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Kendell Geers

with Inscription

‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein

‘For many years what I was trying to do was critique the white cube, challenge the languages of art. Find ways of literally blowing apart, with violence, by any means necessary, according to Malcolm X, according to Frantz Fanon. Trying to literally charge/discharge, terrorise the institutions of art in order to open up the language to an entirely different consciousness. To say reality is not one-dimensional–there’s a whole other continent underneath Europe. There’s an entire other hemisphere. There’s another ways of speaking, other languages that you don’t know. How could I translate my languages, my experiences into something that makes sense?’

Kendell Geers, Gallery Talk about the Exhibition ‘Love, By Any Means Necessary’, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, 27 February 2020

‘Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.’

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Kendell Geers is a white South African artist who was an anti-apartheid activist artist during the apartheid regime and as a result was put on trial for treason and accused of terrorism by the State. In 1988 Geers was one of 143 young men who publicly refused to serve in the South African Defence Force and chose exile, rather than face a six-year prison sentence for his refusal. Having left South Africa, Geers spent the whole of 1989 working as an assistant for the artist Richard Prince in New York. A major retrospective of his work curated by Okwui Enwezor was held at Haus der Kunst, Munich in 2013. He participated in Documenta 14 in 2017 and Documenta 11 in 2002 in Kassel, Germany. Geers’ work was included in the Venice Biennale in 2019, 2007 and 1993. In 2019 Geers curated ‘IncarNations: African Art as Philosophy’ with Congolese collector Sindika Dokolo at Palais des Beaux-Arts (BOZAR), Brussels. He is a renowned international artist, represented by the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London.

In February 2021, the editors of Inscription, Simon Morris, Gill Partington and Adam Smyth sent Kendell ten questions about his work, including *Point Blank* (2004).

QUESTION: This edition of *Inscription* is themed around ‘holes’, and many of your works engage with holes in profound ways: *Point Blank* (2004), of course, and also *Stripped Bare* (2009), and several others. Can you say something of the power of the hole, the ideas it suggests, or negates, or reframes?

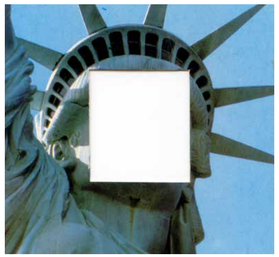
GEERS: In 1989 I found myself in exile, living in New York and working as the assistant to Richard Prince. I was fleeing the fascist Apartheid regime and a six-year prison sentence for defending human rights. As a refugee I was confronted by the questions of liberty and freedom. As a white South African refugee I did not fit the stereotype and my identity was a contradiction in terms of the fantasy of what either an African or a refugee is supposed to look like. I was living in Harlem around 145th street in a dive called Amandla House and working in Tribeca so the daily ride on the A train was an extreme experience and confrontation with all the gaps between the two stops in terms of social, political and economic reality. I did not have a penny to my name and the only space I had to make art was on my lap in the subway. I bought a tourist postcard of the Statue of Liberty and cut a square hole that literally ‘defaced’ Liberty. I was fascinated by the gap between the Black Square of Malevich and the void of making a hole in the context

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of Liberty in the cracks of 1980's New York. The hole has always fascinated me because it is never empty, never really silent, and never about nothing because it draws attention to the absence or unspoken. That little postcard called *After Liberty* was the aesthetic and semiotic equiv-

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alent of the brick that I threw through the window of the de Appel museum in Amsterdam in 1995 (*Title Withheld (Brick)*) or the bomb I exploded at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow in 1999 (*Title Withheld (Blow)*). The wound or scar is interesting because it speaks simultaneously about what was once complete, but through the prism of raw experience. These holes embody the gaps in our reading of aesthetics by shifting the signifier from an aesthetic question to an ethics of the image.

QUESTION: Your book *Point Blank*, published by Imschoot in Ghent in 2004, has been shot seven times at point blank range and has cordite residue around the entrance holes. It comes from an edition of 1,030 copies, which would have meant the expenditure of at least 7,210 rounds of ammunition. Can you talk to us about the logistics of this, and how long it took? More importantly, what motivated the project? Was the violence of it important?

