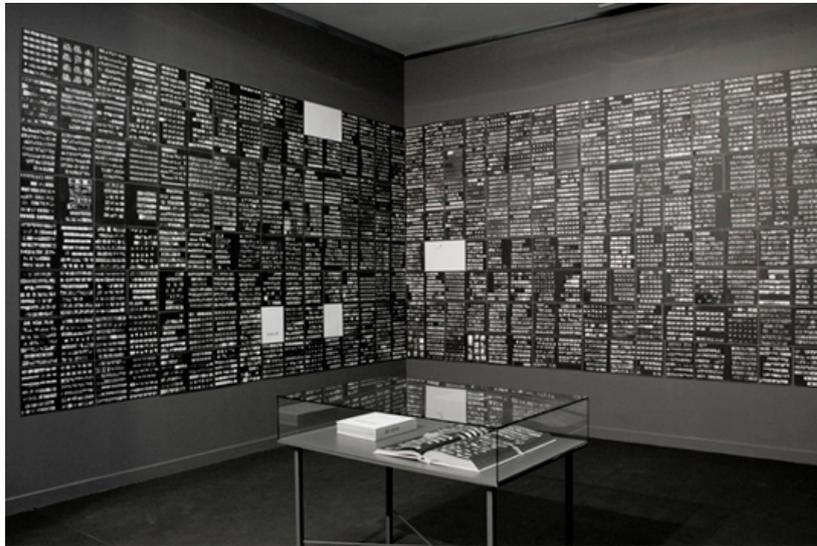


Jef Geys's Art-Making Ethics Chris Sharp



Jef Geys, Al de foto's tot 1998 (All the photos up to 1998), 1998. Installation view, M HKA, Antwerp. Courtesy the artist and M HKA collection

Of the difficulty of not heroising Jef Geys. Of not launching into a shameless panegyric about the legendary and exemplary integrity of his practice. These are the ways I had initially wanted to begin this article. But when I tried, I found myself struggling to organise his potentially heroic qualities according to a system and within a language of which they are both critical and ultimately foreign. Or to put in another way, my measuring stick seemed suddenly rotten and inadequate. I threw it away. And I decided to start from a different, albeit not entirely unrelated angle, one more comparable to Geys's measuring stick. But where to find it exactly? In the artist's practice itself. Behold, on the second page of the *Kempens Informatieblad* publication that accompanied his exhibition *Woodward Avenue* (2010) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit, the following text, authored by Geys himself:

Like on every dead body good and bad insects appear on the remainder; here on Detroit. Carcass opportunists. Some (let's say about 10%) are relief workers with good intentions. In the Detroit situation like for example in Madagascar, Senegal, Leningrad, etc. [...] 'art hoppers' come along to this ruinous community which is for them a temporary playground. Before you know widescreen pictures of abandoned supermarket carts and buildings in decay are published in the glossy magazines. If there's no support of the government or surrounding communities the praiseworthy intentions of good meaning people are bound to fail. If you can't set up a whole new program with a clear view on the specific situation of art; what it is, was, could be, should be: STOP! If you want to join the flying circus of 'would be curators' who hop from one carcass to another, so be it, travel on from one colloquium to another and be a member of what seems to me more than ever the 'Club Med art of the years 2000...'¹

These two baleful paragraphs function not only as a warning of sorts, but also, more importantly, as a righteous condemnation of certain modes of operating in the art world and – to put it mildly – as a statement of intent, a work ethic or even an ethic *tout court*, in negative. I am strongly tempted to believe that significant clues as to how Geys operates and has operated in the world and the art world, however remotely, for the past nearly fifty years are woven deeply within the very fabric of these two paragraphs. For all their awkward phrasing, reckless, would-be profusion of *sics* (more on that later) and general vitriol, they are instrumental to understanding what motivates Geys as an artist and, possibly, a human being.

