

Artwork: *Triumphs + Laments: A Project for Rome*

Artist: William Kentridge

Artistic Director: Kristin Jones

Curator of Historical Research: Lila Yawn

Composer: Philip Miller

Co-Composer: Thuthuka Sibisi

Producer: Tevereterno and Roma Capitale

Location: Rome, Italy

Region: Eurasia

Researcher: Giusy Checola

The monumental frieze : Triumphs and Laments, a Project for Rome is William Kentridge's most ambitious project to date of a monumental 560-meter-long frieze. It depicts a silhouetted procession on Piazza Tevere, through a unique technique: removing years of accumulated bacteria and pollution on the embankment walls, power-washed to reveal more than 50 figures 10 meter high composing a 560 meters long frieze. The frieze, has been realized on the surface of the so-called *muraglioni*, the high embankment walls on the Tiber River, built at the end of the XIX century to protect the city of Rome from flooding.

Artist Kristin Jones, who initiated and made possible the project, stated that "Rome is an inspiration to the world and a magnificent stage for art, but within the city, its river was a wasteland, abandoned and paralyzed by politics and bureaucracy". The frieze drew enormous public attention to the Tiber River, showing citizens and local administrators the potential of Piazza Tevere site (Tevere square) to become an open-air forum, a creative laboratory and a commons. The technique of the removal of bacteria was first explored by Kristin Jones on the site in 2005 in her own frieze entitled *She-Wolves*. Professor Giulia Caneva a specialist in biological deterioration of stone from Roma Tre University, joined the project in 2013.

To understand the complex, fascinating story of the project *Triumphs and Laments* we have to go back to 1983, when Jones was a Fulbright Fellow, in Rome discovered “the perfect geometry of a rectangle of water and sky in the heart of the city on the Tiber River”, the ancient arena in Rome, recalling the original city, founded, according to the Roman Historian Titus Livius, between 754 and 753 BC by Romolo, distant descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas arrived in Lazio region following the fall of Troy.

The stories about the foundation of Rome are multiple. According to Livius and other classical authors mostly from the Augustan age, Tiber River is at the origin of the Rome’s foundation since Romolo and Remo, twins son of Rhea Silvia and Mars - god of war and duels - were abandoned on the banks of the Tiber instead of being murdered by King Amulius' clerk. The basket in which the twins had been placed, has been stranded near the swamp of the Velabro under a fig tree, where the two were found and suckled by a she-wolf and protected by a woodpecker, two animals sacred to Mars. According to another tradition by Greek geographer, historian and philosopher Strabo, the author of *Geography* - the only extant work covering the whole range of peoples and countries known to both Greeks and Romans during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE)¹ - Rome was born as a Greek arcade colony, founded by Evander, another character of the Roman mythology, son of Mercury, the divinity of trade and earnings. However, what is important to remind is that according to modern historiography, Rome was not founded by a voluntary act but by the progressive meeting of villages; in the same way, the she-wolf, which the classics named in Latin as *lupae*, could maybe refer to a prostitute of the time. *Triumphs and Laments* reflects the coexistence and the contamination of myth with history, of sacred with profane, at the core of the evolution of the “Eternal City” across time as a political and cultural hegemonic centre.

According to prominent archaeologist and art historian Salvatore Settis, in ancient Rome the procession celebrating the *triumphator* entered the city via the “triumphal” gate, “slowly winding its way through the flanks of the curious out until it reaches the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill”. But, standing next to him, “was a slave holding a laurel crown above his head, whispering from time to time, ‘Look behind you! Remember, you are only a man!’. Thus the Roman triumph, through a moment of supreme glory was permeated from the outset with a self-conscious *lament* on human

¹ More information about Strabo in English can be found in Britannica Encyclopedia at the following link: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Strabo>

mortality and brevity of life”². Therefore, “the figure’s monumental size (their *triumph*) is therefore inseparable from their precarious state (their *lament*) (Settis, 2017)³.

Extensive research for *Triumphs and Laments* was initiated in 2012, when Jones, together with artists Andrea Biagioni and Sara Spizzichino began to search, collect and select imagery of the tragedies of Rome in WWII. A larger group of historians, including students and researchers was led by Dr. Lila Yawn from John Cabot University, who served the project as curator of historical research. The team, explored millennia of the city’s dominant tensions, researching the greatest victories and defeats from the time of ancient myth to the present. As explained by Dr. Lila Yawn, each episode in William Kentridge's *Triumphs & Laments*, which is “playfully non-chronological”, “ refers to the past in at least two ways. On the one hand, it depicts a triumph or lament from Roman history, legend, or myth (or, better, a triumph-lament, the two being different sides of the same coin). On the other, it represents a specific historical *image* of a triumph-lament: a sculpture, painting, drawing, print, photograph, film still, or some detail thereof, transposed into Kentridge's graphic idiom and modified in ways that await discovery by the viewer” (Yawn, 2017)⁴. William Kentridge selected and drew freely images from a timeline of nearly five hundred images from the history of art, cinema, and journalism collected from Italy, France, Germany, England, Ethiopia, Dr. Yawn precise, “some were made close in time to the events they represent, while others were created centuries or even millennia later (...) in other cases Kentridge drew his inspirations from other sources or freely invented the iconography” (Yawn, 2017)⁵.

The frieze was inaugurated in 2016 on April 21, the symbolic birthday of Rome, with a live shadow procession by Kentridge with original music by composers Philip Miller and Thuthuka Sibisi, inspired by “the processions of the 21st century”, that is to say, “the masses of migrants trudging

² Salvatore Settis, “Drawing, Memory, and the City: William Kentridge’s Rome”, 2017, in C. Basualdo (ed.), *William Kentridge: Triumphs and Laments*, Buchhandlung Walther Koenig: Berlin, 2017, pp. 161-203. Available at the following link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/drawing-memory-and-the-city-william-kentridges-rome/>

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-203

⁴ Lila Yawn (ed.), “The Figures / Le Figure”, in William Kentridge’s *Triumphs & Laments*, a bilingual English-Italian Guidebook app, commissioned by The Office and Tevereterno as an official guide to William Kentridge’s installation on the Tiber, 2016, artistic director: Kristin Jones, curator of historical research: Lila Yawn; texts revised May 2017 – all English editions © Lila Yawn.

⁵ *Ibid.*

across Europe and the images we carry of them: mothers, fathers, children, brothers, sisters, and friends dragging their scant belongings from a place of terrible violence to a place of imagined sanctuary, a place that might become ‘home’”⁶.

The technique of bacterial removal using the river water is related to the animated drawing which lies at the core of Kentridge’s cinematic understanding of images. Kentridge himself explains the complex and collective process making of *Triumphs and Laments*: after the choice of an image to draw among the hundreds provided by researchers in Rome, after the first step of charcoal drawings drawn on the pages of an old ledger book, “the lines and margins over which the drawing was made approximating the lines of travertine blocks of the wall. I then remade the drawing in Indian ink. The smudge and grey of the charcoal had to be resolved into the sharp ‘yes’ or ‘no’ of the white of the paper and the black of the ink. This ink drawing was then traced into a computer and turned into a mathematical file, that could be enlarged or reduced as needed. This file was sent off to a factory outside Rome where the computer file was used to make a full-scale plastic stencil of the figure. The 40 cm drawing became a 10 m plastic stencil”. Then, “the plastic stencil was placed against the wall and water from the river was pumped out, heated up and sprayed at pressure onto the stone and around the stencil, cleaning off the bacteria and pollution. The temperature, the pressure, the type of nozzle all controlled by the monuments commission and river authorities (Kentridge, 2016)⁷. This process brought to a metamorphosis of the represented characters as well, which is a type of mutation during which one changes form but not identity. In the same way, the process of disappearing of the characters from the wall, is indeed a process of transformation, a regrowth of a new strata of biological life in the original place.

At the same time, composers studied “the liturgical songs of the late Renaissance Italian Jewish composer Salamone Rossi of Mantua”, based on the text of Psalm 137 of the Book of Exodus, “re-imagining Rossi’s songs being played stereophonically by two musical processions of singers along the waters of the Tiber”, imagining “brass players and percussionists walking toward each other along the rivers of Babylon, or along the edges of the Red Sea, or indeed along the edges of Africa

⁶ Philip Miller, *The Music of Triumphs and Laments*, 2018, text published on the Kentridge Studio website, available at the link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/the-music-of-triumphs-and-laments/>.

⁷ William Kentridge, *Triumphs and Laments*, 2016, description of the project published by the Kentridge Studio, available at the followint link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/projects/triumphs-and-laments/>

and Lampedusa, and encountering one another across great bodies of water” (Miller, 2018)⁸. In the procession, a Mandinka song of African slaves, an age-old popular song from Southern Italy - where religious processions are still much practiced - and a Zulu warrior battle cry blended together to become one with the words of the poet Rilke: *That is the longing: to dwell amidst the waves / and have no homeland in time*⁹.

As in other works, Kentridge uses shadows to reverse the journey of Plato’s cave, the famous philosophical parable narrated in Plato’s *Republic* (7.514–515), which represent the human condition as trapped, who takes for real the shadows cast on the wall by figures and objects placed behind them illuminated by fire. Plato’s man, “sees” the lights of true knowledge only once it is free, when “the sense perceptions are redeemed by the cognition of trustworthy, immaterial identities”, performing a descent from the brightness of the sun to the darkness of the cave, because “ ‘seeing’ is always a mediation between this image and other knowledge” and shadows “make the mediation conscious” (Guercio, 2007)¹⁰.

