

Haus der Kunst

Kendell Geers 1988 — 2012

Prestel

Munich · London · New York

**Edited by
Clive Kellner**

**with essays by
Nicolas Bourriaud
Laurent Devèze
Katerina Gregos
Clive Kellner
Anitra Nettleton**

**and a conversation between
Kendell Geers and William Kentridge
moderated by Okwui Enwezor**

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Kendell Geers: 1988–2012 adds to the growing corpus of important monographic exhibitions that Haus der Kunst has dedicated to living artists at different stages in their careers. From the mid-career retrospective—as is the case with this exhibition, which examines the work of the South African artist Kendell Geers—to early-career exhibitions to late-career surveys; or the thematic elucidation of particular areas of an artist's oeuvre, the museum has made analytical devotion to the work of living artists a principle of its commitment to contemporary art and artists.

We are therefore proud, that *Kendell Geers: 1988–2012*, the first comprehensive survey of the work of Geers—one of South Africa's most acclaimed artists—is being presented at Haus der Kunst. As an artist who was born and grew up under the pernicious legacy of apartheid in South Africa, Geers at a very early stage in his career understood that the idea of the artist as an autonomous individual in a troubled society stained by inequality, segregation, racism, and oppression, was difficult to reconcile with the harsh, repressive context of apartheid in which he and several generations of South Africans lived remarkably separate lives.

The practice of art, then, offered Geers not only a platform to challenge the specific conditions of the apartheid state; more importantly, art offered him a language with which to establish a position of critical address. It was in the crucible of collective activism as a university student and in solitary isolation as an artist (both instances shaped on the street) in Johannesburg in the mid-1980s that he began to develop his voice. The result, across more than two decades of prolific practice has been a profusion of art that can be quietly reflective and rigorous, but also provocative and incendiary. Brooking no protocols of the proper, Geers—through his ferocious intelligence—has used the occasions of art-making to interrogate power and ideology. In his incisive and passionate art, he has specifically focused on thinking about the profound place of art and the position of the artist in the context of political emergency, social crisis, the psychic toll exerted by the legacy of apartheid, and the spiritual desert created by exile from his country of origin.

Geers left South Africa in 2000 and moved to Europe. He lived briefly in Leipzig before finally settling in Brussels, where he currently resides. The two experiences, home and exile, form the backbone of this

retrospective exhibition. Conceived in two chronological parts (1988–2000 and 2000–present), and partitioned between two geographical as well as psychic spaces (South Africa and Europe) the exhibition—organized so sensitively by guest curator Clive Kellner—explores the differing sensibilities, concepts, strategies, formats, and materials used by Geers while living in South Africa; and the shift in attitude and formal language produced by his presence in Europe.

Nevertheless, the exhibition does not attempt a synthesis of these two cleaved parts, each with their enigmas and resolutions. Rather, through acts of subtle displacements and positioning, Kellner has engineered an exhibition of sensory, visual, physical, and conceptual thinking. His exhibition—which opens with the open terrain of the historical archive as porous memory and as always incomplete—presents a sequence of overlapping temporal and historical registers through a tour of all periods and genres of Geers' practice in sculpture, installation, photography, video, and performance. The result is sometimes visually low-key and at other times physically demanding, but still exhilarating.

With this exhibition, Haus der Kunst continues the tradition of rigorous analysis of the artist's oeuvre, placing a critical spotlight on the challenges and pleasures the work of art brings. Making all this possible has required the critical support and cooperation of many lenders, including museums, foundations, and private collections in South Africa, Europe, and Australia. Pierre Lombart, Gordon Schachat, Xavier Huyberechts, Francois Pinault, Museum Africa, Hector Pieterse Museum, Morand Family Collection and others have kindly extended loans' work Geers to this project. We thank them enormously. The exhibition would not have been possible without the active participation of Lorenzo Fiaschi and Alice Fontanelli at Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Le Moulin; Liza Essers at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / Cape Town; Rodolphe Janssen at Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels and Stephen Friedman and David Hubbard at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. With the galleries' support we have tracked down works in various collections and filled gaps in information necessary to form a fuller picture of the artist. We also extend to the four galleries our gratitude for their generous funding support to the project.

