

# VANESSA GERMAN MATRIX 174

I COME TO DO A VIOLENCE TO THE LIE



JUNE 9 - SEPTEMBER 4, 2016  
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

**i come to do a violence to the lie**

i come to do a violence to the lie

i come to do a violence to the lie

and i have a gun and i have my lips

i have my hands and i have a claw tooth hammer

i have a hatchet and i have my nails

i am on wheels and i rage the rage

i am a rage

so let me in at it

let me in at the lie

with my gun hatchet love rage red red heart blistering soul

i am a cannon i will go in at it with my teeth

and i have seen the bodies and i have called out the night sky

let loose the military of my soul i am coming for the lie is not

safe here.we.come up the bones.we.eat in dust.we.

the bleeding red of it.seething.sweet.bleeding.

And I believe in the power of \_\_\_\_\_.there iz nothing else

available in this universe that iz useful.

**VANESSA GERMAN**

# STOP SHOOTING. WE LOVE YOU.

*One day when, taking a break on the porch from my sculptures, I heard a round of 21 gunshots. I waited. I grieved. I worried for my neighbors, my students, the victims, the shooters, their families. I noticed the signs for political candidates in the yards around me and I thought maybe I could do something. Out on the porch, I began printing yard signs that encouraged peace and nonviolence with messages like “Stop Shooting: We Love You” and “No Guns: Keep Summer Fun.” I began distributing them around the neighborhood to friends and community members who, like me, saw this as an opportunity to say “STOP!”, not with judgment, but with love.<sup>1</sup>*

—VANESSA GERMAN

LOCAL CHILD HOLDING ONE OF VANESSA GERMAN'S SIGNS “STOP SHOOTING: WE LOVE YOU” IN FRONT OF THE ARTHOUSE. PHOTO: VANESSA GERMAN



A VIEW OF VANESSA GERMAN'S ARTHOUSE IN THE HOMEWOOD SECTION OF PITTSBURGH, PA, DECEMBER 2015.



KONGO (SOLONGO OR WOYO SUBGROUP). POWER FIGURE (NKISI NKONDI), LATE 19TH–EARLY 20TH CENTURY. WOOD, IRON, GLASS, FIBER, PIGMENT, BONE. BROOKLYN MUSEUM, GIFT OF ARTURO AND PAUL PERALTA-RAMOS.

Since 2007, artist Vanessa German has lived in the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, where crime, drugs, and gun violence continually wreak havoc on the historically African-American, urban community that was recently labeled “America’s Most Dangerous Neighborhood.”<sup>2</sup> Gun shots can be heard day and night, and many residents have personal connections to the victims of violence. In response to her first-hand experiences, in 2012 German started ARHouse, a place where young, local children can be artists. Alongside them, German creates her inspiring sculptures in the tradition of West African power figures called *minkisi* (*nkisi*, singular)—divine protective objects, thickly encrusted with nails, beads, shells, bones, and found objects that evoke suits of armor. The sculptures often feature medicinal materials packed in resin in their heads, or in boxes projecting from their abdomens and sealed with mirrors. Bearing mystical forces meant to eradicate evil, German’s updated versions of the enigmatic, ritualistic African power figures embody a similar performative, spiritual, and affirming function.

To make her sculptures, German begins with standard doll parts. The traditional baby-doll heads are layered in plaster and gauze to emphasize unique features and build different hair styles. After applying numerous coats of black tar and inserting a cowrie shell for the lips, German uncovers the character of each face by removing some of the tar with mineral spirits. She paints the whites of the eyes and, finally, sets a rhinestone in each pupil to bring light to the eyes and life to the figure.

German refers to the second step as “dressing” the sculpture, which includes the aforementioned components of the African power figures, plus an endless array of other objects. Discarded clothes, sheets, towels, and cutting quilts are bound tightly with string, yarn, or ribbons into the many cocoon forms that make up the dresses of German’s brigade. Strings of buffalo teeth, buttons, keys, and padlocks encircle each figure. Close inspection reveals details representing particular attributes, such as squirt guns, statuettes of saints, or outdated Blackberries, to name just a few. Whether old or new, found or constructed, purchased or donated, hundreds of elements bring powerful individual personalities to the sculptures. Elaborate headdresses sometimes incorporate additional figures, as in *Lessons On How to Ride the Eagle*, in which a “child” with its arms spread wide rides an eagle on the head of a larger figure astride a giraffe.