The sequence of characters of the monumental frieze represented the glory and the falling, the splendor and misery, the responsibility of the heritage and that of the future: the Archangel Michael, Commander of the heavenly army against the rebel Angels for Christianity, who looks at the artwork from the top of Castel Sant’Angelo, and the iconic scene from the movie *La Dolce Vita* by Federico Fellini (1959), where actress Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni have a bath in an old bathtub instead of the magical Trevi Fountain; from *Triumphs of Caesar* (1484-1492) by painter Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), to today’s refugees in Lampedusa, placing migrants beside Saint Peter crucified taken from a painting by Masaccio but overturned looking like the Hanged Man in the Tarot, symbolizing the impossibility of acting and, at the same time, the opportunity to provide a different point of view.

According to Settis, the most complex composition of the frieze is the one in which the image of Aldo Moro’s body (1978), assassinated by the Red Brigades during the Years of Lead (end

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ A part of the performance and rehearsals could be seen at the following link:

<https://www.kentridge.studio/projects/triumphs-and-laments/>

¹⁰ Gabriele Guercio, “Becoming Aware in a World of People on the Move”, 2007, published on Kentridge Studio website, available at the following link:

<https://www.kentridge.studio/becoming-aware-in-a-world-of-people-on-the-move-2/>

of 1960s-beginning of the 1980s) - a period of social and political turmoil in Italy -, merge with the *Ecstasy of Santa Teresa* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1647), a baroque and mystical representation of martyrdom, transformed into spirituality by “the extreme love of God for her” who literally “left her body on fire”, not without profane meanings; and with a detail of the Great Ludovisi sarcophagus, showing Germans - at the time the “barbarians” - about to die or to be killed (Roman history, around 250 CE), reaffirming “anachronism”, understood as the “coexistence of asynchronous moments or historical figures in a single pictorial space” (Settis, 2017)¹¹.

The image of Mussolini on horseback painted in *The Triumph of the Roman Empire*, a fresco by Giovanni Brancaccio (1939-1940) is placed beside an amputated arm gesturing the ‘Roman salute’, and it was painted in a time when street art “was the source of the artistic development that occupied the whole of the twentieth century”, in opposition to the abstract and elitist forms of the avant-garde. Spanning from the original Mexican murales such as the ones created by Diego Rivera “to speak to masses” to the fascist “Manifesto of Mural Painting (1933) signed by Mario Sironi and Carlo Carrà, street art “could present itself as another, alternative avant-garde” (Settis, 2017)¹². Interestingly, Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini (1883-1945), has been named by his father in homage to the hero of Mexican independence Benito Juárez and to Andrea and Amilcare, Italian revolutionaries. Therefore, as a former socialist, teacher, and journalist, and later Italian dictator and founder of fascism (1919), Mussolini’s image represents, once again, metamorphosis. At the same time, a past not yet left beyond, but alive and still bewitching, that continue to stratify the blanket of moral pollution which is more difficult to remove¹³.

Piazza Tevere is also emblematic of the inner relationship between power and ghettoization, as Kentridge himself describes: “I knew on the one hand, as we all do, of the glories of Rome – the Basilica of St Peter on the Trastevere side of the river – and I was also aware much later, maybe in

¹¹ Salvatore Settis, “Drawing, Memory, and the City: William Kentridge’s Rome”, 2017, in C. Basualdo (ed.), *William Kentridge: Triumphs and Laments*, Buchhandlung Walther Koenig: Berlin, 2017, pp. 161-203. Available at the following link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/drawing-memory-and-the-city-william-kentridges-rome/>

¹² Salvatore Settis, “Drawing, Memory, and the City: William Kentridge’s Rome”, 2017, in C. Basualdo (ed.), *William Kentridge: Triumphs and Laments*, Buchhandlung Walther Koenig: Berlin, 2017, pp. 161-203. Available at the following link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/drawing-memory-and-the-city-william-kentridges-rome/>

¹³ Tommaso Speretta, Lucia Franchini Viceré, “Triumphs & Laments: Sources for the Frieze Figures”, 2017, published on the Kentridge Studio website, available at the following link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/triumphs-laments-sources-for-the-frieze-figures/>.

my twenties, of the existence of the ghetto – the enclosed section for Jews on the other side of the river, about a kilometer down from St. Peter’s. I had never thought of them as connected and I suppose it was a gap in my knowledge that the establishment of the ghetto and the growth of St Peter’s had happened at the same time. What I had known of Rome was the great cathedrals, the glories of the Baroque and the starting shock of the project was that realization that the ghetto was actually a project of modernity”¹⁴.

Today, the characters of Triumphs and Laments are buried under the blanket of pollution, microorganisms and vegetation, and, because of that, the surface of the Tiber walls is ready to give birth to new characters and stories, to regenerate other memory and memories: the she-wolf continues to nourish the city and its legend, while the Kentridge’s she-wolf, reduced to a bony carcass, reminds us that ascension also brings fall.

¹⁴ William Kentridge, “Quello que non ricordo”, text published on the Kentridge Studio website, available at the following link: <https://www.kentridge.studio/projects/triumphs-and-laments/>