

Wilde

PRESS RELEASE

KENDELL GEERS

THE OCULIST WITNESS

10.06. – 17.08.2024

VERNISSAGE: 10.06 18:00 – 21:00

WILDE | BASEL

Kendell Geers, a pivotal figure in contemporary African art, has carved a niche for himself on the international stage with his incisive and unapologetically bold works. His first exhibition with Wilde and in Basel, *The Oculist Witness*, is a testament to his profound engagement with the legacies of history, art, and activism. Born in the throes of apartheid South Africa, Geers's journey from a working-class family to an artist in exile shapes his unique artistic language, one that defies simple categorization and speaks to the complexities of identity and resistance.

His work, rooted in a deep and complex engagement with his identity as a white African, interrogates the intersections of minimalism, conceptual art, and activism. Through his art, Geers stretches and transforms the fabric of perception, weaving together semantics, puns, and innuendos into a tapestry that challenges and provokes. His art is a dance in the shadows of Plato's Cave, where reality is inverted, and doubt and perception intermingle in a shamanic ritual of understanding.

At the heart of *The Oculist Witness* lies an innovative and thought-provoking venture: the exhibition is conceived around the book *Duchamp's Endgame*, authored by Kendell Geers. This book is not just a catalog or supplementary material but serves as the conceptual and thematic core of the entire exhibition. In *Duchamp's Endgame*, Geers embarks on a scholarly yet deeply personal journey to decode the enigmatic activities of Marcel Duchamp in Munich in 1912, revealing insights that challenge and expand our understanding of Duchamp's contributions to modern art.

The book proposes a revolutionary perspective on Duchamp, suggesting that the true essence of his work has been obscured by conventional art historical narratives. Geers, through meticulous research and artistic intuition, uncovers the intricate play of influences and ideas that shaped Duchamp's oeuvre, particularly the pivotal work *Tu m'* (1918). By doing so, Geers invites readers and viewers alike to discard preconceived notions about Duchamp and engage with his art in a more direct, unmediated manner. *Duchamp's Endgame* thus acts as a gateway into the exhibition, guiding the audience through Geers's intellectual and artistic landscape. It frames the show as an extension of the book's arguments, with each artwork serving as a visual and conceptual counterpart to the themes explored within its pages. The exhibition, through this symbiosis with the book, becomes a dynamic space where the legacy of Duchamp is reexamined and reinterpreted through Geers's lens.

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Throughout his long career as an artist, Kendell Geers has engaged with the legacy of Duchamp on multiple levels. Perhaps the most profound was to shift the term found object to lost object because the former entirely erases and denies the history of the object prior to being “found” by an artist. In contrast, the term lost object invites the viewer to consider when why and how an object gets lost and how that context informs the object re-contextualised as a work of art.

Geers’s most famous lost object is a broken Heineken bottleneck that he titled *Self Portrait* (1995). The domestic beer bottle is transformed into a weapon of destruction and the label that reads “Imported from Holland - The Superior Quality” is a cutting commentary on how the colonial process was directed by corporate interests.

The central work of the exhibition is an art historical masterpiece called *Stripped Bare* (2009). The sculpture is a 3-meter high wall of bulletproof glass, shattered by the impact of 7 bullets fired at close range. The scale and structure of the work are exact quotes from Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915 to 1923), which can be found in the Tate Collection. Even though the sculpture was made 15 years ago, it is as pertinent today as ever, a chilling reminder of the fragile human condition and the fine line where art and politics find themselves in an uncomfortable interrogation of the other’s limits. *Stripped Bare* was also included in *Ruffneck Constructivists* curated by Kara Walker for the Philadelphia ICA in 2014.

Where *Stripped Bare* is larger than life, *Tears of Eros* (2009) is an almost invisible small glass phial that takes its form from Duchamp’s 1913 work *Air de Paris*, a 50cc glass phial of air. Once again, Geers shifts the signifier along the tense border between art and politics, by filling his 50cc glass phial with teargas. The title uses black humor to generate a play on words that pays homage to the English title of Georges Bataille’s 1961 book “*Les Larmes d’Éros*” which explored the complex relationship between violence and the sacred.

