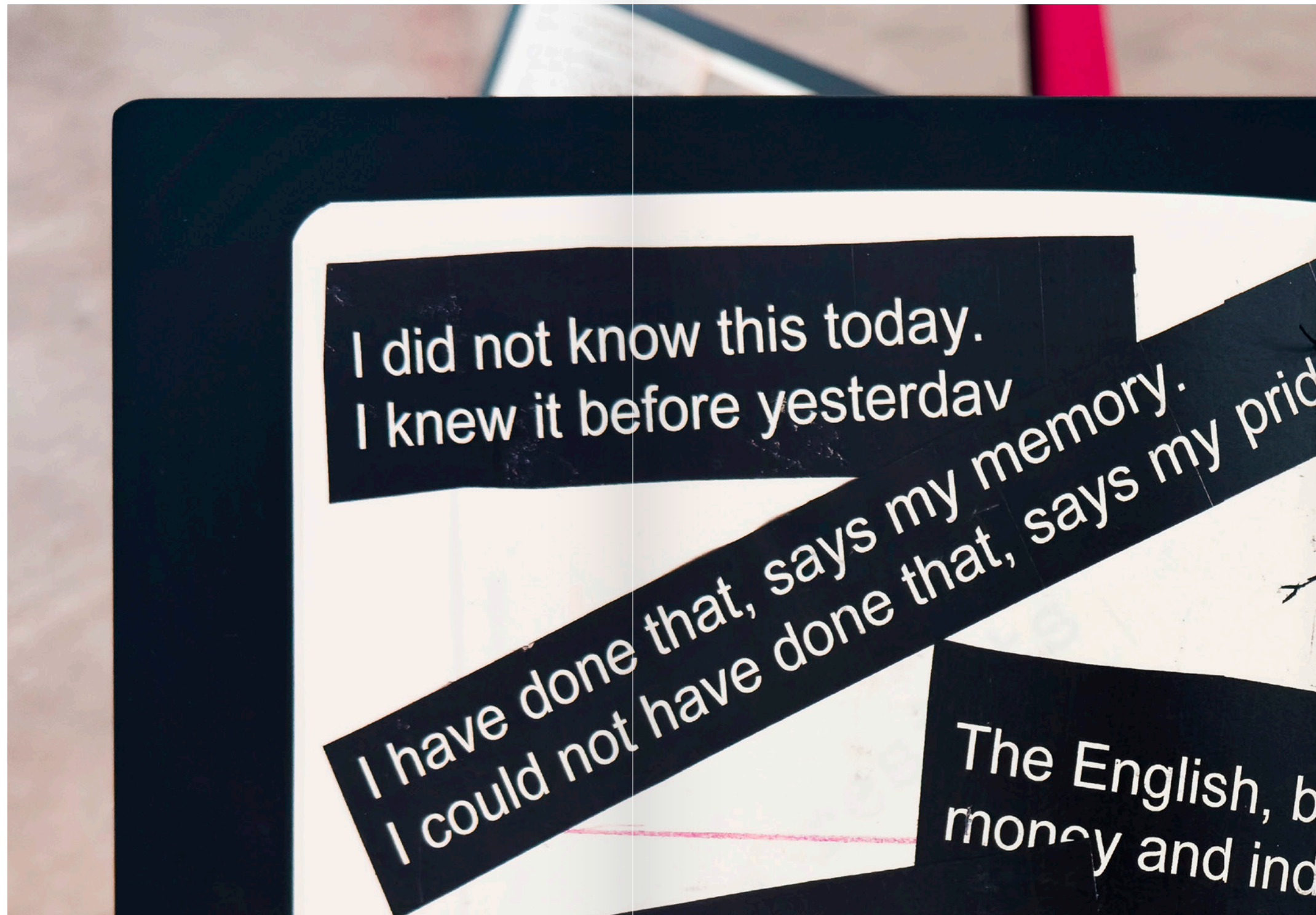
The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; not
the margins; noteboo

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years c
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and c
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In *Words* (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



vetlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

document meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

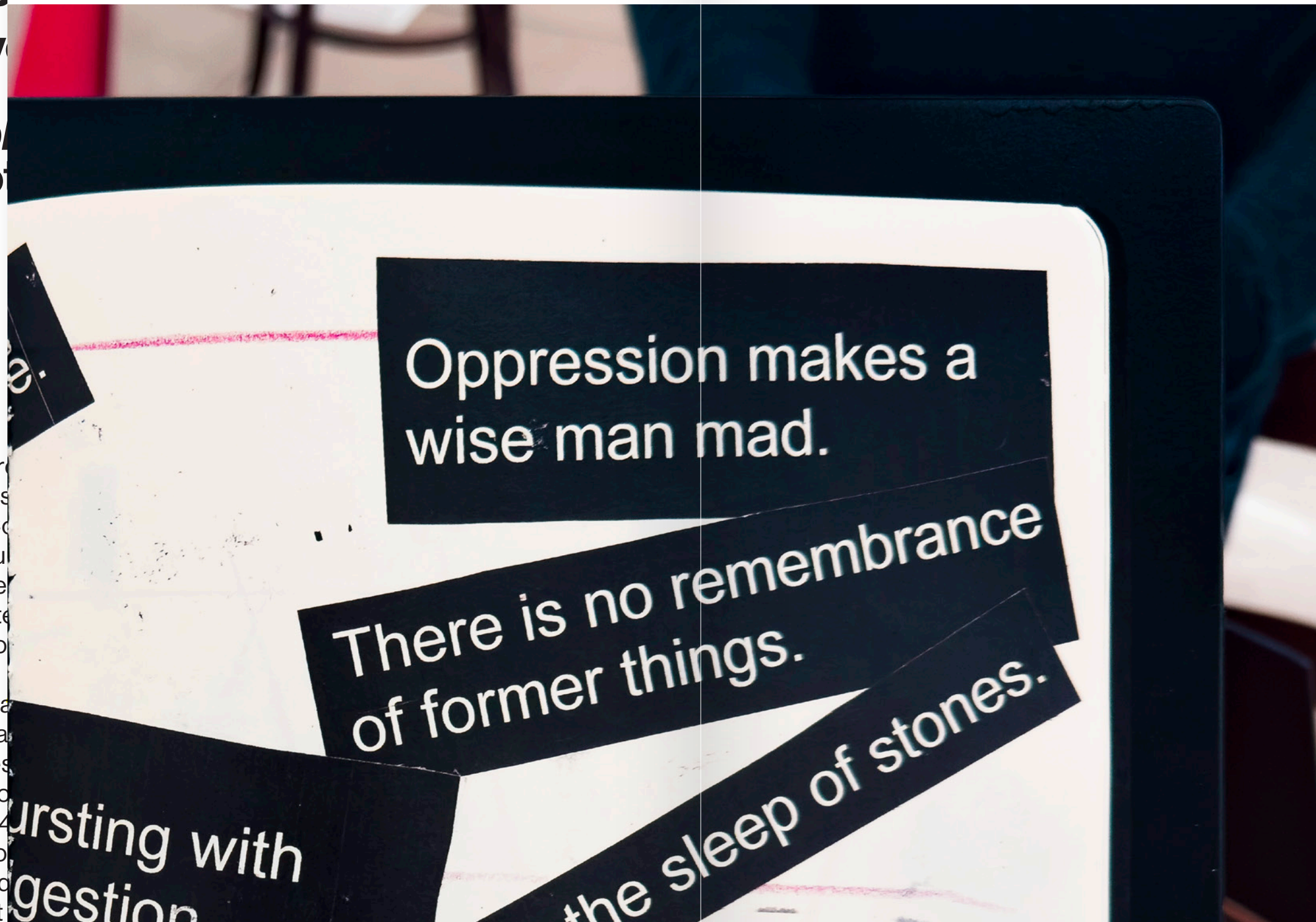
The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; not
the margins; noteboo

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years o
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and o
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In *Words* (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



vetlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

document meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

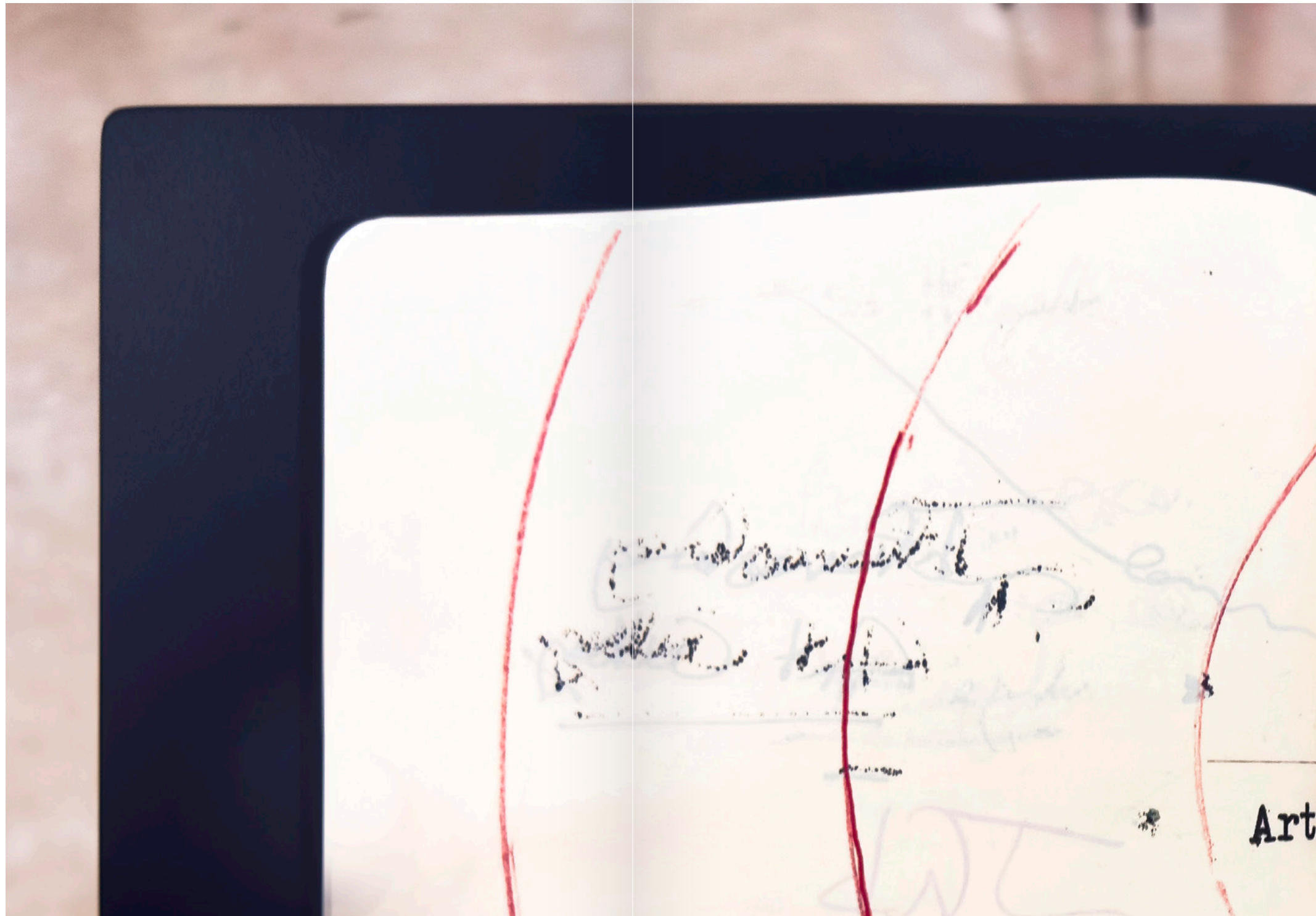
The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; note
the margins; noteboo

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years c
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and c
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In *Words* (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



vetlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

document meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

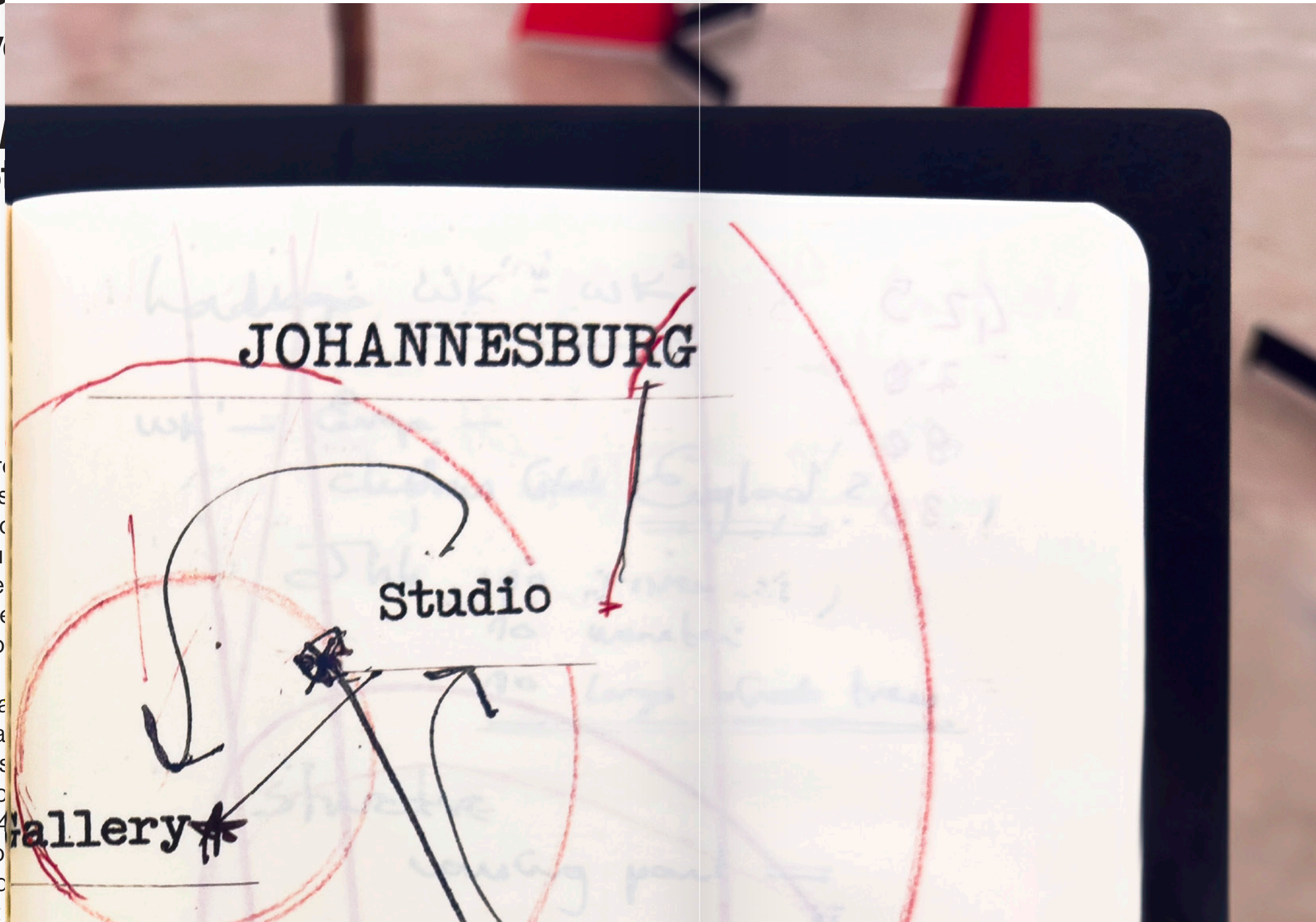
The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentrige's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; not
the margins; noteboo

