

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Il Manifesto
Art heals with hallucinatory fevers
Arianna Di Genova
7 July 2020

quotidiano comunista
il manifesto

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Interview. The South African artist Kendell Geers, guest at the "Inhuman" exhibition in the Barletta Castle, speaks.

'Capitalism only works if we hate everything about ourselves, from our hair to the colour of our skin, our age, body, height, weight and smell. We spend fortunes in an attempt to erase what defines us.'



Image: Kendell Geers, 'Pro Aris et Focis', 2008

Extreme situations, unspeakable tortures, a claustrophobic imaginary studded with abuses and degradation, a theatre of violence that crucifies in the name of religion or ethnic conflicts. The path of the 'Inhuman' exhibition (curated by Giusy Caroppo, open until 18 October), which starts in the basement of the Barletta Castle to reverberate in the restless history of our present, does not invite pure contemplation. Moreover, one cannot think of a "comfortable" foray when three artists such as Andres Serrano, Oleg Kulik and Kendell Geers are exhibiting. The body, often vilified, violated, is the great protagonist, a disturbing presence. "I work with materials that interact with the physicality of the viewer as well as the content of the work incites their imagination. An object / subject that lives in space necessarily renegotiates it, making the viewer aware of his own body. Nothing is more obvious."

"Inhuman" (title of the exhibition) is a word that has a profound consonance with his works. And it boasts many holds even with what is emerging in our present, between viruses conveyed by leaps of species and anti-racist movements that inflame the whole world to respond, in fact, to "inhuman" treatments ... What do you think?

The pandemic due to Covid19 and the Black Lives Matter movement should not be considered as two separate phenomena, but rather as the reverse of the same (economic) coin. The real problem is that humanity has completely lost contact with itself. The world in which we live and our cultural attitudes have been torn from their roots, have produced a disconnect and now there is a desire for instant gratification, even pre-digested. Anything that causes unease, raises too many questions, makes the common idea of ethics falter, destabilizes power, is subversive, is considered socially outlawed, something to push on the margins of the market (always economic). Consequently, the last frontiers of the rebellion transmissible through art or culture have been reduced to mere clichés and entertainment. They follow the same structural logic of populism, with which some recent political movements can be recognized. Capitalism only works if we hate everything about ourselves, from our hair to the colour of our skin, our age, body, height, weight and smell. We spend fortunes in an attempt to erase what defines us. This identity eradication is an exorcism of love and encourages self-abuse, doubt, insecurity, depression, despair and, ultimately, self-contempt. The result is that we have so little respect for our body that we would do anything to destroy it. How then could we respect anyone else? It makes me happy to note how many people today are abandoning their previous racist habits, but if we do not understand that that prejudice was built in the rituals of self-contempt, the solutions will be only ephemeral and cosmetic in nature.

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We are witnessing, in several countries, a revolt against the "traces" of colonial history. Do you think that the demolition of statues, the desire to remove monuments can lead to cultural censorship?



Image: Kendell Geers

During the period of the Spanish influence, the poet William Yeats composed a poem entitled 'The second advent'. There were some verses that could have been written today: "Whirling in the widening spiral / The falcon cannot hear the falconer / Things collapse; the centre cannot stand / Pure anarchy is rampant in the world / The bloody tide rises everywhere / The ritual of innocence is submerged / The best have lost all conviction, while the worst / They are full of passionate intensity".

The story is told by those who have the power to do it and therefore will always speak in their favour. But power undergoes changes and so do the stories they tell themselves. Many dictators and tyrants have tried to erase memory by censoring art, but art is ultimately the only testimony of any era. After the brutality of colonialism and slavery, I believe it is healthy to challenge the way in which history has been handed down and proceed with

a decolonization of its monuments and signs.

Your site-specific installations focus, in a sculptural form, often on the use of force, on abuse ...

When our bodies are infected with a virus or disease, the body generates a fever to move towards healing. That fever is often hallucinatory and almost always creates a great nuisance, but we cannot heal without that violence that raises the temperature to our limit to bring about a change. If art is only consoling it will have no transformative capacity. Its power lies in the timeliness with which it poses many more questions than the answers that may arise.



You are Afrikaans, born in Johannesburg, in a working-class family. As a young man, your involvement in the anti-apartheid movement meant that you had to leave your country (returning only to the release of Mandela). What is the legacy of that period that flowed into your art?

I understood the devices of language and their functioning within the anti-apartheid movement. The legitimacy of a power can only be questioned within the limits of this language. You can't challenge something if you can't name it. In its most complex and contradictory form, the ability to speak not "on behalf of" but for oneself is a solid basis for freedom and liberation. The language represented a formidable protest against the blind habits of the art market, but today it is reduced to a seasonal fashion. As subversive as looking at the paint as it dries.

Could you explain something about the Manifesto you published a few years ago, a sort of "guide" to orient yourself in political and emotional life?

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I drafted my Manifesto in an agonizing period. I was deeply depressed, I did not like how the art system exploited the works, destroying their integrity. I needed a reason to justify why I continued to consider myself an artist. So, I decided to underline that moment, writing down my thoughts, gathering what, in my opinion, makes art important.

Does "Inhuman" also say something about the cohabitation of different species on this Earth, about "living together"?

Of course. We have yet to learn, as human beings, that we are not the only guests on the planet.

The "Circuito del Contemporaneo", a project with which the Puglia Region, in collaboration with the Teatro Pubblico Pugliese and the artistic direction of Giusy Caroppo, sets itself the goal again on 18 July with the exhibition "Inhuman" at the Castle of Barletta to permanently establish a network of excellence for the production and use of contemporary art. The exhibition (which can be visited until 18 October), distributed in all the rooms of the manor's basement, seeks to prompt reflection on the universality of human degradation, the violence exercised by the individual or by power against the dignity of the person and his freedoms, also in light of the lockdown imposed by the pandemic and world protests to protect ethnic differences, touching the moral and anthropological sphere. The concept is declined through site specific interventions and works belonging to some historical series of three international artists: Kendell Geers (Johannesburg, 1960, lives and works in Brussels), Oleg Kulik (Kiev, 1961) and Andres Serrano (New York City, 1950).