I should start by perhaps stating the obvious: implicit in Geys's brief but potent text is a fundamental belief in art's essential capacity to make a positive social impact, to register as something much more than a cosmetic enhancement of the lifestyle of a privileged few. Rather, it sees art as that which promotes an actively ethical engagement with the world. This is done by appealing to the critical agency of a given subject so as to help him or her learn to

take as little for granted as possible (what more could be asked of art? Of an exhibition, a poem, a novel, a movie? What more basic service could art possibly offer than helping one become more present in one's own life? In others'? In the world? Perhaps this is what Robert Filliou meant when he said: 'Art is that which makes life more interesting than art.'). In case the text cited above did not make it clear, Geys is not, by any stretch of the imagination, some kind of utopia-addled hippy; a deeply Foucauldian and occasionally obstreperous distrust of power structures and how they manage our lives may be found in the negative penumbra of his positive aesthetics. It is how he chooses to identify, negotiate and challenge those structures through the development of ethical methodologies that accounts for his positive contribution as an artist.

This complex belief system has played a crucial role in Geys's practice almost from the beginning of his career in the late 1950s — from his early projects that exposed the absurdity of cow passports (issued in Northern Europe at the time) and his proposal to blow up a museum in Antwerp due to its lack of structural soundness, to his educational activism as an elementary-school art teacher in the small Belgian town of Balen (where he still lives) from 1960 to 1989. Manifestations of that system can perhaps best be seen in two recent exhibitions: *Quadra Medicinale*, his project for the Belgian Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale, and *Woodward Avenue*, a variation of the pavilion situated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit. For the Venice incarnation of this deceptively simple project, Geys asked four qualified acquaintances in four different cities — Brussels, New York, Moscow and Villeurbanne, France — to collect twelve different kinds of weeds which 'definitely grow on the street' within a one- to two-kilometre quadrant of their respective homes or workplaces. In addition to locating the plants, Geys requested that his collaborators photograph them in their natural urban habitat, and 'harvest them', dry them, pin them up and provide their identifying information, such as their Latin name and the genus to which they belong. He was particularly interested in the medicinal qualities of the plants, and how they might ideally be used, for example, by a homeless person to relieve the pain of a toothache. The artist then collected all the material from his collaborators, processed it and formalised it into a navigable, two-dimensional whole in the form of photographs, dried and framed plant samples and maps, which was presented in the Belgian pavilion in a serial, or grid-like, no frills format.

In Venice, at the viewer's eye level, could be found a framed dried plant sample with its relevant scientific information, Latin name and medicinal properties. Below this were two colour photographs mounted on a single support: one of the weed growing in the urban environment, and the other of signs on the street where it was found. This systematic, tripartite presentation of information was occasionally complemented by blown-up, black-and-white Google-map details of the specific urban quadrants themselves. Meanwhile, the upper perimeter of the walls featured larger, dried, flattened and framed examples of the same plants, often corresponding to the small representations directly underneath. The pavilion also housed a broad selection of drawings largely of plants, erotica and military motifs,² a few visual references to former, albeit related works and an enlarged version of Geys's presentation of the project translated into twelve languages.³ Eschewing any romantic, symbolic or idyllic value normally associated with the depiction of plant life, and prioritising, quite simply, the facts, the mood of the pavilion was sober and scientific. In reaction to the project's presentation, Ina Vandebroek, Geys's principle scientific collaborator on both the Venice and Detroit exhibitions, noted that it 'emanated scientific rigour as well as simplicity and refreshing orderly stillness. Through this work of art I also saw a man's ode to science.'⁴ Indeed, the project sought to create and function as a method as much, if not more, than a work of art. One of Geys's goals here was to create a template that could be applied to any city as a scientifically plausible point of departure, and one to be carried on, elaborated and applied by others — a sort of ur-open source mode of operating very much in conformity with Geys's practice.⁵

In addition to the project's use of traditional artistic strategies, artistic status can be located in two particular factors in *Quadra Medicinale*: its somewhat nebulous and deeply imbricated relationship with the grid, and the *Kempens Informatieblad* publication that accompanied it.⁶ Foregrounded in the work's title, the grid lurks with a kind of impish ubiquity not only throughout this project, but throughout the artist's entire practice. If I refer to it in such unflattering terms, it is because the grid, in Geys's deployment, never betrays its thoroughly paradoxical nature. Indeed, it conforms to a certain ambiguity that can be seen throughout its application in contemporary art; Rosalind Krauss's diagnoses of it as 'fully, even cheerfully schizophrenic' was a consequence of its proclivity to simultaneously project centrifugally outward (as in Mondrian's diamond-shaped paintings) as well as centripetally inward (as in the depiction of windows), while just as readily rendering itself serviceable to spiritual and materialist or scientific discourse.⁷ Similarly, Geys's preoccupation with the grid keeps even the best of his students guessing. *Quadra Medicinale*, in particular, is predicated upon both the rigorous implementation and subtle, irrepressible annulment of the grid. From the map's