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years c
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and c
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In Words (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



retlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

cument meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

The 30 notebooks contain
120 made over the last
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; note
the margins; notebook

Josh Ginsburg's engage
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years c
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and c
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In Words (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



retlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

document meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

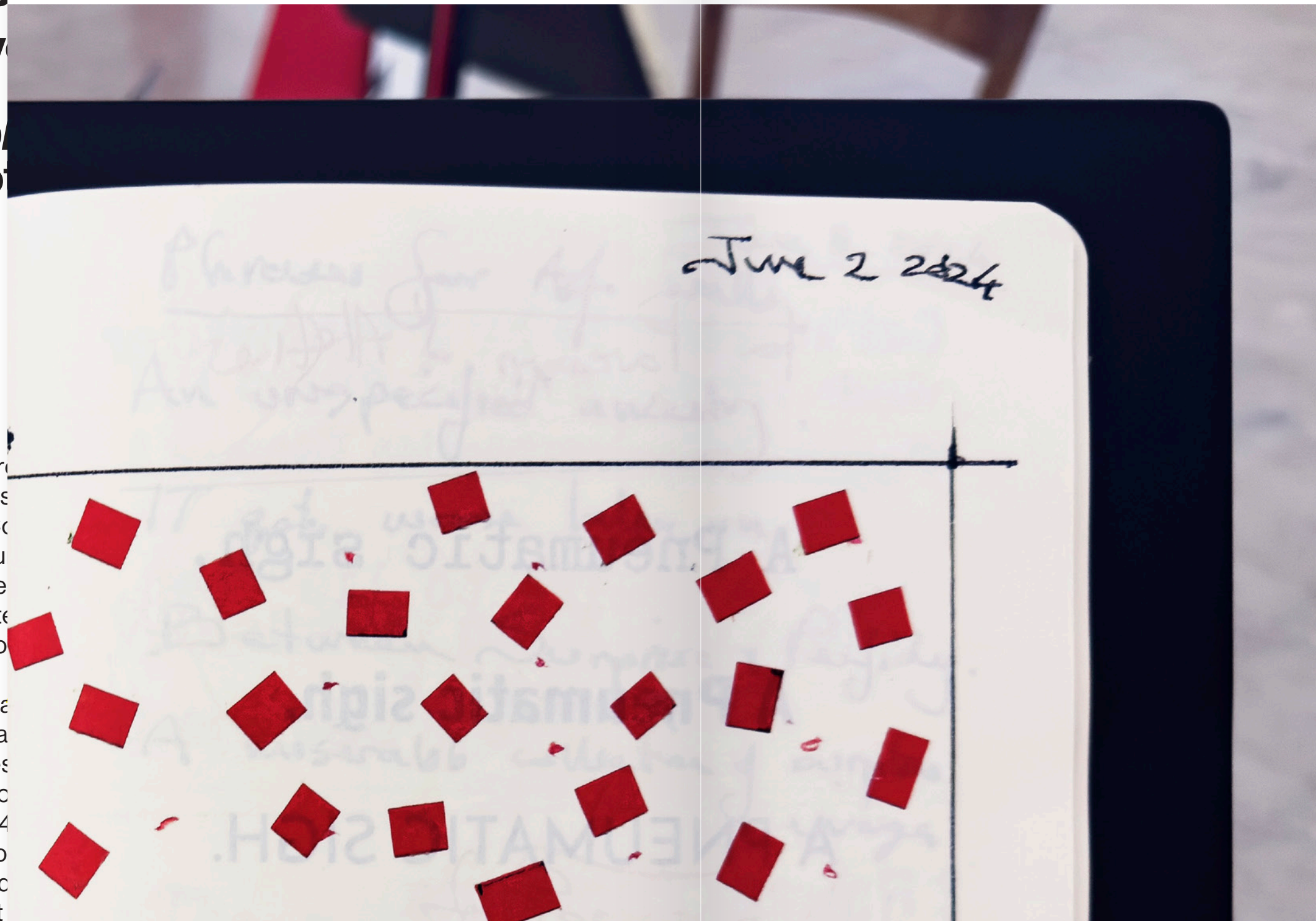
The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; not
the margins; notebook