The incorporated pedestals of the sculptures are in the form of vehicles—like carts, tricycles, and scooters; furniture—like tables, chairs, and stools; or food containers—like biscuit tins and apple crates. By using a palette that is primarily red, white, and blue, German intentionally refers to the heroic colors of the American flag and “the [country’s] story of blood, peace, and illumination.”<sup>3</sup> But these colors also signal broader meaning for the artist, as indicated by the title of each work. Red

VANESSA GERMAN, *LESSONS ON HOW TO RIDE THE EAGLE*, 2016. MIXED MEDIA. COURTESY OF VANESSA GERMAN AND PAVEL ZOUBOK GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTO: HEATHER MULL



VANESSA GERMAN, *RED.RED.RED. FOR THE RAGE, BLOOD AND DESIRE* (CENTER FIGURE), 2016.  
MIXED MEDIA. COURTESY OF VANESSA GERMAN  
AND PAVEL ZOUBOK GALLERY, NEW YORK.  
PHOTO: HEATHER MULL



OVERVIEW OF THE TERRA-COTTA ARMY BURIED  
WITH CHINA'S FIRST EMPEROR, QIN SHI HUANG DI  
IN XI'AN, CHINA, C. 210-209 BCE.



DETAIL OF THE TERRA-COTTA ARMY BURIED  
WITH CHINA'S FIRST EMPEROR, QIN SHI HUANG DI  
IN XI'AN, CHINA, C. 210-209 BCE.



represents blood, love, desire, and rage, as in *red.red.red for the rage, blood and desire*. White stands for liberty and ghosts, as in *black on white swan*. And blue symbolizes water, the Middle Passage, living truth, trauma and grief, the psychosis of enduring oppression, and the healing language of music, as in *i come to do a violence to the lies of ugly*.<sup>4</sup> These fierce and complex all-American figures are simultaneously entrenched in the safety of home and prepared to strike out in the call for justice.

For MATRIX 174, German has transformed the gallery into an underground excavation site. Minimally illuminated by several strings of bare light bulbs, a powerful, all-female, black army of approximately thirty figurative sculptures is installed in a military formation on an earthen floor that magically shimmers with a dusting of gold. The artist notes, “i am thinking about that cavern of clay soldiers. the chinese space that was a burial chamber. i am thinking about creating a movement. a cluster of power figures in this manner. to be displayed as though soldiers.”<sup>5</sup> The presentation was inspired by one of the most remarkable archeological discoveries of our times—the massive configuration of an estimated 7,000 terra-cotta warriors and horses buried near the 2,000-year-old tomb of Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di (died 210 B.C.E.), which were uncovered in northwest China in 1974. Like the self-proclaimed first Emperor of Qin, German’s female soldiers display remarkable individuality and perform specific protective and supportive roles within the community (or dynasty) that relate to rites of passage from birth, to death, and rebirth. The artist explains, “this work is an uprising. i am imagining. mothers and daughters in a state of deep refusal so momentous. that it iz a withering destructive force to the systems and structures that bind and constrain their very liberty.”<sup>6</sup>

German’s soldiers confront the agents of racism, violence, and police brutality. In her signature prose, she describes them as “an army of healers. an army of weepers. an army of protectors. armed and dangerous upon the lie.”<sup>7</sup> She defines their role in “a sustained accumulation of destruction to the vicious and debilitating compendium of hate, lies, and murder; the shapeshifting nature of the weapons aimed

VANESSA GERMAN, MEMBERS OF THE ARMY  
MARCHING IN THE ALLEYWAY IN HOMEWOOD, 2016.  
MIXED MEDIA. COURTESY OF VANESSA GERMAN  
AND PAVEL ZOUBOK GALLERY, NEW YORK.  
PHOTO: HEATHER MULL



against my very flesh and soul. (i do not have to tell you that \_\_\_\_\_ black lives matter.)”<sup>8</sup> German invokes the names of the many black lives lost to senseless violence, primarily at the hands of the police. The innumerable victims include Tamir Rice (2014), LaQuan McDonald (2014), Eric Garner (2014), and Sandra Bland (2015). Each has been cited in German’s prose, which engages directly with the Black Lives Matter movement that was created in 2012 after the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. To further the dialogue concerning guns and violence, locally and nationally, German created additional lawn posters featuring “trayvon” and “We Stand by Jordan Miles,” an eighteen-year-old Homewood man who was beaten by police in 2010.





But in her MATRIX installation, *i come to do a violence to the lie*, Vanessa German aims to unite and heal the community: “i am thinking about the power of love. for how inside of my heart of love. all of my ancestors are present....this army is ancestral. ...and love is the process, the product, and the way. and it is infinitely reproducible. and all of this rises from the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