We are especially pleased to have worked with Clive Kellner who, as a curator and longstanding collaborator of Kendell Geers, perhaps like no one else, knows the artist's work with the depth of insight required to bring the exhibition successfully on stream. Working with Clive has been a singular pleasure. It goes without saying that every work of art and the career of an artist require the particular knowledge and insight that interpreters of that work can bring. Typically the exhibition catalog serves as the historical index in the course of analysis and interpretation. For this Nicolas Bourriaud, Laurent Devèze, Katerina Gregos, and Anitra Nettleton have each contributed essays of depth and clarity. Important thanks go to William Kentridge for his participation and eloquence in a conversation with Geers, which I was only too pleased to moderate. Others have played a crucial role in shaping the publication, not least of which are the artist and curator. We thank Kendell Geers' wife Cendrine du Welz who assisted and supported the exhibition and catalog production in immeasurable ways, and Anna Schneider, who served as the catalog's assistant editor and worked in close collaboration with the authors, the curator, the artist, the designer, the publisher, and the copyeditor. We thank as the book's designer Chris Goennawein for the clear visual program of the catalog; Katharina Haderer, editor-in-chief of Prestel; and our incomparable copyeditor Monica Rumsey.

The members of the Haus der Kunst's exhibition planning and production team have been indispensable to this project. With their usual professional care they have made the exhibition seem both effortless and engaging. For this, thanks are due to Tina Köhler, head of exhibition production and planning; Anton Köttl, technical director; Cassandre Schmid, registrar; and Sophie Remig, exhibition assistant, who closely tracked every facet of the installation and production.

Finally, we are grateful to Kendell Geers for his collaboration on this important exhibition project and thank him for his patient dedication, working with members of the museum's staff to see through all aspects of its production. It is my hope that this exhibition and the publication that accompanies it will bring further insight into understanding Geers' work and its relationship to South Africa and the world at large.

Okwui Enwezor
Director Haus der Kunst



Out of Africa, 1994

Kendell Geers (1988—2012)

Kendell Geers is a visual artist from South Africa whose artistic practice spans a polyphony of media, including installation, sculpture, drawing, video, performance, and photography. As a conceptual artist born into the tendentious political period of apartheid in South Africa, Geers' identity as a white Afrikaner provided a fecund environment in which he was able to explore both art and life. Geers' incendiary artistic practice can largely be defined according to two important periods, denoted by the dates 1988 and 2000. In 1989 Geers left South Africa as a form of self-exile to move to New York, as a result of the military conscription that was forced onto white males at that time by the South African Defence Force. In New York he spent some time working as a studio assistant to the artist Richard Prince before returning to South Africa in 1990 after the release of Nelson Mandela. *Liberty* 1989, a set of postcards Geers created with the face of Liberty cut out, emerges from this time. The second date, 2000, denotes the year of Geers' emigration to Brussels. These two periods embody two distinct bodies of work produced over two decades: the periods of South Africa and Europe, where the contradictions and "entanglements" of the postcolonial manifest.¹

I

Geers' early political work took the form of Conceptual Art that employs the ready-made or found object as a strategy to "resist," "engage," and "expose" facets of society. Geers' acts of appropriation can be understood to be performative, such as in his 1993 work *Title Withheld (Brick)*, in which the artist threw a brick through a window; the appropriation of an object in *Self Portrait* (1995) where Geers placed a broken glass bottle neck in a gallery; and appropriation as an idea, as in *By Any Means Necessary* (1995), where the artist wrote a bomb threat letter. In his seminal early work *Untitled (ANC, AVF, AWB, CR, DR, IFP, NP, PAC, SACP)* of 1993–1994, the artist joined each and every political party during the run-up to South Africa's first democratic election, thereby exposing the borders of the democratic process and bringing into question the fetishization culture of party politics and individuality. In this way, Geers became a card-carrying member of each political party that ranged in extremism from the Afrikaans right-wing party, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement); to the South African Communist Party (SACP); and the predominantly black liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC). This was a volatile period in South Africa's sociopolitical transition to a democracy where only four years earlier Nelson Mandela had been released from Robben Island, third force insurgents were agitating violence in the hostels, and constant flare-ups occurred between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) members, which led to violent clashes.