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years c
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and c
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In *Words* (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



vetlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

cument meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations* Nov 2020, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; not
the margins; noteboo

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years c
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and c
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.

In Words (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about



etlana Alexievich in
16 reads: *Kind words*

document meandering

other ideas hovering

margins – but I can't

Leg appears in the
ea (March 2017) /
summarises his
ten for the length of
the South African
to another performed

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations Nov 2020*, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.

30 Studio Notebooks (History on One Leg), 2024

Exhibition copies

19 cm x 25 cm

Printed by P
on Arena Iv

Scenography
30 steel no

The 30 notebooks cr
120 made over the las
Kentridge's studio. Co
perform its various fu
their diagrams, score
drawings for film; not
the margins; noteboo

Josh Ginsburg's enga
spent 10 days in the a
performance lectures
work." Twelve years o
for engagement at A4
music stands for an o
the handwriting and o
mode of thought that

retrospectively. Notebooks are for thinking, *how can this be done?*" These are working documents. Within the rudimentary and rough lines (there to remind the artist of a drawing he wants to make, of an exhibition's scenography, or the set pieces for a stage), there are parts to these books that reveal marks on the heart.



In Words (March 2014, 2016, 2018), it is written:

What we see and what we know.
Tell them about
Tell them about
I wanted to make my
Mother(land) happy.
The 9 year old in the
55 year old

Turning the page:

Struggle for a good Heart. –
Strengthen the branch
Expedite the budding
Make the Mother(land) proud.

A few pages on, a line from *Second Hand Time* (2013) by Svetlana Alexievich in English translation written out by the artist in November 2016 reads: *Kind words make me cry harder than gunshots.*

Then there are the small thoughts, quite unserious, that document meandering and sideways routes that thinking takes.

2 I am trying to keep track of life in the studio. There are other ideas hovering at the wings...

I am meant to be talking about the importance of the margins – but I can't stop thinking about mangoes.

As for the title of the exhibition? The phrase *History on One Leg* appears in the notebook *If the good doctor.../a defence of the less good idea* (March 2017) / *BRUGES*, mentioning the story of Hillel, a Jewish sage who summarises his beliefs in one sentence to an impatient man, only able to listen for the length of time he can balance on one leg. Kentridge goes on to name the South African *Toyi-Toyi*, a marching, jumping dance shifting from one leg to another performed as a rally to protest, as a reference.

In *Studio Life, Episode Translations Nov 2020*, you'll find where Kentridge writes, "What does a poem say? If you understand it, very little." A few pages back, a riff on that line: "What does a picture say. Very little if you understand it." Together, the notebooks offer insight into what is saved and savoured – the sustenance of creative work – and a read into Kentridge's practice outside of parenthesis.



Scenography: Parcours d'atelier wall mural Montana street ink 30.55 m x 3.86 m

Painted by Keren Setton

The drawing is preceded by a walk in the studio, where the walk precipitates the drawing. This looks like: "Many laps walking around the studio trying to gather the energy in the muscles, in the impulse before the paper is touched," William Kentridge told Jane Taylor². He speaks often about the drawing as a place to test ideas, as thought rendered in slow motion. Notebooks, a vital tool for work in Kentridge's studio, are filled with such drawings. Where these drawings are propositional, in a conversation with Josh Ginsburg, Kentridge describes the studio walk as the preamble. The wall mural depicts such a path taken in the studio by the artist, walked first, then drawn.

p. 20

From 'A walk through the studio', WK and JG in conversation, p.9

JG So William, I might have read this somewhere, or maybe it was something you told me: it was about walking on the beach – the beach you visit in the summer – how walking on the beach is very different to the studio, where the studio walk affords this peripheral vision, whereas the beach...

