

Inside the Atelier

Luisa Toušová

Once you emerge from Gallery 1 into Gallery 2, you have just entered the ‘Atelier.’ You are met with an encased scale model of the space you are inhabiting. In an era of digital monopoly over project plans, William Kentridge’s *The Battle between YES and NO* is represented physically. Every wall is meticulously rendered and adorned to scale with miniatures of his work. The model is surrounded by all one expects an artists’ atelier to have—a moka pot, scissors, scattered charts, pencils, charcoal. The closer you look, the more you see. Little details and allusions to the exhibit come to light. The model is an ode to the moments from the exhibit that you loved. The model is a window into the pieces that you did not notice. You are presented with an expression of the labor that has gone into the exhibit you are flowing through.

The room engages in a playful reimagination and materialization of what an artist’s studio looks like. Some elements are a direct staging intended to illustrate Kentridge’s artistic process. A team of artists from his Johannesburg studio depicted this recreation. The walls of the space are adorned by dramatic figurative lines, collages of phrases, and notations. As if you were inside the pages of Kentridge’s personal sketchbook. The limited color palette throughout the exhibit renders the bright red scrawl all the more prominent. Its motion traces a path; it guides us through the atelier and guides us as we imagine Kentridge at work. Pacing. Pondering. Philosophizing. Picturing.

The walls invite us to pace, to ponder, to philosophize and perhaps to picture. Kentridge advises “let’s try for once not to be right.” The gallery presents you with the chance to sit with the artist’s thoughts. Surrounding the scale model are chairs with music sheet stands that display replica sketchbooks. The music sheet stands remind us of Kentridge’s other work, including the multimedia chamber Opera that is eponymous with the exhibit. The audience is given the chance to materially connect with scattered thoughts and words that inspired the work before them.

One sketchbook asks you to “Try rubbing the words together.” This text now proposes that you do the same. The Atelier walls suggest an exploration of “dialectics for 9 year olds.” A dialectic is a style of argument or thought. Through a thesis and antithesis, you come to a synthesis, simply put thesis x antithesis = synthesis. In classical Socratic dialectics you aim to arrive at a shared truth. Which invites the question of what a shared truth looks like in the 21st century?

In contrast to the approach encapsulated by the exhibit’s scale model, I asked Anthropic’s Artificial Intelligence *Claude* to generate a series of dialectics for 9 year olds. This was the LLM’s response:

Screen Time vs. Playing Outside — Balance video games with outdoor play

Rules vs. Freedom — Follow important rules but get choices in other areas

Trying New Foods vs. Sticking to Favourites — Try one new food weekly while keeping favourite foods

Working Hard vs. Having Fun — Do homework/chores first, then free time to play

Being Alone vs. Being Social — Spend some days alone and other days with friends

Saving Money vs. Spending Money — Save half your allowance, spend half now

Competition vs. Cooperation — Play to win but also help teammates and celebrate effort

Being Independent vs. Getting Help — Try solving problems yourself first, ask for help if stuck

Staying the Same vs. Always Changing — Keep favorite old things but also try new ones

Now, I want to invite you, to engage in “for once not [being] right,” write your own dialectics for 9 year olds. Be playful. Consider what you imagined, thought about or wished to have known at that age.

What does your synthesis evoke? Can you come to a shared truth? How do your thoughts compare to Claude?