

The Cuckoo in the Artistic Nest

The Work of Jef Geys

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[ERIC BRACKE]

The Flemish art-tsar Jan Hoet is said to have once called him 'more a social worker than an artist'. It seems that after that relations between Hoet and Jef Geys (Leopoldsburg, 1934-2018) never really recovered. The fact is that, throughout his long career, Geys tried to erase the boundary between art and everyday life.

Whether they paint, take photographs or make films, artists 'question the representation of reality, the status of the artwork, or the mechanisms of the art world'. These are stopgaps that recur frequently in writings on contemporary art, so often in fact that the word 'question' has lost all its bite. But if there is one Flemish artist who has made 'questioning' – raising things for discussion – his hobbyhorse, it is Jef Geys.

Following the example of his father, who was a soldier, the young Jef Geys initially opted for the army too. But after only a few years he brought his military career to an end and enrolled at the art academy in Antwerp. This young artist was a thorn in the side of the artistic world from the very beginning. His work did not match the expectations of the art circuit, but criticised the institutions and undermined the convention of the uniqueness of the work of art.

Geys was keen to interact abundantly with his local surroundings in Balen, a village in the Campine region: the school, the neighbourhood committee, the local committees with the ability to influence local decision-making, the cafés, the clubs and so on. This often resulted in a presentation of all sorts of documents, cuttings, drawings, objects, photos and letters. You might call it an unstreamlined, eclectic communication of knowledge.

The fact that, throughout his career, Geys was an art teacher in Balen, at the same school where his writer-friend Walter van den Broeck and the socialist politician Jef Sleeckx also taught, probably helped shape his open and unstructured method. In the classroom, instead of giving pupils an academic initiation into the plastic arts, he entered into conversation with them. He hung up original works by well-known artists at the back of the room, curious to hear the pupils' reactions. It was also during discussions in these classes that his list of 'Women's Questions' took shape, which was often to be seen in his exhibitions. 'A woman in politics. How does that work?' is one of at least 150 questions that Geys collected in his lists.



Self-Portrait, *Black Overalls*
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Working-class and rebellious

Geys also liked to incorporate popular culture into his unruly work. A good example is the project with a young local racing cyclist in 1968-69. Geys supervised and coached the fifteen-year-old cyclist during his races. In exchange, the boy told of his experiences, which Geys incorporated into a number of letters to friends. Geys also followed Eddy Merckx in the Tour de France and from there wrote letters to his protégé in which he described the great champion's cycling technique and lifestyle. The result of this project, consisting of framed photos, letters and cuttings, is kept in the collection of the M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art, in Antwerp.

It was at about the same time that allotments first began to appear in his work, and later they frequently recurred as a full-blown subject. In 1969 Geys suggested to the then Minister of Culture, Frans van Mechelen, that the Middelheim sculpture park should be dug up and turned into a kitchen garden for the people of Antwerp. Several years later he himself planted cabbages ('edible art') in the park in Ghent, and for the bicentenary of the French Revolution, in 1989, he suggested to Jacques Chirac, the mayor of Paris, that vegetables be grown on the Cour Royale.

In some cases his early work also had a rebellious side. In 1971 Geys proposed blowing up the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, KMSKA, in Antwerp. The weak points in the construction of the building were marked on the plan. The artist confronted the artificial world of art with its own pretensions, its self-determined demarcation and its irrelevance.

In his early years, his field of action also included the Socialist Meeting House, especially when the wildcat strike broke out at the Vieille Montagne zinc factory in Balen in 1971. Regarding this period, Geys said that it was the only time in his life that he had felt useful as an artist. In that same Meeting House he had also once taken part in a hobby exhibition organised by the 'association of socialist women'. It was at this exhibition that his painted packets of flower and vegetable seeds made their appearance.

Every year since 1962, Geys painted a large panel in which he copied the illustration of vegetables or flowers on a seed packet. In 2001, this series of paintings, a continuous thread running through his oeuvre, was shown at the Kunstverein in Munich, the place where the Nazis had exhibited the *Entartete Kunst*, or Degenerate Art Exhibition, in 1937. On the wall opposite the painted panels of flowers and vegetables was a countdown from the year 1962 to 1928,

Closed Archive, 1957

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written in chalk. Next to this hung a list of ethnic population groups. Associations with the dark chapters in German history and with the issue of refugees were quite plain to see even at that time.