### **PATRICIA HICKSON**

Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

# VANESSA GERMAN

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 *Vanessa German/ MATRIX 174/i come to do a violence to the lie*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT  
*Introspective: Vanessa German*, The August Wilson Center for African American Culture, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2015 *Bitter Root*, Northcutt Stelle Gallery, Montana State University Billings, Billings, MT  
*Bitter Root*, Holter Museum of Art, Helena, MT
- 2014 *Bitter Root*, Montana Museum of Art & Culture, Missoula, MT
- 2012 *Emerging Artist of the Year*, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2011 *HOME: HOMEWOOD Artist Residency*, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2010 *Tar Baby Jane and Doo-Wop: Everything Useful For Your Modern Household*, 709 Penn Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 *State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now*, Jepson Center for the Arts, Savannah, GA
- 2015 *Black: Color, Material, Concept*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
*Re:Purposed*, Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL
- 2014 *State of the Art*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR  
*Pittsburgh Biennial*, Pittsburgh Glass Center, Pittsburgh PA
- 2013 *Remix: Selections from the International Collage Center*, Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY
- 2012 *The Art of Storytelling: Lies, Enchantment, Humor & Truth*, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD  
*Ill Perceived*, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Cleveland, OH  
*African American Art 1950-Present*, Smithsonian Institution, College Park, MD
- 2010 *Art of the State: Pennsylvania 2010*, Pennsylvania State Museum, Harrisburg, PA  
*Art For Life*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA  
*Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow*, I.P. Stanback Museum, Orangeburg, SC
- 2009 *Associate Artists of Pittsburgh 99th Annual Exhibition*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2008 *Black Clay in PA: A Dialogue in Flux*, The August Wilson Center for African American Culture, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2005 *Gestures: An Exhibition of Small Site-Specific Works*, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA

## AWARDS

- 2015 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant
- 2014 Ronald H. Brown Leadership Award for Community Leadership, Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh
- 2012 Pittsburgh Foundation and The Heinz Endowments, Creative Development Grant
- 2011 Women and Girls Foundation Award
- 2009 Inaugural August Wilson Center Fellow
- 2008 Inaugural Green For All Fellow

Born 1976, Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
Lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

## PERFORMANCES

- 2015 TEDxPittsburghStatePrison, Pittsburgh, PA  
2014 The Summit at Crystal Bridges, State of the Art Spotlight, Bentonville, AR  
2013 Creative Mornings, Association of American Museums, Pittsburgh, PA  
Rally for Public Education, Kelly Strayhorn Theater, Pittsburgh, PA  
2011 TEDxPittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA  
TEDxCambridge, Cambridge, MA

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are mixed media, various dimensions, and by Vanessa German, 2016. Courtesy Vanessa German and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York.

*Priscilla Rides Again*

*red.red.red for the rage, blood and desire*

*Lessons on How to Ride the Eagle*

*Blessing of the Boats*

*trumpet song*

*dark syrup*

*No Water Cleanser*

*The Greater*

*sometimes i want to kill you #2*

*are you a good woman?*

*the secret of charm is color*

*outrage*

*sometimes you cannot see how beautiful i am because you keep looking at my face*

*i love you this much*

*black on white swan*

*i come to do a violence to the lies of ugly.*

*no admittance apply at office.*

*\_\_\_\_\_ must be stopped.*

*workhorse*

*a list of things to never be forgotten*

*i will never smile again*

*The Boxer*

*this is what it looks like when you get real up close to it*

*Endurance is a love story.*

*Spool cotton colors*

*an ease to the sorrow*

*sometimes i want to kill you*

*oh for to healing of the blues*

*Cream crackers*

*Rage on the horse.*

*Easily Removed and Replaced for Washing*

## ARTIST RESIDENCY

German recognizes parallels between her Homewood neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Hartford, Connecticut, particularly in terms of racism and gun violence. She will be an artist-in-residence as part of her MATRIX project. Beginning in May, her residency took her into the Hartford Public Schools to work closely with students to encourage creativity

through dynamic art workshops in all-school assemblies and classroom settings. Additionally, she will return to Hartford in July for summer sessions with various community groups like True Colors, Real Art Way's Park Art, Billings Forge Community Works, and the Wadsworth Atheneum's Summer Community Studio.

## OPENING RECEPTION AND PERFORMANCE

Wednesday, June 8

5 pm | Exhibition Viewing & Cash Bar Reception

6 pm | Performance

7 pm | Meet the Artist

\$15/\$10 for members

## ARTIST TALK

Artist Vanessa German and Patricia Hickson,  
Emily Hall Tremain Curator of Contemporary Art

Friday, June 10

12 pm

Free with admission

## JUNETEENTH FAMILY DAY

**Power & Identity**

Saturday, June 11

10 am - 4 pm

Free

Artist Vanessa German shares private moments with visitors in *Eye Contact Is an Act of Love*, followed by a procession of dance, music, and poetry. In collaboration with The Amistad Center for Art & Culture.



**WADSWORTH ATHENEUM**  
MUSEUM OF ART

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[www.thewadsworth.org](http://www.thewadsworth.org)

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greater hartford  
arts council



still revolutionary  
Department of Economic and  
Community Development

Office of the Arts

<sup>1</sup> See Vanessa German's web site [www.lovefrontporch.com](http://www.lovefrontporch.com).

<sup>2</sup> Homewood was labeled "America's Most Dangerous Neighborhood" in the two-part series "Home Sweet Homewood," on The Rachel Maddow Show, originally aired on MSNBC on 6 May 2011 and 26 May 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Vanessa German quoted from an email correspondence with the author, 31 March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Vanessa German quoted from an email correspondence with the author, 16 October 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Vanessa German quoted from an email correspondence with the author, 1 February 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.