WK It's very different. I've often gone for long walks thinking, *Oh, well, you just walk to clarify an idea*, to let a project settle like swimming a length in a swimming pool. Instead, I found quite often, with that sort of walking, that the ideas I have are a bit like the ideas one has in a dream, which seem so brilliant in the dream, and then you wake up, and you examine them in the light of day and find that they are quite feeble.

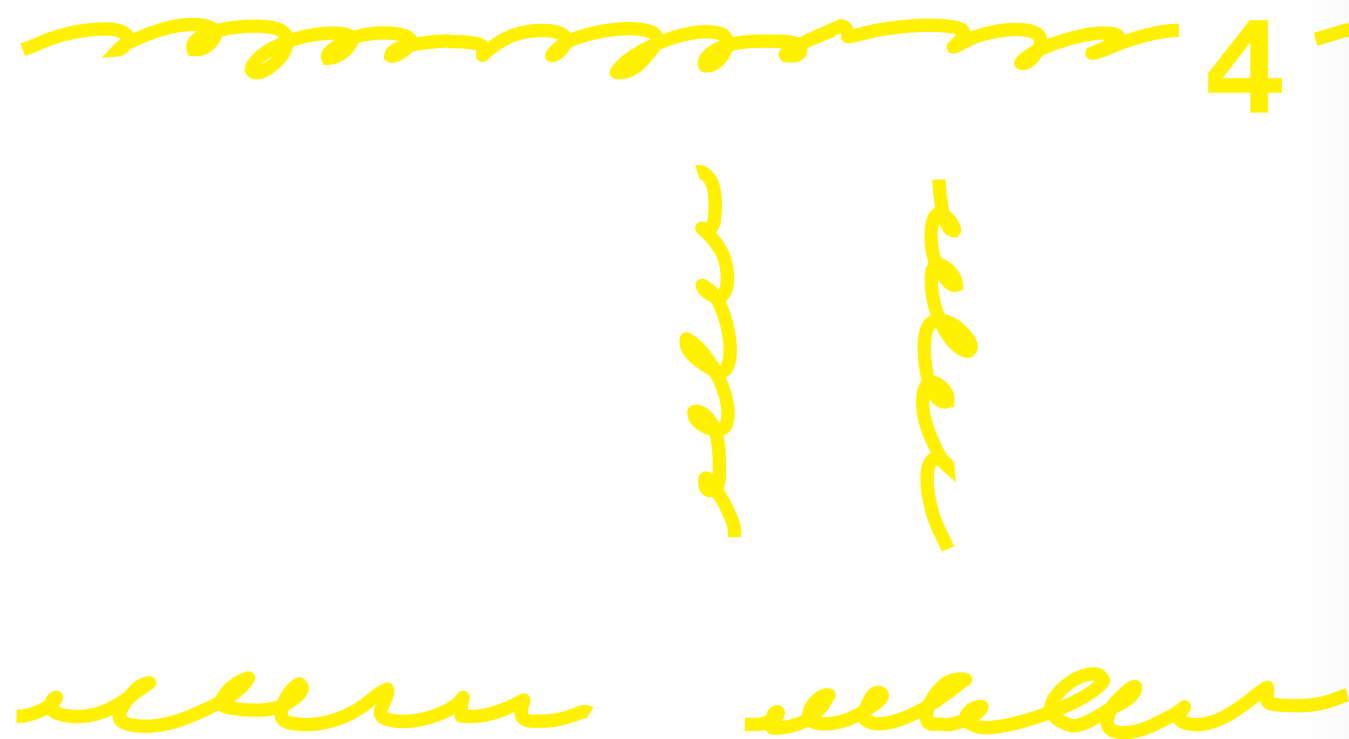
The walking in the studio has an endpoint, which is: *the gathering of energy to begin*. A conversation is another productive way for me to clarify ideas, but just thinking on my own is not a productive way of thinking. Of course, one needs physical activity, but this studio walking is a spur to start the work. This is where there might be the first glimmer of an idea, but then, the idea meets the paper and pen or charcoal, too. Drawing as a way of thinking is also like that.