Geys's social commitment was also expressed in his contribution to *Chambres d'Amis* (1986), Jan Hoet's controversial project in which artists showed their work in the homes of Ghent residents. This artist from the Campine region selected a number of small, shabby houses inside which he installed a false door with the slogan of the French Revolution: Freedom, Equality, Fraternity. When you opened the door you came up against the wall. One of these doors can now be seen at the S.M.A.K., the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, in Ghent.

In the catalogue, the artist included accounts given by the inhabitants of these houses. Ingrid Verdonck, for example, said: 'As an unemployed single mother with two children who has to manage on an allowance of 9,000 Belgian francs a month, I no longer feel much need to go and look at art in the museum. As I watch my children growing up in this small, damp house, I often think "what will become of them later?"'

Chambres d'Amis, Ghent, 1986
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Figurative art

Geys prompts us to look for the meaning behind his experiments and presentations, without leading us by the hand. Inevitably, the viewer sometimes sees intentions that the artist probably never had. In *Kunst in België na 1975* (Art in Belgium after 1975, 2001) we read: 'With his painted copies of *Seed Packets* (as from 1962) and above all *Culture HQ* (1969), *Edible Art* (1967-68) and *Cabbages* – which he installed as sculptures in the flower beds of the South Park in Ghent in 1969 (and which were promptly removed by the council) – he parodied figurative representation in painting and in addition took aim at the notion of the artist as the individual maker of an artwork.'



Coffee Mats, 2015
 © Dirk Pauwels, S.M.A.K. Ghent

I am quite sure that it was never Jef Geys's intention to denounce figurative representation in painting. Geys guarded against pushing art in any particular direction, and even joined in exhibitions by so-called amateur artists. In the popular Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, for example, we read that Jef Geys also took part in the first exhibition by the Balense Kunstkring KUBA (an art club) in September 2016. He wanted, rather, to accuse the artistic bastion of unworldliness and expose the dominance of commerce and marketing.

After being awarded the Flemish Culture Prize for Visual Art in 2000, Geys told the writer Walter van den Broeck, a kindred spirit, in a rare conversation: 'It's my opinion that significant images can still be made using pencil and paint.' According to Geys, this no longer happened because it was no longer taught. 'And it is no longer taught because the schools believe there's no money in it.' This does not really sound like someone who reviles figurative representation in painting. On the contrary, according to this former teacher of art, drawing is a matter of true seeing. He himself collected a series of his drawings in 'colouring books for adults'. And in November 2011 he gave every year six pupil at Leopoldsburg's schools one of these colouring books.

Archive

Jef Geys almost constantly reincorporated themes and elements from earlier work into his projects. He kept his reserves of material and ideas neatly archived in Balen: from drawings he did as a thirteen-year-old boy to a Super-8 film of a concert by the crooner Zwarte Lola in a roadside café in the Campine region, and even police tickets, all arranged tidily and chronologically. These

archive items frequently turned up in various combinations, as was the case in the *Retrospectieve-Introspectie* ('Retrospective-Introspection') exhibition at the Erna Hecey Gallery in Brussels in autumn 2007.

Earlier, at the 2002 Documenta in Kassel, Geys projected the negatives of all his photos onto a screen. This really means every single one of his photos, from snapshots of his private life to photos documenting one or other project. This is typical of Geys, since he made no hierarchical distinction between the items he used to compile his artworks. It took thirty-six hours for half a century's worth of photographs to pass across the screen. The majority of the negatives had previously also been published in a tiny but thick 500-page book entitled *Jef Geys – Al de zwart-wit foto's tot 1998* [Jef Geys: All the Black-and-White Photographs up to 1998].

In the newspaper *De Standaard*, Johan de Vos wrote that 'a real photographer would never do such a thing'. 'The art lies in the selection, quite literally.' And he concluded: 'We outsiders can only look on in wonder, guessing, searching. In the end the images will make a different impression on everyone. And these impressions will have little to do with Jef Geys, but plenty to do with the viewer himself. That's what makes it an odd, incomprehensible, but delightful book.'