Rack (2009) refers to the Medieval torture instrument as well as Duchamp’s iconic work *Bottlerack* (1914). Geers has transformed a vintage bottlerack from the same period into a device that interrogates history by adding broken Heineken bottles to each of the lost object’s pins, both restoring and denying its original functionality.

Duchamp’s Endgame will be published by Wilde in partnership with Fonds Mercator and Yale University Press. During Art Basel 2024, it will be available exclusively through Wilde.

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Duchamp's Endgame
by Kendall Geers

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In June 1912 Marcel Duchamp was so disillusioned about having his painting *Nude Descending the Staircase* (No. 2) rejected by the Cubist Salon, that he fled Paris with rage and spent the summer in Munich. On his return, he declared that Munich had been the scene of his complete liberation and that painting was dead. Very little is known about what happened in Munich apart from his own words "I went to the Pinakothek in Munich every day. I love those Cranachs, I love them. Cranach, the old man. The tall nudes. The nature and substance of his nudes inspired me for the flesh colour."¹

To better understand Duchamp's transformative process, South African artist Kendell Geers sought to decode the works Duchamp created during his time in Munich and his decision to cease painting, which is considered the Holy Grail of Art History. Exactly one century after Duchamp's time in Munich, Geers installed his retrospective at the city's prestigious Haus der Kunst. It was there that Geers decided to embark on painting himself, picking up where Duchamp left off. Geers shared Duchamp's disappointment with the art system and believed that to begin painting in 2012 was the conceptual equivalent of stopping to paint in 1912.. Duchamp's cryptic notes and the scant details of his stay have spurred numerous books, exhibitions and countless competing theories. The only reliable evidence of Duchamp's supposed liberation is two small oil paintings, along with several drawings and sketches.² For Geers, the key to understanding Marcel Duchamp's oeuvre is in "forgetting almost everything written about him and to simply view his work as if seeing it for the first time."

Kendell Geers's book *Duchamp's Endgame*,³ and accompanying exhibition *The Oculist Witness* (at Wilde, Basel, 10 June – 13 August 2024) reveal the extensive research that Geers conducted during this crucial year in Duchamp's career. The findings may astonish many and even spark debate among purists. This narrative embarks on a unique journey led by an artist's perspective, tracing the influences and inspirations across history from one artist to another, all the way back to Leonardo da Vinci.⁴

¹ "An Interview with Marcel Duchamp at The Art Institute of Chicago, 1949," reprinted as an appendix to Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, "The Art Institute of Chicago and the Arensberg Collection," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 19, no. 1 (1993), p. 100.

² These paintings laid the groundwork for the bride figure in *The Large Glass* (1915 to 1923) and one sketch already bore the same title "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even."

³ The title *Duchamp's Endgame* refers to the late stage of a chess game in which the balance of power has been reversed because inevitably all the important pieces have been lost and the powerless little pawn could transform into a queen and ultimately win the game.

⁴ The link between Duchamp and da Vinci will not surprise anyone given that he added the letters L.H.O.O.Q. to a postcard of the Mona Lisa in 1919. The letters are a gramogram that in French sounds like "Elle a chaud au cul" meaning "She has a hot ass," but given that Duchamp was already living in New York at the time, Geers stresses the importance of reading L.H.O.O.Q. in English with the instruction to LOOK!

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Duchamp's Endgame presents a nuanced view, arguing that Marcel Duchamp is less of an iconoclast and more of a classicist. It goes further, portraying him as quintessentially a French painter throughout his career. Kendell Geers clarifies a common misconception: Duchamp never outright declared 'painting is dead.' Instead, he loudly protested against the stupidity of painters and his task was rather "to put painting once again at the service of the mind."⁵

The book is a passionate story about art and the real-life, art-historical version of the "Da Vinci Code" written by a contemporary artist with his tongue firmly on our cheek. Kendell Geers describes Marcel Duchamp as "the artist I love to hate and hate to love." After reading Geers's book and seeing his exhibition, there will be much more to love and hate about the Godfather of Dada and Pope of Surrealism.

⁵ James Johnson Sweeney, "Eleven Europeans in America", *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* 13, no. 4-5 (1946)

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Kendell Geers, *Oculist Witness*



Rack, 2009, Metal, beer bottles, 74 x 74 x 72 cm



Stripped Bare, 2009, Bulletproof Glass, steel and lead Bullets, 277 x 175 x 79 cm