In *Untitled (Death Register)* of 1976–1993, Geers found the official death register of the June 1976 Soweto riots on a dump at the Johannesburg Magistrates offices. The document records the name of Hector Pieterse, the first victim to be shot dead by police in Soweto during the scholars' protest march against the forced implementation of Afrikaans in black schools in South Africa. Pieterse became a symbol of the liberation struggle and resistance against apartheid and was immortalized in an infamous image by documentary photographer Sam Nzima. Through these and other similar "acts of appropriation," Geers was able to employ the coded language of North American and European conceptualism as a strategy to both resist the apartheid regime and to expose the inherent contradictions prevalent in white apartheid society where the morality and ethics of the time prevented

¹ The term "entanglement" is defined by Sarah Nuttall as follows: "Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained even if it was resisted or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture toward a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring in a tangle, but which implies human foldedness."

See Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).

mixed couples from marrying, where race defined the movement of people, and the state controlled information and regulated society through the military. This kind of society produces its monsters. As South African writer and academic Njabulo Ndebele stated, “If today they sound like imaginary events it is because as we shall recall, the horror of day-to-day life under apartheid often outdid the efforts of the imagination to reduce it to metaphor.”² In his essay, “The Perversity of my Birth, the Birth of my Perversity,” Geers renders legible his subjective experience under apartheid.³

II

One way in which he achieved this was through appropriating the colonial history of South Africa and other global political and artistic events into his curriculum vitae, by means of an artwork titled *T.W. (C.V.)*. In a similar way, Geers altered his actual date of birth and appropriated that of May 1968, the social revolution sparked by students and workers that emerged out of Paris and manifested itself in locations as diverse as Argentina, Spain, Poland, and Brazil. In Geers’ work *T.W. (C.V.)*, the date 1899 appears with the words, Anglo Boer War. It denotes the second Boer War (1899–1902) fought between the colonial British forces and the Afrikaans or Dutch settlers who were known as the Boers. As a result of the conflict between the two groups, the British forces under the leadership of Lord Kitchener implemented the “scorched earth policy” in which British forces burned the Boers’s crops, homesteads, and provisions, leaving many of the women and children to perish from starvation or to be placed in concentration camps. In 2002, Geers made the work *Scorched Earth*, a series of photographic images depicting burned landscapes throughout South Africa.

Coeval to this history are the barbed-wire fences that were erected by the British forces to form concentration camps that contained Boer women and children. As a result of their internment, more than 26,000 women and children died in the camps. Geers’ first “barbed wire” work, *T.W. (Flatwrap)*, produced in 1993, consists of a ball of flatwrap wire. Barbed wire is a South African form of fencing that has been adapted in other countries as razor wire. As Geers has said, “barbed wire is for cattle and razor wire for humans.”⁴ In 1993 Kendell installed a full-length fence, *T.W. (Exported)*, made from “barbed wire” into a gallery space. The fence physically disrupts the gallery space, bisecting it into two. While *T.W. (Exported)* evokes the ghostly imagery of the Boer concentration camps, it also refers to many contemporary political issues and situations. Perhaps the most harrowing example is the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, a detainment and interrogation facility of the United States military located within Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, where many Al Qaeda terrorist suspects have been held since January 2002. Similar constructions of razor-wire mesh fences occur repeatedly within the facility. Geers obtains the “barbed wire” fencing he uses in his installations from a South African company called Cochrane Steel, which produces a range of “security systems products,” including RPG Rocket Barriers, Critical Infrastructure, and Rapid Deployment Barriers used in crowd control and riots. The artist tells the story of visiting the company and meeting with the CEO, who has a photograph of himself and former United States President George W. Bush fishing together.

2 From the book by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Memory, Metaphor and the Triumph of Narrative, Negotiating the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

3 Quoted directly from the Geers essay sent by Cendrine du Welz to Clive Kellner by e-mail, 5 November 2012.

4 Ibid.

T.W. (Exported) predates a much larger installation, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2001) a permanent installation in Muenster, Germany. It forms a labyrinth around a garden in a former Cistercian monastery near the Teutoburg Forest, the site of the “Barbarians” defeat of Tiberius’s Roman legion in the Varus Battle of 9 AD. Teutoburg was also the site of the Peace of Westphalia, signed between May and October 1648, that ended the Thirty Years’ War and led to the territorial reorganization of Europe, signaling the triumph of sovereignty over empire. Geers’ title *Waiting for the Barbarians* clearly references the historical victory of the Germanic tribes over the Romans but is also a reference to the literary work of the same title by South African author J. M. Coetzee that was published in 1980. It tells the story of a magistrate who governs a small border town on behalf of “the Empire.” There is the constant threat of invading “barbarians” and the magistrate witnesses levels of cruelty and injustice to prisoners of war by the Empire. He empathizes with the prisoners, and as a result is branded an enemy of the state. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an allegory for the oppressor and the oppressed. It asks us, in times of heightened socio-political injustice and intolerance, whether the individual will act with a conscience. Works such as *T.W. (Exported)* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* infer an inclusion and exclusion by the state or authorities, not only to hold people in prison behind fences but also to keep people out—such as illegal immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers. In this way, *Waiting for the Barbarians* becomes, according to Jan Winkelmann, “a kind of anti-monument of the many borders of the world, the countries and peoples that are implicated in countless conflicts and wars.”⁵

