

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

## Kendell Geers, Super Love

Nadia Yala Kisukidi

"Blessed a thousandfold she who loves  
Her heart is a weapon"

There is a radical experience of love, which disrupts the arena of political conflicts and that explodes or reconfigures them. However, it is difficult to hold on to this idea. Its religious dimension immediately grabs you by the throat. Love as a sentiment doesn't fit with politics. It cancels out tension, disqualifies antagonism and opposition. It is loaded with the pious and ever so mawkish belief that a stronger bond unites those who consider themselves to be apart. Separated by race, by gender, by class. Separated by administrative boundaries or by the repressive technologies of state apparatuses. Separated too by an ideology, a programme.

The order to love is of no use in the struggle. It softens where it should strengthen, and excavates assumed hatred. Until violence, when there is no other possible outcome, leads to the death of the opponent. Love prevents you from going to the bitter end. Its politics are never those of victory – of crushing the enemy. Love turns the other cheek and lowers its head before domination's terror. Somewhat insensitive to collapse. An idea of a woman, like a serpent... A gender trap.

NOITU-LOVE-R. Inverted, the word revolution tells another truth. And this truth must be heard; it sits at the centre of artist Kendell Geers's political, mental, symbolic and spiritual apparatus. Emphasising the duality of 'black' and 'white', a gleaming neon brandishes the banner of conflict. Love – the heart of the revolution – is a halo of light wrapped around a bronze sculpture: a handless woman whose shape echoes the fantasised idea of an ancient African statuary, that remains indefinite, undeciphered.

Hand-less. Severed Hands.

Archives of colonisation collect facts, compile data, multiply numbers. From 1885 until 1908, King Leopold II's Belgian administration in Kongo organised a brutally repressive system of wealth extraction. Indigenous bodies were the labour force trained to extract natural resources. Unproductive and defiant behaviour was punished by the cutting off of hands – the colonists cured and brandished the severed limbs like war trophies. The severed hands speak of the system of terror and cruelty that inform the stories of the powerless. The ones who were mutilated, mass-murdered, whose villages were levelled to the ground. The bronze figure with its severed extremities and its head piercing through the 'O' of (NOITU-) LOVE (-R) is a figure of powerlessness. But those who do not command either armies or states are not passive figures whose existence demands endless care and assistance. The bronze woman has no hands, but instead her arms are made of glass shards, from which iron chains dangle. In the history of ideas, iron chains symbolise the deprivation of liberty – as established in Rousseau's famous preamble to The Social Contract. But iron chains are weapons also. The iron chain of martial arts confuses, strangles – it is a threat, offers the possibility of self-defence. Powerlessness is neither weakness nor helplessness, that is, the physical or moral inability to have agency in the world. Figures of powerlessness do not depict victims – they demand that the power that annihilates the living and the Earth, that pierces through bodies, and reduces muscles and arms to extraction tools, must be overturned. To overturn power – that is the political, revolutionary radicality of love.

Not violence. Love.

To conceive of love's political radicalism is to formulate a very pointed critique of power, that is of the force that some exert over others, the belief in inferiority and superiority, and the promotion of a leader figure as sovereign incarnation of the right to dispose of the existence of any being, whether alive or inert. We must use the power of love to counter these many forms of power that continue to dominate and fabricate hierarchies of rejection – according to class, race, gender, territory (if it is useful to repeat it).

But power mutates; it is constantly re-codified in the spaces that produce oppression, but also in those of the minority, of revolutionary militancy. There is, in fact, a common language to domination and militancy: the language of war. War and what often comes with it: a passion for manliness, martial posturing, thundering voices

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and a certain level of fitness. Competition, and the identification of the other as a hostile figure. The brusque imperious tone of voice of the self-righteous.

The political draws front lines, traces divisions between 'them' and 'us', turns the slightest difference into signs of hatred. Love, on the contrary possesses a radicality that invites a different expression of the political; it substitutes the naming of enemies with the need to acknowledge and strengthen that which unites us.

This is what bell hooks reminds us of in her many publications on love and revolutionary feminism. A struggle that liberates us – a rEVOL(LOVE)ution – does not brutalise, thus reproducing the codes of oppression. Feminist leaders, those whose actions nurture a revolutionary feminism, do not command. They are lovers – they are people who when drawing their weapons, they love – whereas the initial inclination might be to humiliate and destroy, replicating the transparent and dull codes of oppressive powers.