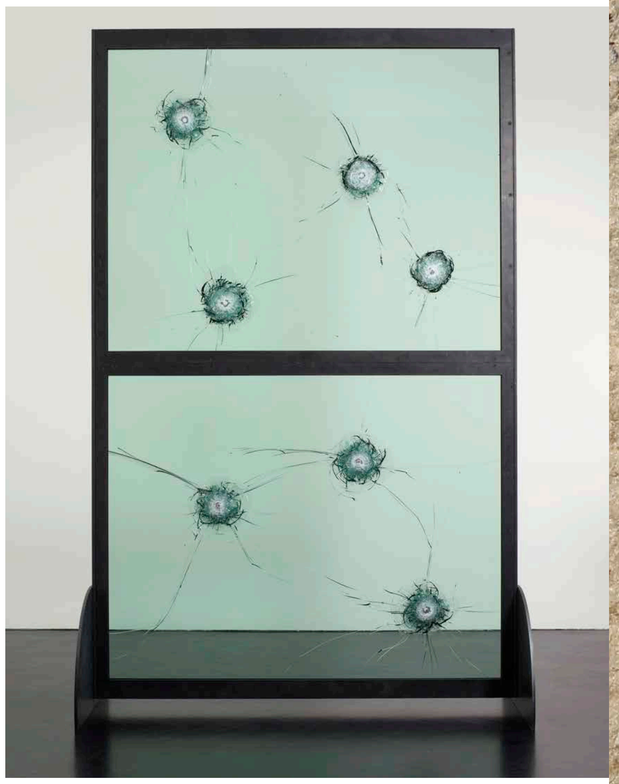
GEERS: I have always felt a deep connection with the Conceptual Art tradition, but at the same time it felt so alien to the experience of my identity. It always felt as if the languages of art were written in such a way that I could only ever have partial access and a fragmentary reading. The unspoken luxury and privilege that is the blueprint of the Institution of Art does not permit anything that is outside of its control. The white cube gallery is a quarantine zone and the aesthetic canon of minimalism is not unlike a hospital. I sought out points of contact and points of resistance in the canon where I might be able to interrogate language and invite the viewer/reader to experience the limits of those codes. *Point Blank* is literally that—a blank book and pointless exercise in reading. The cover is 'printed' with the blast of gunpowder and the book is bound together by the bullet passing through the pages. If you try to 'open' the book to read it, that act of reading destroys the work of art. Already in 2004 I feared that we were arriving at an age when words had no meaning and there the difference between truth and lies was disappearing. The ripening of Fake News and the flowering of Strategic Ignorance in 2020 marks the death of language as we know it. I made *Point Blank* with the help of a Shooting Gallery outside Brussels where members of the gun club were all too happy to fire away at the books for a couple of hours. Of course many of them did not care much for my reading of the languages of art so I explained to them that it was like the cowboy in the movies whose life is saved when the bullet is stopped by the Bible. Of course, the violence is important, just as it is in any crucifixion.

QUESTION: The destruction of books is an established trope in conceptual art. Dieter Roth minced them into sausages, and John Latham devised many elaborate methods, including setting fire to them, exploding them, and cutting them in half with a chainsaw. There have also been some previous examples involving firing guns at the page. The Fluxus artist Dick Higgins aimed a machine gun at a series of music scores, scattering them with bullet holes and creating new musical works in the process, which were then performed. In these cases there's a relationship between destruction and recreation: an attempt to subvert and remake the text, to find new meanings and make it signify in new ways. Did you have any such precursors in mind, and how did you envisage the relationship between violence, destruction and creativity?

GEERS: In 1999 I was in residence at Art Pace in San Antonio and made a video installation of the exact moment, cut from hundreds of films, when a character shoots directly at the viewer. The first time an actor fired a gun directly at the camera/audience was *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. It was a scandal and the audience ducked down trying to dodge the bullet as if it were real. I was fascinated by the ways we read the image and how our perceptions of the image of violence / the violence of the image change with time. That installation was called *Title Withheld (Shoot)* and an obvious reference to the performance by Chris Burden. *Point Blank* was certainly inspired by William Burroughs, but not so much his works with bullet holes as his book *The Electronic Revolution* in which he speaks about the viral nature of language. The year before, in 2003, I made another artist book called *The Plague Is Me* which is a play on the word plagiarism because my book is literally a reprint of *The Electronic Revolution*.

QUESTION: At the beginning of the new academic year in September 2020, I [Simon Morris] was showing my friend and colleague Dr Nasser Hussain books I had purchased over the summer recess which included a signed copy of Christian Marclay's *The Clock* and a copy of

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Bloody Hell, 1990
Photograph, variable dimensions
Kendell Geers in Satyagraha, commonly known as Gandhi House in Johannesburg