III

Germane to Geers’ artistic practice is the notion of his identity. That of a “bastard,” of not being of legitimate birth but born between Europe and Africa, and as such his identity is constructed as a vernacular—a third-world version of modernity. In his writings, *The Horror The Horror*, Geers states, “I live with the knowledge that I am a complete contradiction.”⁶ This notion is made manifest in one of the artist’s early found object works, *Self Portrait* (1995), a broken glass bottle neck from a discarded bottle of Heineken beer. Like many of Geers’ works, his identity is connected to the work *T.W. (CV)*. As Geers states, “We were imported from Holland in 1652.”⁷ *T.W. (CV)* begins with the date April 6, 1652, which denotes the “founding” of the Cape of Good Hope into a Dutch colony by Jan van Riebeeck. Like many white Afrikaners, Geers can trace his heritage back to the Dutch Huguenots who trekked across the Vaal River to secure their own land, the Transvaal. Within generations the Afrikaner community had established its own vernacular language, Afrikaans, and sought its own identity. The formation of the National Party and the leadership of Verwoerd led to the establishment of “apartheid,” the racially segregated policy implemented by the South African government in 1948. Like Geers’ ancestors the “Boers,” Heineken beer was imported into South Africa. The implication is that foreign is better than local. Heineken bottles are specifically designed aesthetic objects. The designer in Holland decided on the hue of the glass, the label’s typography, and the bottle’s shape. Into it they poured the perfectly designed beer—the artist’s ancestors with their ideas, ideology, values, and morality. After a few centuries, things fall apart! After the bottle is used, it is discarded, thrown away and broken. In the same way, Geers produces art that is a by-product of his broken life.

5 This quote is from Winkelmann’s essay, “Waiting for the Barbarians’ — Kendell Geers,” in *Skulptur-Biennale Münsterland 2001*, translated from the German by Andrea Scrima (Berlin: Vice-Versa-Verlag, 2001). Full text available online at: http://www.jn-wnklmn.de/geers_e.htm. Accessed November 16, 2012.

6 Kendell Geers, “The Horror, The Horror,” in *Stopping The Process? Contemporary views on art and exhibitions*, edited by Mika Hannula, trans. by Mike Garner (Helsinki: Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, 1998), 163–173.

7 This quotation was recorded in an interview between Kendell Geers and Clive Kellner in Paris on 30 September 2012.

At age fifteen Geers ran away from home. His father, Jacobus Hermanus Pieter Geers, was a religious fundamentalist Jehovah's Witness prone to bouts of violence spurred on by his alcoholic disposition. Kendell grew up in Boksborg, in East Johannesburg, a rough blue-collar suburb. Some of his uncles served in the South African Police Riot Squad. As a result of Geers' memories of his father, he made the artwork *Death Certificate* (1988), the official notification of death of his father by asphyxiation—suicide. In a similar way, the broken bottle neck represents a self-portrait of the artist. A disembodied image. It refers to a discontinued history and to the illegitimacy of being a white Afrikaner, placed at the broken end of a violent history. And so Geers tried not to be white.

IV

Geers' artistic and literary influences are varied and numerous, Marcel Duchamp perhaps being the most pervasive. Duchamp's influence extends from Duchamp's deployment of the readymade or found object as a mechanism to comment on the dominant political and economic systems of his day through the use of irony, humor, and ambiguity. The only definition of "readymade" published under the name of Marcel Duchamp, or rather his initials "MD," exists in André Breton and Paul Éluard's *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme*, described as "an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of the artist."⁸ Duchamp explicitly selected objects that were "visually indifferent." Similarly, Geers has selected objects that appear visually indifferent yet are rendered aesthetically potent as sociopolitical commentaries on South African society in the form of a brick, a bottle neck, a suitcase, or a fence. In this way, the readymades or found objects that Geers employs are not simply objects removed from one context to another but are signifiers of a social field of relations that implicitly binds sociopolitical content to an inanimate object.