Kendell Geers's sculpture, the bronze woman whose stumps are weapons, is the lover – the leader of revolutions. She brings a motley crew with her. A monstrous multitude – black, mixed, queer, poor, animal, off-white, vegetable, indigenous, unproductive and infertile – that does not believe in the tales of separateness, in clean lines, in electing. Forasmuch as revolutions are communions, they are religious. They tell the story of those who are now united, despite the power that has always wanted to segment and segregate. Power enjoys classifications and territorial partitions. It distributes and displaces bodies. It builds camps, distinguishes unliveable from liveable spaces, thus separating the living.

When the word 'love' is summoned by oppressive powers, it becomes a sentimentalism designed to condemn those who must remain powerlessness in their assigned place of weakness and helplessness. Running through the struggle of minorities, love becomes hope, hopefulness: popular and minority struggles operate against a worldview that negates them, here and now they must create a worldview that holds them in regard. Such is the meaning of revolutionary love. An emotional energy that shatters what breaks us. Such as the walls erected at borders. Walls raised in front of individuals or people in order to reduce, belittle, crush. This love is overflowing – blossoming in all of the world's flowers.

The poet Leopold Sédar Senghor was an avid reader of Jesuit theologian Father Teilhard de Chardin. In a text dedicated to him, Senghor wrote:

God, as Super-Person, as Super-Man, is a vital necessity for Man. Non-believers themselves postulate Him as Hypothesis and Purpose of their generic endeavour. Quoting Camus and Wells in support of his comment Teilhard points out: 'If Man accepted that the Universe can love, he would be reconciled' said the first. Who and by whom? 'The Universal Lover' responds Wells, the humanitarian biologist.<sup>1</sup>

Geers's sculpture, a bronze woman whose upper limbs end in shards of glass, is the universal lover. Super woman. Super Human. Crowned with the halo of revolution. She prevents the conversion of the revolutionary struggle into sophisticated technology dedicated to hatred.

Senghor's text uses, without a doubt, a gendered interpretation matrix. But never mind: you have to read it as if were a photographic negative – where colours, tones or genders must be reversed. Who still takes offence when a man becomes a woman? Besides, the body of the bronze woman presents itself as an enigma. It bears marks. Scars, gashes – signs of suffering reminiscent of the suffocating memory of pain. But it is not clear whether the image of her ordeal actually matters. The traces along the spinal are hand-made, fingerprints on the metal skin. The hands applied to the bronze are Geers's, the miracle worker. The bronze, which rises up monumentally, has been healed. It is not moved by anger: to start a revolution is not to wage a war, even if the use of weapons is often necessary. To make a revolution is to be healed, and to reconcile. It is to love.

A thousand textures covered with signs and writings are intertwined in the material and form a multiplicity of layers. Underneath each of them, genders and sexes splash on top of each other, lively and exhilarated.

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<sup>1</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine', in Cahiers Pierre Teilhard de Chardin 3. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962) p. 52. [Translation quotation Sara Le Turcq]

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The remission of pain is a matter of eros. A healing hand is a caressing hand. Flesh against another flesh. The rite of the Eucharist takes on a political meaning when turned on its head: the wine is not blood; it is in fact the body. The bottles of wine have become the arms of the revolutionary leader, integrated in the bronze woman, they make up her skeleton and muscles, on which the artist has left his mark. Her navel is made of a bottle bottom, a receptacle attached to her abdomen like the mirror-reliquaries of Kongo statues. The Super-Lover is magnetic, charged like a Nkisi Nkondi – although she doesn't chase away evil spirits. Love (eros) doesn't pursue its prey in order to punish. It searches and hunts to put back together what had become divided because of lack of awareness, of the other or of the self. Life and joy. Mind and sex. Plant, human, animal. Water and Earth. Reason and emotion. Nature and the knowing mechanisms of invention.

The emotion of the rEVOL(LOVE)ution, its driving power, is a Super Love. The one that sees the universe as reconciled. Nuptials that honour day as night. Where those who opted for powerlessness, retreat, invisibility, whether in the thickness of a forest or the concrete of our peripheries, acknowledge, as one, what binds them.

Translation by Sara Le Turcq

This essay was written to accompany the solo exhibition 'Love, By Any Means Necessary' at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (7 February–5 March 2020).