2
After Liberty, 1989
Postal card, 10.5 × 15 cm

3
Photograph from the making of *Point Blank*, 2004

4
Stripped Bare, 2009
Bullet proof glass, steel, lead bullets
277 × 175 × 79 cm

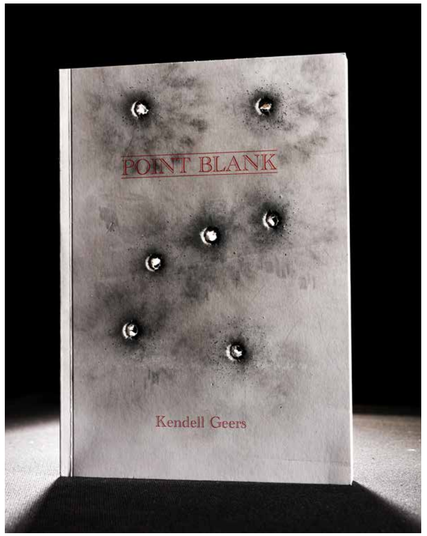
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Point Blank, 2004
Artist book, gunpowder and bullet holes
21 × 15 cm
Photos: Ricky Adam

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Kendell Geers portrait by Lydie Nesvadba

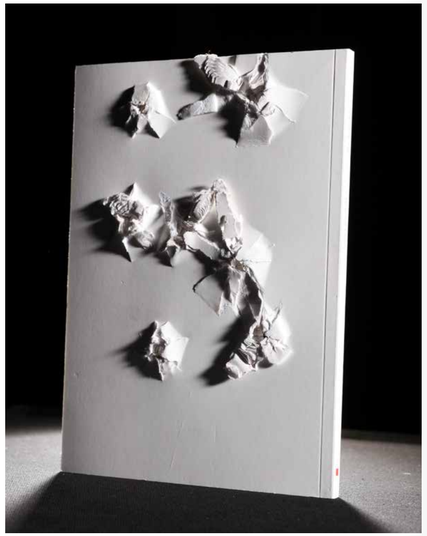
your book *Point Blank*. Nasser wondered whether *Point Blank* was made as a direct response to the shooting of Jacob Blake seven times in the back by Police Officer Rusten Sheskey in Kenosha, USA, in August 2020. Of course, your book was made in 2004, but *Point Blank* powerfully spoke to this event 16 years later. Can you discuss how *Point Blank* relates to specific political contexts, and how it uncouples itself from those moments to become mobile, and speaks to later political contexts? Is there a particular reason why *Point Blank* is shot 7 times?

GEERS: The number of bullets varies somewhat because we used a number of different guns, including the Uzi sub machine gun which would spray a number of bullets very quickly. My practice has always been about the border between order and chaos and the difference between what's within our ability to control and losing control. In different words we might call that the difference between creation and destruction, but in terms of my experience of identity I have described it as 'The Perversity of my Birth, the Birth of my Perversity'. Growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in a white trash working class family at the height of Apartheid, I witnessed first-hand how easily people lost their humanity. The same people suddenly changed their spots in 1990 and all of a sudden many white South Africans who had turned their Liberal Blind Eye away from the realities of Apartheid began to speak as if they had always been Anti-Apartheid activists. I was left asking myself what would it take for normal or abnormal to shift for every one of us? The story of Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (and *Apocalypse Now*) is about this shift and how he begins as a good company man full of ambition, charisma and eloquence to achieve greatness but ends up instructing the company to 'Exterminate all the brutes!' and dies whispering the words 'The horror! The horror!' The extreme circumstance of living through Apartheid or witnessing the suffocation of George Floyd and ensuing political violence exposes human nature for what it is. What we call normal or common sense is just the circumstances of habit and it only exposes its operating system when '*Things Fall Apart*'. The violence that has marked my work is really not unlike a fever when

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one is ill because we do not accept the challenge of change without the discomfort of violence. *Point Blank* could just as easily be read as a reaction to a medieval Auto-da-fé or the Nazi's burning books or the decline of reading today on account of Social Media.

QUESTION: Is *Point Blank* a blank book? Or are the gunshots a kind of marking or even writing? Is one of your ambitions here to make us rethink the very material form of the book, and the most basic protocols of reading? Are we forced back to reflect, what are we to do with this book object? We were particularly struck by the way in which the surface of the page acquired a depth as a result of the gunshots fusing the pages together, making it impossible to turn the pages without destroying the book. We were reminded of Les Coleman's book *Glue*, with each page glued down: to read Coleman's book means tearing the pages apart.

GEERS: *Point Blank* is absolutely not a blank book, even if it's about the emptiness of experience. The gunshots are not unlike Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* or Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*. The act of reading is an invitation to share the experience of reading inasmuch as what is not said, not written and absent is the point.

QUESTION: *Bloody Hell* (1990) was the first piece of art you created on returning to South African soil in 1990, following the release of Nelson Mandela. In it, you took blood from your own arms and used it to complete a ritual washing of your white Afrikaaner Boer body. We were interested in this paradox of washing your body with your body: and whether this is about purification, or the impossibility of purification. Can you talk a little about how this complicated act of 'cleaning' or 'staining' relates to your ancestral, cultural and religious heritage?