Geers has produced work that directly references Duchamp, for example *Rack* (2009) with that of Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* (1914), where Geers has adorned Duchamp's rack with broken self-portrait Heineken beer bottles and works that indirectly reference Duchamp. His 2010 piece, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, unlike Duchamp's snow shovel, portrays two pairs of human arms cast in bronze and suspended on a chain. One hand has its forefinger pointing downward, while the other hand is arranged in a gesture that, in contemporary society, is considered rude and carries sexual connotations. Historically, this sign of the thumb between the fingers was used to ward off evil. In this way *In Advance of a Broken Arm* becomes a talisman embodying aspects of both the sacred and the profane. But Geers' forays into body parts, such as *St Johns Pendulum* (2010)—while addressing a religious theme and imbued with a fetish in the form of nails found in *Nkisi* figures from the Congo—also references Duchamp's little-known series of studies and sculptures for *Étant donné*s of unused body casts from the 1950s. For Duchamp, the casting process suggested the skin of the body: "the surface produced by the plaster gives me more or less what I am looking for, namely the epidermis and not the sculpture of the bones and volumes."⁹

Literary influences that have informed Geers' production include, among others, Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* (*La casa de los espíritus*, 1982), which resulted in Geers' *House of Spirits* (2005), an enormous polyhedron made of steel and razor mesh that references the "magical realism" present in Allende's novel as an embodied form of expression. Geers speaks of his *House of Spirits* as "a prison that attracts and repels and evokes beauty and repulsion. It is a house that provides protection against the materialism of this world but also a prism through which we begin a spiritual journey."¹⁰

8 See Hector Obalk's essay "The Unfindable Readymade," *tout-fait*, the Marcel Duchamp studies online journal, vol. 1, no. 2 (May 2000). Accessed online at: http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/obalk.html.

9 This reference on Marcel Duchamp is taken from Lewis Kachur, "Given, Finally," published on *Artnet.com*, August 26, 2009. Available online at: <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kachur/marcel-duchamp8-26-09.asp>. Accessed November 16, 2012.

10 This quotation by Geers is taken from the press release issued by Castello di Ama for contemporary art, announcing Geers' *House of Spirits* traveling with *the diversities*, 2006. Available online at: <http://www.castellodiam.com/english/pressrelease.php?id=198>. Accessed November 29, 2012.

In the video installation *My Traitor's Heart* (1998), the artist produced a large-scale video installation comprising twelve monitors placed on twelve scaffolding towers in a circle. The work references the book of the same title (1989) by Rian Malan, where Geers utilizes two clips of found footage from the films *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) and Nicolas Roeg's *Heart of Darkness* (1993), both of which were adapted from Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Geers selected the scene where Kurtz lies mortally wounded on the ground after being attacked by Willard and utters the words, "the horror . . . the horror." The marrying of *Apocalypse Now* through the adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, together with Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*, suggests a common thematic thread based on Malan's return from exile to South Africa in 1989: "he returns to face his country, his tribe and his conscience."¹¹ *Country of My Skull* (2010) refers to the literary work by Antjie Krog (1998) in which Krog writes about the findings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) from three main vantage points: as a collection of testimonies from the TRC, as an exploration of political and moral philosophy relevant to the TRC, and from her own position and experience as a white Afrikaner. In a similar way, we can read Geers' *Country of My Skull* as a return to his roots in post-apartheid South Africa and as a meditation, both on his personal life and on the country of his birth.

V

Kode-X (2003) consists of found objects, steel shelving, glass, concrete, and signal tape. Commissioned by the Museum for African Art, New York, this large-scale installation brings fetishization of tribal objects together with popular culture, suggestive of archival storage and commodity culture but also evoking the paradox of the sacred and the profane. Kendell's use of popular culture, texts, newspaper articles, Hollywood film footage, political posters, photographs, letters, and literature suggest an "archive," a repository that indexes memories, ideas, and references. The archive then becomes, as Hal Foster states, "a mode of practice or point of departure for the artist"¹² as opposed to Derrida's notion of the archive as personal in his *Mal'd Archive* or *Archive Fever*. Within the context of political South Africa, Geers' archive infers an "instituting imaginary," a subjective experience of the individual but also, according to Achille Mbembe, suggests the archive of the state.¹³ In this way the archive becomes an extension of the artistic process and of the studio. It is the locus of creative thought as much as it is a record or a register. It is similar in many ways to Marcel Broodthaers' *Musée de L'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles; 1968), which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction and infers institutional critique playing homage to Duchamp's readymade.

VI

The human skull, or rather images of skulls, carry a plethora of nightmarish evocations. One such example is the photographic depiction of human skulls from the Rwanda Genocide in 1994, where an estimated 800,000 people were killed in the East African nation. Other images provoke a different emotional register, such as the subterranean receptacle of the dead (as the catacombs of Paris were known in the eighteenth century), the underground chambers stacked with bones and skulls. For some cultures, the human skull is an

11 Rian Malan, *My Traitor's Heart: A South African Exile Returns to Face His Country, His Tribe, and His Conscience* (New York: Grove Press, 2000; orig. pub. 1990).

12 For further reading on the relationship between the archive and artistic practice, see Hal Foster's article "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22.

13 See Mbembe's chapter, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2002), 19.

object of loss or a symbol of time passing. For others it possesses magical attributes or is endowed with special powers. In seventeenth century Europe, the term *vanitas* was used to describe a genre of still-life painting that sought to convey a reminder of the temporal nature of our earthly existence. *Vanitas*, (from the Latin, meaning “vanity”) functioned as an allegory for the meaninglessness of earthly life and possessions. In Harmen Steenwyck’s *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* (1640), the artist used such symbols as the *turbinidae* (sea shell) to signify wealth, books to show human knowledge, musical instruments synonymous with sensual pleasure, and the chronometer (watch) to convey the passing of life. The skull represents death or mortality. From this emerges the *memento mori* tradition, meaning “remember your mortality” or “remember you will die.” The contrast between youth and death is evident in Frans Hals’ *Youth with a Skull* (1624–1628), while a more macabre allegory exists in a white marble sculpture by an unknown Italian artist of the seventeenth century, where the ambiguity of life and death is enunciated in the form of the skull with the vestiges of the person’s wig and breastplate. Perhaps one of the most striking images in antithesis of the moral message of *vanitas* is Damien Hirst’s sculpture *For the Love of God* (2007), which features an eighteenth-century human skull encrusted with 8,601 flawless diamonds, and reifies the notion of commodity culture and the fetishization of the art object.

Geers’ skull *Fuckface* (2005) brings to the fore the relationship between text and object. It combines two harrowing elements, the skull of a deceased African person who was murdered by a gunshot behind the ear and that of a common swear word spray-painted onto the skull in black and white. The missing element is the face, the personable and subjective aspect that is rendered mute as a result of the violence, suggested by both the language and the object. But the skull still speaks; it says, “*Et in Arcadia ego*” [Even in Arcadia, I am there]. An old Yoruba folktale tells of a man who encountered a skull mounted on a post by the wayside. To his astonishment, the skull spoke. The man asked the skull why it was mounted there. The skull said that it was mounted there for talking. The man then went to the king, and told the king of the marvel he had found, a talking skull. The king and the man returned to the place where the skull was mounted; the skull remained silent. The king then commanded that the man be beheaded and ordered that his head be mounted in place of the skull.¹⁴ Similarly, the photographic version of *Fuckface* (2007) depicts the head of the artist himself with the same black and white text that appears on the earlier skull version. The transformation of the skull into an embodied figure that stares back at you is profound. The painted face of the artist is at once “primitive,” evincing a tribal quality with that of a warlike disposition. Inscribed onto his face are words, or rather a word. This has particular significance because objects are named through words and are thereby given meaning. The artist has also produced similar works that combine text and object using the skulls of a hippopotamus, a walrus and a whale. Geers’ *Cadavre Exquis* (2007) reinterprets the ancient Greek sculpture Nike of Samothrace. Germane to the self-portrait *Fuckface* is an earlier work, *Bloody Hell* (1990) in which the artist’s head is shown covered in blood. A reminder of our mortality, our *vanitas*. Each self-portrait represents an epoch, a period in the artist’s life: South Africa at the end of apartheid and a post-ideological and capitalist era in Europe.