2 — Prepared on the occasion of the exhibition *That Which We Do Not Remember* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Art Gallery of South Australia, 2018–2019, p.76, available online: https://issuu.com/kentridgestudio/docs/kentridge_twwdnt_final/41

Scenography: Various handpainted wall phrases (often recorded in William Kentridge's *Words* notebooks)

By Damon Garstang and Claire Zinn



Written phrases recur across Kentridge's notebooks and projects, appearing as headlines, slogans, rallying cries, warnings, poetic fragments, and obscure invocations – in short, a cacophony. Borrowed from such diverse sources as political manifestos, librettos, and world literature (among countless others), these quotations appear without reference, removed from the fixity of their first context to become wandering signifiers that shape and punctuate the artist's enquiries.

From 'A walk through the studio', WK and JG in conversation, p.10

WK Looking through these notebooks, I've discovered how much I repeat myself and how far back so many of the projects go. A phrase that I am using now, I might think, *Oh, this is a new phrase. Here's a new idea.* And then, there it was 12 years ago – the same phrase, the same set of ideas. That's either reassuring or shocking, depending on how you look at it.

JG *Whichever page you open, there you are.* I'm paraphrasing that line of yours. I'll attempt a silly way of understanding this: there's an inherent question one has to try and locate an answer to in the world, a question that is being endlessly negotiated. The notebooks reflect this.

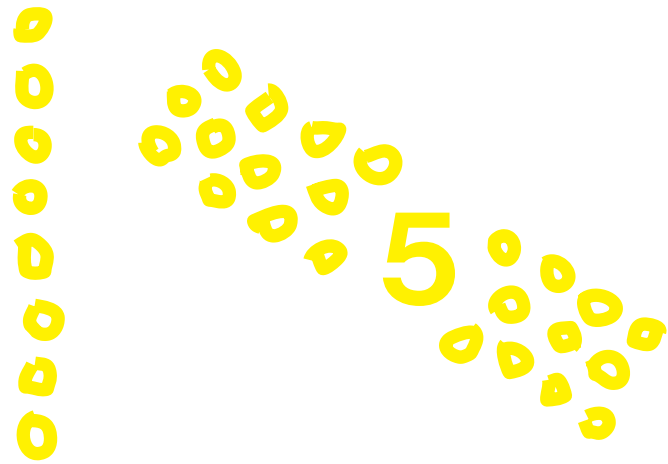
WK It may feel like a different question, but looking from the outside, it may well be the same question.



Scenography: William Kentridge's studio ephemera and video fragments

26 studio notebooks; three 'video fragments' with accompanying audio (and a fourth played on the landing at the bottom of the office stairs); a found book with ink drawings toward *Intoxicating Cash Liquor Cash Sales Book (Sphinx)* (2010); the artist's copy of *Houseboy* (1956) by Ferdinand Oyono; miscellaneous prints, drawings and paper matter; charcoal powder; pitt charcoal pencils in an open box; loose thick charcoal in a plastic tub; charcoal sticks; an unopened pack of willow charcoal; paint brushes; red pencils; a pencil eraser; assorted tapes; a tape dispenser; glue sticks; steel scissors; metal pincers; a short wooden ruler; a long wooden ruler; a tape measure; aluminium push-pins; bronze weights; small glass pots; a cracked teacup from the Royal Academy; a small grey bowl with twisted wires; a small grey bowl with three pins; an empty box that once held ink; a cotton rag with studio residue; a bolt of calico with note attached; a Bialetti coffee pot; a prop telephone made from plaster of Paris; a Nose maquette (2009); two maquettes for *The Great Yes, The Great No* (2023).

Video fragments from *Studio Life (Notes Towards a Model Opera; notebook for Ursonate; Charmed Life; various)*, 2020–2021.



Fugitive Words, 2024

Single-channel video

8 min 33 sec

Fugitive Words premieres in History on One Leg. A video work staged entirely in one notebook, its drawings, incidents of figures, text and glyphs play out between the twinned frames of the bound pages set on a studio desk. A browsable copy of notebook no. 29 is included in the exhibition.

In the opening sequence, the artist's hands page through a working notebook, with its to-do lists, timelines, 'obligations' (among them 'drawing for A4'), and sketches towards sculptures. This overture sets the scene for an elliptical, non-narrative engagement with the book as an *aide memoire* that extends beyond the purely practical, a site where 'fugitive' words and images – free-floating, unbidden – find chance proximity between its covers. Seemingly unrelated phrases appear; impressions of a tree recur; portraits of the artist and others come and go; a wandering line journeys across the pages; marks feint towards, but seldom resolve into, writing. Even the artist's drawing tools assume the role of characters, participants in the oblique logic of the notebook, around which eraser filings and charcoal dust notate a series of accumulations and erasures.

"Remove not the old landscape," a cursive heading in *Fugitive Words* reads; "Enter not into the fields of the fatherless," reads another. On a page dated 31 July, in a letter to his father, Kentridge asks: "What will remain when you are gone?" In Latin script, the words *AVE ATQUE VALE* appear – *hail and farewell*. Taken together, the coincidence of phrases assumes a tone elegiac and lamenting in a reflection on past loss and anticipated mourning. Included among the figures that populate the film's pages are the artist's late mother, Felicia, pictured as a young woman, and his father, Sydney, now 102. There is then the artist's own likeness, which looks towards his ageing parent across the notebook's binding. A supporting cast of Russian poet

Mayakovsky and his lover, author Lilya Brik, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, and Surrealist André Breton cite two recent projects from Kentridge's studio and the dissolution of revolutionary ambition. The woman from Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) also appears as does a nameless figure seen lying in a spreading pool of blood – a victim of South Africa's political repression, perhaps – before being subsumed in the landscape.

For Kentridge, drawing in charcoal has long offered an analogue to thinking in its immediacy and provisionality. His animations, which most often extend from such drawings, proceed not from a predetermined storyline but "from an impulse, from an image that's in my head, from something, a phrase, a central idea," as Kentridge said in 2014³. Scenes and words address themselves to the artist, are read or recalled, setting an unfolding sequence of associations, asides, indecisions, and revisions in motion. Sense-making is suspended in favour of uncertainty. Fragments coalesce and then disperse, speaking to one another in different registers: directly, tenuously. It is only in the doing – and in hindsight – that a given film's themes and resonances become clear. To this, many of Kentridge's video works and lectures recast the studio as a mind, a place where passing thoughts find form, however tentative; the semblance of sense composed from disparate parts. Here, the notebook, as an extension of the studio and its labours, plays a corresponding role.



3 — William Kentridge Interview: How We Make Sense of the World, Louisiana Channel, 2014, available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1lwOmoxJ6U> (edited)



William Kentridge
b.1955, Johannesburg

—

Performing the character of the artist working on the stage (in the world) of the studio, William Kentridge centres art-making as primary action, preoccupation, and plot. Appearing across mediums as his own best actor, he draws an autobiography in walks across pages of notebooks, megaphones shouting poetry as propaganda, making a song and dance in his studio as chief conjuror in a creative play. Looking at his work, a ceaseless output and extraordinary contribution to the South African cultural landscape, one finds a repetition of people, places and histories: the city of Johannesburg, a white stinkwood tree in the garden of his childhood home (one of two planted when he was nine years old), his father (Sir Sydney Kentridge) and mother (Felicia Kentridge), both of whom contributed greatly to the dissolution of apartheid as lawyers and activists. The Kentridge home, where the artist still lives today, was populated in his childhood by his parents' artist friends and political collaborators, a milieu that proved formative in his ongoing engagement with world histories of expansionism and oppression throughout the 20th century. Parallel to – or rather, entangled with – these reflections is an enquiry into art historical movements, particularly those that press language to unexpected ends, such as Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism.

Moving dextrously from the particular and personal to the global political terrain, Kentridge returns to metabolise these findings in the working home of the artist's studio, where the practitioner is staged as a public figure making visible his modes of investigation. Celebrated as a leading artist of the 21st century, Kentridge is the artistic director of operas and orchestras, from Sydney to London to Paris to New York to Cape Town, known for his collaborative way of working that prioritises thinking together with fellow practitioners skilled in their disciplines (for example, as composers, as dancers). Most often, he is someone who draws, in charcoal, in pencil and pencil crayon, in ink, the gestures and mark-making assured. In a collection of books for which A4 acted as custodian during the exhibition History on One Leg, one finds 200 publications devoted to Kentridge's practice. *In the end*, he has said, *the work that emerges is who you are*.

by Lucienne Bestall and Sara de Beer

Exhibition

—

Artist: William Kentridge
Curators: William Kentridge and Josh Ginsburg
Production: János Cserhádi
Fabrication and installation: Kyle Morland
Notebook production coordinators: Jessica Jones, Anne McIlleron
Handpainted wall phrases: Damon Garstang, Claire Zinn
Parcours d'atelier wall mural: Keren Setton
Printer programmer: Mitchell Gilbert Messina

Wayfinder

—

Writers: Lucienne Bestall, Sara de Beer
Additional notebook research: Lemeeze Davids
Design: Ben Johnson

Printed and assembled at A4 Arts Foundation

All images and publication © A4 Arts Foundation, 2024
23 Buitenkant Street, District Six, 8001
info@a4arts.org

Special thanks to Roger Tatley for his insight and expertise and to Goodman Gallery for their engagement and for providing transport and transit insurance for the artworks. Artworks, phrases, and studio ephemera are courtesy of the artist.

A4

**21 Dec '24 —
17 April '25**