GEERS: *Bloody Hell* was the first work I created when I returned from exile following the release of Nelson Mandela. The ritual washing of my naked body with my blood that is also the blood of my ancestors was an act of giving birth to myself as an artist. Apartheid was over and I could finally return to South Africa, but everything I had been taught to believe in was a crime against humanity and everybody I trusted as a child from my father to my school, my teacher to the police, government, judicial system, constitution and priest had collaborated with the lies that maintained the Crimes as normal habits. I had to re-invent myself within a new identity, morality, culture and language so I created the exorcism of giving birth to myself. I did this in the garden of one of the former homes of Mahatma Gandhi because it had fallen into ruin and friends of mine were squatting there (because the Apartheid government did not think it worthy of being given historic monument status).

QUESTION: A powerful influence running through much of your work seems to be the theatre director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht was committed to a theatre that was defamiliarizing, that created distancing effects on stage that might disrupt meaning– and he did this via techniques such as the direct address to audience, or the use of songs to interrupt the action, or explanatory placards. Are you working with similar ambitions to defamiliarize, and to jolt your audience from a kind of slumber?

GEERS: Indeed! Not just Brecht, but also Adorno. I recall thinking about the statement 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', and I felt just as strongly about poetry after Apartheid. No doubt my feelings were fuelled by my rage at how easily white South Africa shifted from supporting the Apartheid (by turning a blind eye) to suddenly being anti-Apartheid (by turning the other eye blind) and I felt as if beauty or aesthetics made it too easy to get away with political expediency. The 'Verfremdungseffekt' [distancing or alienation effect] flips the stage around by making the viewer complicit and that way the experience of art is expansive and generous.

QUESTION: You title several of your pieces *Les Fleurs du Mal*. What is the connection you are exploring between Charles Baudelaire's collection and your own work?

GEERS: History is just another habit, written subjectively by the winners. As political economies go bankrupt and the winners are switched, so too do histories get rewritten. What we call art history is really just an accumulation of habits and what we call beautiful is symptomatic. A lot of my work deals with these historical languages but devoured with relish in the spirit of Oswald de Andrade's 1928 *Anthropophagic Manifesto*. I feel a deep connection with *Les Fleurs du Mal* because it touched too many nerves when it was first published in 1857 because it was banned on account of its so-called immorality.

QUESTION: You've talked in previous interviews about language as a barrier that needs to be overcome. You said that the biggest challenge of your work is to 'overcome the limits of language … [which] acts as a structure that limits what can be expressed', and talked about the need for an art that 'hijacks and kidnaps the international (historically defined) languages and codes, that tortures and interrogates them, until they reveal their true nature and identity.' Reading these statements, it's hard not to think of *Point Blank*. Is shooting a book (even one with no text) a symbolic challenge to written language and written codes, subjecting it to a kind of torture and interrogation? Is there something about their 'true nature' that is revealed in the work?

GEERS: The book itself is only the residue of the overlap between Art and Life. It's impossible to separate the book from the process and it's impossible to separate the process from the story of my life. When I was 10 I shot my first gun because my uncle, who was also a policeman, thought it part of my education. When I was 12 my school also taught me how to shoot. Our school uniforms were the same colour as the army uniforms and we marched in regiments every other week up and down the rugby fields. When I was at Art School in 1985 a State of Emergency was declared that gave the police the right to shoot first and ask questions after, so my memory of learning about art is punctuated with the smell of teargas, dodging rubber bullets and being beaten with police batons. When you hold a copy of *Point Blank* in your hands, you are also holding my hand as I am being bailed out of prison. The only true nature that I am aware of is my body in pain, either physically or emotionally, and the rest is culture.

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QUESTION: Shooting holes in books is a very charged act. In this sense it shares an impulse to transgression that seems to drive your work. You've said that you're 'drawn to … taboos'. But what kind of taboos surround the book as an object, and what is involved in breaking them? What is it that is specific to this act in the context of your work, as opposed to the other transgressive gestures you enact?

GEERS: Georges Bataille's theories about taboo and transgression and Julia Kristeva's interpretation of abjection helped me understand the codes by which normal erases all traces of the expedient power it embodies. The taboo is not universal, nor is it fixed. In the 1990's for instance, it was taboo in South Africa to create Conceptual or Performative art, whereas today it's taboo to make a painting and [faux] Conceptual Art is the new academy. In June 2019 I curated the exhibition *incarNations* for the Bozar in Brussels to challenge the reading of African Art as primitive. Much of the exhibition was focussed on the idea of the mask and how that relates to healing inasmuch as illness is a spiritual as well as a physical condition for many people in Africa. A year later, Europeans are all being forced to wear masks in order to heal and suddenly anyone not wearing a mask is primitive. □