14 William Russell Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

VII

One of the recurring motifs or themes in Geers' artistic production is that of violence. There is the personal violence that Geers inflicts upon himself, such as in the work *Bloody Hell* (1990); violence that occurs in the public realm, for example the work *Hanging Piece* (1993); violence toward others, as in *T.W. (Rock)* (1992); violence in the media, as seen in his single-channel video *Shoot* (1998–1999); and violence instituted by the state, in a series of works he made from police batons. The media is saturated with images of violence. Violent acts occur daily, are propagated in popular culture, and form part of our experience in some form or the other through crime, loss, or incidents we witness. We live in violent times. As historian Eric Hobsbawm states in *The Age of Extremes*, "The world of the third millennium will therefore almost certainly continue to be one of violent politics and violent political changes. The only thing uncertain about them is where they will lead."¹⁵ During the past two decades, numerous "events" of a global nature have taken place; events that constitute violent acts perpetrated against mankind, either by humans or by forces of nature. From tsunamis to tropical storms, genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to terrorism attacks such as those carried out on September 11, 2001. And now we live in an era of economic austerity, where public demonstrations and riots have become commonplace in many countries and European and American financial markets face continuous uncertainty.

For philosopher Slavoj Žižek, these forms of violence are inherent to the system and are not merely "contingent disruptions of the otherwise idyllic world of liberal capitalism."¹⁶ Žižek defines two categories of violence: objective and subjective. Objective violence includes systemic violence, as in the ceaseless economic expansion of capitalism, thereby creating a widening divide between the rich and the poor. In response, subjective violence occurs, as in riots, protests, or acts of terrorism. Symbolic violence as a development of objective violence is inherent in our liberal-capitalist ideology and includes hegemonic violence—for example, racism and sexism—but also includes the violence inherent in language. Geers employs language as a device within his artistic production, both literally and metaphorically, as a sign or cipher to challenge conventions and to question morality. Examples of this strategy range from word or language games to placing text on objects, which might be considered a form of rhetorical violence. His word games manifest in a series of neon works where a word such as SLAUGHTER is transformed by dropping the "S" into LAUGHTER. In his *Present Tense* (2003), the artist installed a digital clock upside-down, so that it reads HELL (11:34) for one minute and then SELL (11:35) for another. The installation was in the Hagia Sofia, which is located within the occidental and oriental nexus of Istanbul, the historic site of Constantinople. It was during this time that American jets were flying over Istanbul en route to bomb Baghdad. In his earlier political works, Geers employed "found" text from newspaper articles, photocopied them and placed them with objects. In each of these works the "found" texts deal with the theme of violence. These include works such as *Suitcase* (1988) in which an extract from a South African newspaper describes the brutal killing of a ten-year-old boy when the father found out that the child was illegitimate. *48 Hrs* (1997–1999) is a wallpaper made up of newspaper articles covering 48 hours of violence in South Africa.

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 2003), 460.

¹⁶ See Michael Withey, review, "Violence by Slavoj Žižek," *Bedeutung* 1, no. 1 (2008): 122–127. Available online at: <http://www.bedeutung.co.uk/magazine/issues/1-nature-culture/withey-zizek-violence/> Accessed 19 November 2012.

VIII

The American artist Bruce Nauman produced a series of neon works consisting of “language games” early on in his career. Nauman’s *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967) is referenced in Geers’ *Manifest* (2008), a neon work that follows the same format and coloration with the words, “What do you believe in?” replacing those of Nauman’s. Nauman originally hung the work in his store-front studio and used the medium of neon due to its popular culture appeal, with the idea of making his art more accessible to a larger public. But the message of the piece also appeals to common ideas about artists as religious or shamanic figures who reveal something about the world to people. “The difficult thing about the whole piece for me was the statement. It was a kind of test—like when you believe it. Once written down, I could see that the statement [. . .] was on the one hand a totally silly idea and yet, on the other, I believed it. It’s true and not true at the same time.”¹⁷

Postpunkpaganpop (2008) exemplifies a search for “mystic truths” that the artist reveals in the form of an installation constructed from mirrors and razor mesh. It is an artwork that has to be experienced by the viewer who walks into and through it. The entire floor is covered in mirrors, reflecting whatever is above as well as below—or, according to alchemists, “as above, so below”—and in this way connecting the spiritual to the earthly, and the outer, external, material world with the inner, metaphysical. For the English poet and mystic William Blake this implied a “second sight” where, if one could “really see,” everything was in fact “double” and worked according to a set of “correspondences.” The labyrinth has historically emerged from Greek mythology, Roman times, and the Renaissance. In the medieval cathedrals of Chartres, Reims, and Amiens, labyrinths were symbolic of an allusion to the “Holy City” (Jerusalem) and serve as substitutes for pilgrimage paths. *Postpunkpaganpop* mixes the “unicursal” of the labyrinth that leads to a “center” with that of a maze or “multicursal” that offers a puzzle with choices of paths and directions. In this way the installation suggests a path to enlightenment where the viewer contemplates their inner spiritual state as they see their reflection in the maze. Moreover, Geers’ interest in “shamanic logic” can be linked to entopic phenomena as developed in the theories of David Lewis-Williams, concerning geometric patterns that are common shapes and which are universally understood in a similar way to that of archetypes. These visual experiences, derived from within the eye or brain, have been extensively studied by Lewis-Williams in numerous prehistoric and rock art paintings. In this way, the ancient symbol of the swastika in its archetypal form is the basis for the installation. Here it is important to state that it is not the Nazi symbol but the swastika in its generic shape as an irregular icosagon or twenty-sided polygon that Geers had employed in the installation. Derived from the Sanskrit word *svastika*, meaning a lucky or auspicious object, it has often been associated with cross symbols such as the sun cross of pagan Bronze-Age religion. One hypothesis is that the four arms of the swastika represent the four elements of nature: the sun, the wind, water, and earth. Geers views *Postpunkpaganpop* as a return to nature, in the Arcadian sense of Paradise but also within ourselves, our own “nature,” in an epistemological sense.

17 Bruce Nauman, quoted in J. P. McMahon, “Nauman’s The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths,” KhanAcademy Web site “Smarthistory.” Available online at: <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/naumans-the-true-artist-helps-the-world-by-revealing-mystic-truths.html>. Accessed November 16, 2012.

IX

Geers' exigency is to give distinct meaning to the entropy and uncertainty that is prevalent in the world today. Through mechanisms of profanity, humor, and provocation, Geers' pursuit of a typology of violence has increasingly shifted from the political to the poetic, from reality to metaphor. While Geers comments on many of the meta-narratives of his time—terrorism, mortality, desire, and faith—at the center of his production is the artist's identity, his subjectivity that can best be defined as fictionalizing the truth. As Geers declares, "Only our bodies do not lie, for the day we learn to speak is the day we learn to lie, even if our desires and intentions are for the contrary."¹⁸ In this way Kendell Geers narrates his identity and artistic production through various literary sources and acts of appropriation. It is an art of social, political, and cultural engagement fused with personal mythology. Here the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary converge. He reveals the dark parts of our human condition, the hidden aspects of society that we would rather not confront but would willingly forget.

18 Quoted in Lubi Reboani, *Fin de Partie* [Endgame] (San Gimignano; Beijing: Galleria Continua, 2012), 5.



Untitled (24 April 1994), 1994



Title Withheld (Kendall Geers), 1968





Clive Kellner

Kendell Geers

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Kendell Geers' Leben und Werk lassen sich in zwei Werkphasen gliedern. Seine politische Phase von 1989 bis 2000 wird erstmals in Europa im Überblick dargestellt. Geers lebte zu dieser Zeit als weißer Südafrikaner im System der Apartheid, wo er sich in seiner künstlerischen Praxis mit den Widersprüchen der Moral und Ethik des Systems auseinandersetzte. Er eignete sich für seine Arbeiten historische Ereignisse und Ideen an und stellte seine Erfahrung in der Gesellschaft in den Mittelpunkt: Geers änderte sein Geburtsdatum in Mai 1968, dem Beginn der Studenten- und Bürgerrechtsbewegung, und trat zur Zeit der ersten demokratischen Wahlen in Südafrika jeder politischen Partei bei. Über die Verwendung gefundener Objekte wie Stacheldraht, Neonleuchten oder Glasscherben fand er zu seiner von Provokation, Humor und Gewalt geprägten Bildsprache. Seine europäische Phase, eingeleitet mit dem Umzug nach Brüssel im Jahr 2000, ist geprägt von einer eher poetischen Ästhetik. Geers überführte seine aufrührerische Praxis in einen globaleren Kontext, indem er sich mit übergreifenden Erzählungen der Zeit wie Terrorismus, Religion und Sterblichkeit befasste. Dennoch folgt er weiter seiner konzeptuellen Sprache der Aneignung und stellt sie in großformatigen Werken und skulpturalen Objekten dar.