Het Kempens Informatieblad (The Campine Newsletter)

Geys's whole oeuvre was a gigantic work in progress, always branching off in new directions. The younger shoots largely fed on the same humus as fifty years before, reflecting the artist's consistent position in the world. Geys always sided with the weakest party.

He considered the social reality more oppressive than the art world, which he appeared to want to unmask as elitist, mercantile and artificial, sneaking everyday things into his art that do not have the exalted aura of an artwork. He replaced the usual exhibition catalogues with his own issues of *Het Kempens Informatieblad*, the name of a regional newspaper that used to be delivered door to door. If ever prepared to take part in a group exhibition, he would ask for his résumé to be omitted from the catalogue. But in his own modest publications he gave a detailed account of his sources and offered his views on socially relevant topics.

Geys had always been interested in how mass communication works. As a student at the academy, he took the course in advertising because he was interested in the publicity machine used to reach the masses. It was clear from his exhibition at the Middelheim Open-Air Museum in Antwerp in 1999 that advertising had continued to fascinate him. He turned his fire on 'corporate image-building'. At the time, Geys told the journalist Christine Vuegen: 'There is a type of logo being made that carries out a subliminal campaign... For example, cigarette advertising is banned; a colour is then linked to the brand. A colour is appropriated, just as political parties do. Will a time come when one will not be able to paint one's house yellow?'

At Middelheim, Geys used an advertising strategy himself. He copied pornographic drawings ranging from Ancient Greece to the nineteenth century. Geys planted the drawings on stands in the museum park and linked each one to a different product logo.

Geys had already incorporated logos into his work in the 1960s. At that time he was mainly interested in their form, the simplicity of which was overshadowed by their weighty symbolism. One striking example is the stars and triangles the Nazis used to stigmatise Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals. These geometrical figures appeared in his paintings and the Star of David turned up again in his entry for the São Paulo Biennial in 1991. In a series of photographic self-portraits, Geys, in a black overall, shows several of these highly charged geometric forms. But their meaning is obscured by the fact that they are given the colours of a local football team. Jef Geys called this 'image wear'.

Recognition

For the last couple of decades, Jef Geys has been receiving international recognition, ironically enough even from the major art institutions. Having taken part in Documenta 11, he was given a retrospective at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (2004) and was later a guest at art institutions in Finland and



Women's Questions, 1965

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Outlines of a Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent
© Dirk Pauwels, S.M.A.K. Ghent, 2015



France. They have also discovered him over in the United States. Dan Graham invited him to take part in the *Deep Comedy* exhibition (2007) at Marfa in Texas and a year later Geys's work was shown at the International Center of Photography in New York (*Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*).

In 2009, when he was already seventy-five, the Flemish Community also sent him off to the Venice Biennale, where he carried out the *Quadra Medicinale* project. He asked four acquaintances to look for twelve wild plants between the paving stones in a square kilometre marked off in their own city – Villeurbanne, New York, Moscow and Brussels. What was found in these four 'terroirs' formed the starting point for a richly documented study that was presented in the Belgian Pavilion.

In 2015, Geys was also finally given his own solo exhibition at the S.M.A.K. in Ghent. It turned out that the artist still had a bone to pick with Jan Hoet, the former director of the museum. Geys applied coloured lines to the floor of several otherwise empty rooms. They turned out to be the outlines of a wing of the neighbouring Museum of Fine Arts (MSK), where Geys had been promised an exhibition long before. Geys had already prepared everything when Hoet cancelled that earlier exhibition, supposedly because he didn't have the money for it. This unsettled account was now settled at the S.M.A.K.

The question remains whether Jef Geys was 'more a social worker than an artist' who made arresting art. One thing is certain: that with his uncommon attitude he kept the art world and his audience awake. And although the visual impact of his work is often subordinate to its content, an almost moving, poetical beauty lies dormant in many of his works. A recent example of this was the presentation of a series of so-called coffee mats in the S.M.A.K. exhibition. The artist went to a café to read the paper every morning. On the paper mat the coffee was served on, he wrote down the headlines and topics that struck him that day. Together these kitschy mats form an enthralling diary of current events that had troubled the artist. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball