

**Speech of William Kentridgde on the occasion of her installation
at the Académie des beaux-arts
February 12, 2025**

Part One

What a pleasure and honour it is for me to be here, ready to occupy Fauteuil 13 of this great academy. I have not seen this significant seat, but I imagine a deep soft chair ready to envelop one. An English armchair - the word 'armchair' – does not have the same welcoming sound as a *fauteuil*, that will swallow you up.

But I am also aware of this chair being un-sat-upon for the last eleven years, since the death of my predecessor, Ilias Lalaounis, in 2013, when he was 93. I hope that this is an omen for longevity. The fact that one has the chair until the end of one's life is both reassuring and anxious-making. We know who is standing next to the chair the whole time, waiting.

I want to pay tribute to Ilias Lalaounis. We all know he was a great jeweller, spending 70 years at his métier, abandoning academic studies in political science and law for the physical activity of working with gold. I feel an affinity here. I too started studying political science at university, but ended up, for better or worse, in the physical world of the studio. Not abandoning thinking, but thinking through the fingers and the eyes. Very early in his journey of making jewellery, Ilias found his material: gold. A pliable, adjustable, soft metal rather than the hard fact of precious stones. And what was his physical thinking? A lifelong conversation with old civilisations and cultures. His work drew on his own Greek heritage, but later he also drew images and inspiration from Celtic, Japanese and indigenous American cultures – which would appear transformed in the different collections of jewellery he presented in museums and shops and galleries. All artists are in conversation with the past, as are we all. All seeing is 10% optics and 90% prediction, memory, and association. This comes to the fore in the studio. Our eyes have been under construction for thousands of years. The knowledge of a shoulder, a forearm and a wrist is also filled with the forearm, shoulder and wrist of the charioteer of Delphi, Ilias's home town, where he would have seen the classical sculpture in the flesh, or in the metal, of the town museum. But the charioteer of Delphi

is also a part of my eye, in my case known from a bad black and white photograph, from a high school textbook on history of art. I have never made a project about the Delphic oracle, although I have made one about the Sibyl at Cumae. Again, I am aware of the closeness and differences. These myths and their universe being so local for Ilias and so present, but distant, for me. The difference of being inside a tradition and being outside, but still being fed by it, nonetheless. However close or far from Delphi, there is a commonality. Having to translate – or in my case, I am sure, to mistranslate – these histories into our present time.

Gold is not my *métier*. Rather, it is charcoal - burnt wood. So I have chosen wood rather than metal for my symbolic sword. But the specific medium is secondary. What is primary is the debt we owe to our work. In Ilias's case, not just a mastery of filigree work, of granulation, of hand-hammering – all the disciplines rehearsed until they become habits of the hand. Not just how we use the material but what we owe to the activity, how we serve the art. And here we honour both Ilias's devotion to his art and to the beautiful objects that he made – miniature sculptures designed to be worn. Ilias, I will sit very comfortably in your chair.

Part Two

I am particularly delighted to be admitted to the Academy here in Paris. As a scholar, I visited Paris as part of a whirlwind tour around Europe. Two days in Rome, four days in Florence, three days in Paris. But I came to Paris properly as a student with Anne, my partner (and after a year in Paris, my wife). I had some years as an artist making drawings and etchings in Johannesburg, but had decided I could no longer do it. I could not get rid of the phrase lodged in my head: 'You do not have the right to be an artist.' That was my mantra. Perhaps an idea that artists did not live in Johannesburg, that to be an artist you had to live in Paris or New York. Maybe you had to wear a beret and have a thin moustache, had to have a palette, had to live in a *chambre de bonne*. At any rate I decided I had failed as an artist. I sold my etching press, closed the studio and came to Paris to study not art, but theatre, to become an actor. My wife worked at the American Hospital in Neuilly. I studied at the École Jacques Lecoq, a school of movement and mime in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. After three weeks at the school it was clear I would not be an actor, but I stayed for the year, practicing but failing all the physical exercise. But in these activities I learnt more about what it is to be an artist

than I did in any other art school or any other learning situation. This was in 1982, François Mitterrand had just been elected, there was fear among the bourgeoisie of France of what the socialists would do. I remember street battles at the Cité Université between socialist and Islamist Iranian students.

At that time there were three main teachers of mime in Paris. There was Jacques Lecoq, there was Marcel Marceau and there was Étienne Decroux. Étienne Decroux, the *éminence grise* of mime in Paris, had a deeply utopian philosophy. When an actor rose from lying down to standing on their feet, he believed you should see the whole of humanity rising. This was the aim, to make every gesture universal.

At his school, Marcel Marceau taught rigorous skills of pantomime *planche*, the glass box, your hands against the glass, the balloon tugging into the air, extreme precision to make predictable illusions. There was a devotion to the *point fixe*. Each school disliked, more than that, had a contempt for the others.

The Jacques Lecoq school was a school of movement more than mime. A learning of what one could express and what one could recognise in the body in movement, a course in acting from the neck downwards. A world held in our bodies not just in our heads. There was not one universal walk, but rather an endless array of particularities which one might not know, but which one could recognise when one saw them. This meaning from below the head, this non-rational knowledge, this favouring of recognition rather than knowing in advance, was the key lesson I learnt. This applies whether one is making a gesture as an actor, or to one's movement as a dancer, or to the line made by an artist. The thinking is in the body.

Where does the impulse begin? What is the tension in the body, what is the breath, the voice that comes from this first impulse? If you are drawing, is your whole body involved, movement all the way as far as you can reach? Or are you working just with your arm from the shoulder, or just from your elbow, or from the wrist or just from the knuckles? There's a whole course in drawing lessons to give, just in thinking of these separations. But what is central is the desire of the body towards its object, the meeting of the charcoal and the paper. This is the primary drive - this first impulse to be making. The 'what' that is made, the subject, is vital of course, but also secondary. The paper

and the charcoal cry out for its subject, the leap comes first and then the looking. Trust the impulse, give the impulse the benefit of the doubt. This is what I learnt at the theatre school in Paris and in a deep way, it is still at the heart of my practice.

In the end the work will always tell you who you are. If your work is pretentious, arrogant, flippant – you can't escape the judgment of yourself. All the work becomes, if not a self-portrait, then certainly an autobiography. This is why looking back at one's work is often so painful. One is confronted with, "Is this really who I am? Is this all that I am?"

There is risk in embarking on a project without a clear route map, a script or a storyboard - but also an openness to what will arrive unbidden and to discovering that you didn't know what you knew. A moment of recognition, perhaps like a dog finding a bone he has forgotten he has buried. It's not relying on chance, nor is it a planned programme, it is somewhere in the middle. An invitation on behalf of our body, or arm or hand, if you are making a drawing, that will lead us to new spaces.

When I started making animated drawings using a technique of charcoal drawing and erasing, I was very apologetic. I could not get a perfect erasure. I tried different papers and erasers, there was always a grey trace left behind. In the end, friends said to me, "Stop complaining, it is this grey smudge, this trace of time, that we are interested in." I had to recalibrate. "Yes, of course. The grey smudge is good." I didn't think, "How clever I am, to have found this way of making the passage of time visible!", but rather, "How stupid was I, not to have seen that before?"

The process shows the meaning. A certain stupidity in the studio is essential; the studio is a safe space for stupidity. The drawing should always know more than the artist. If the artist is more intelligent than the drawing, there is no point in making it. What this means, of course, is that large allowances must be made for doubt, for uncertainty. For being cautious about the starting point, the first, the good idea. Finding confidence in what you did not expect. The detail at the edge of the drawing that gives a clue to rethinking the whole process. A moment of surprise, in a theatrical improvisation. An almost physical response to the surprise of this new image or movement. The grey smudge follows the line - this is the less good idea.

“Find the less good idea.” What does it mean to follow the less good idea? Eight years ago in Johannesburg, I (with other people) founded the Centre for the Less Good Idea, an art centre in the heart of the city. The Centre works with the principle of finding and using the energy of collaboration of writers, dancers, filmmakers, artists, musicians, as a way of working. The Centre for the Less Good Idea is a physical space: a rehearsal space, spaces in which to perform. Some 1400 artists and writers have participated in projects in the last eight years. The title - the Centre for the Less Good Idea - comes from an African proverb, which advises, “If the good doctor can’t cure you, find the less good doctor.” When the grand ideas fail, find other more local, more particular, solutions.

One needs to be attentive and open to what arrives in the process of making. The good idea with which one had started, often begins to crack as the rehearsal, or the drawing, proceeds. At this point, one can either insist on it - shout louder, draw darker lines (there is always a violence in certainty) – or one can welcome what comes from the cracks, from the periphery.

The Centre involves a strategy for making: not waiting for clarity before beginning. But along with the physical making, this is also a way of thinking: thinking through material. In a fundamental way, my way of thinking, my way of approaching what it is to be an artist, was shaped by the lessons of the body, at which I was so bad, in the Paris theatre school 43 years ago.

But ‘the less good idea’ also has wider meanings, including a suspicion of the grand ideas. The history of the twentieth century has shown us the disasters that have attended every project that claimed certainty about how the world should be. The good ideas have led to such catastrophes, that we need to find more tentative, partial, local solutions. Being attentive to what arrives from the periphery also means being open to ideas and impulses from outside the centre. Johannesburg where I live is not Paris, New York or Berlin, but there are understandings and insights here which show new ways of thinking.

Whilst the activity in the studio often involves many collaborators, editors, composers, dancers, even in the solitary act of drawing, one is not alone. Over the decades in the studio there have been many companions. Some French artists and writers have been vital in the work I have done over the past fifty years.

Edouard Manet's paintings still sit inside me. How can one resist the gold on the champagne bottles in the bar of the Folies Bergères, or the flowers in a jam jar or small vase, that he painted at the end of his life? Alongside these, one remembers his images of the barricades of the Paris Commune and the execution of Emperor Maximilian. The historical and the domestic, the personal and the public. This lesson from him stays with me.

Georges Méliès and his films, made around the turn of the last century, changed how I imagined films could be made and opened the idea of the studio as a subject for inquiry. Courbet and his studio is also in the mix, of course.

Alfred Jarry and his Ubu have been companions over the decades. In a student production fifty years ago, I played a dancing bear and my wife played the entire Polish army. Jarry's self-pitying tyrant remains a figure for our time. Over the past thirty years he has reappeared in the studio in drawings, etchings and other theatre productions.

I think of Ferdinand Oyono, the great Cameroonian writer, and his novel *La vie d'un boy* (which I also turned into a piece of theatre), which revealed to me both new insights into France, but also into what it was to grow up in South Africa.

There are the French and anti-French writers at the edge of France. Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, writing between Paris and Martinique; and Frantz Fanon, looking at France from Martinique and Algeria. None of these were given a place under the *Coupoles*, but all of them have a seat in my studio, watching the work, prodding me here and there, bringing the world into the studio, giving me good remembrance of what is vital.

“For remember,” writes Césaire, “beware of crossing your arms and assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, because life is not a spectacle, because a sea of sorrows is not a proscenium, because a man who cries is not a dancing bear.”

I thank you.