obscure; and the overall tone seemed to presuppose a familiarity (which for most of the audience would have been unlikely) with Geys's career since its beginning. Indeed, this *Kempens Informatieblad* was characterised by his proclivity to elliptically sum up past projects with laconic, non-descriptions (i.e. '...touring around Belgium with my cabbages on the backseat of my Citroën 2CV: showing the landscape to the cabbages with clumps of ground packed in plastic'), as if an artistic career merely needed to be evoked in order to exist.¹² That, or it was already the stuff of legend.

If this self-mythologising tendency seems implicit in the *Quadra Kempens Informatieblad*, it becomes explicit in the *Kempens* that accompanied the Detroit incarnation of the project. Elaborating upon the methodology developed for Venice, Geys invited Vandebroek to apply the same methods as *Quadra Medicinale* employed to one of Detroit's main thorough-fares, Woodward Avenue. Beginning at Cadillac Square, in the centre of Detroit, and continuing on to Saginaw Street, and almost thirty miles north into the neighbouring city of Pontiac, Vandebroek collected twelve samples of the urban flora otherwise known as weeds at twelve different intersections, documenting the process and classifying the plants. This incarnation, however, was complemented by a much greater involvement by Vandebroek, featuring a workshop with local, herbal healers at the museum itself, and a documentary, made according to Geys's directions, of Vandebroek conducting an ethnobotany workshop with traditional health practitioners in Eterazama, Bolivia. (Ethnobotany could be briefly described as an attempt to study and register indigenous healing techniques and lore, and to synthesise these with biological medicine.) As linked to language, culture and ethnographic studies as to medical science and the practical application and improvement of medical care in less favoured communities in South America – in Bolivia in particular – Vandebroek's work is emphatically practical.

The *Kempens Informatieblad* for *Woodward Avenue* features a multi-voiced, elliptical narrative, in the style and spirit of, say, William Faulkner, which revolves around the death and funeral of a gallerist by the name of Ghislaine Delforge. A host of written monologues, which correspond, at least in part, to those of real people – ranging from Geys's friend, the writer Walter van den Broeck, to his own daughter, Nina Geys, among many others – variously reflect on Delforge, as well as on Geys himself. All but outright reviled throughout, Geys is evocatively depicted as some kind of intransigent zealot and is generally spoken of, one feels, with a sense of embittered dread (except, of course, by his daughter and van den Broeck). Indeed, one gets the sense that these monologues all form a community in which Geys, for better or for worse, functions as a kind of conscience. That Geys should elect to accompany an untraditional community-based exhibition with such an eccentric text in a city far from the centres of the usual art circuit and in a country where he has rarely exhibited is perhaps not as puzzling as it may at first seem. I see within his decision two interdependent beliefs: that of the practical significance of the myth of the artist to the efficacy and cogency of art, and that of the importance of maintaining, against all appearances, the division between art and life (the formal fictionalisation of the self serves – at least here, given the story's reliance on narrative convention – not to make that self more real, but rather the stuff of fiction). Contrary to what such an unorthodox career would suggest – a career that has always been and continues to be categorically antagonistic toward the mechanisms of the mainstream art world – Geys is not necessarily out to 'blur the boundaries between art and life', or, more radically, to dissolve art into life. Had that been the case, he probably would have stopped participating in and contributing to a community he deems so reprehensible decades ago – which is to say, carried such a belief to its logical conclusion. Nor does his continued participation make him a martyr to the cause of art – he knows how to keep his distance from the dealings of what he has been known to refer to as 'the mafia [*sic*] which calls itself the international art trade'.¹³

To return to the condemnation quoted at the beginning of this essay, Geys does have 'a clear view on the specific situation of art; what it is, was, could be, should be'. I see it thus: it is a privileged mobile 'site', demarcated as art, that is capable of hosting and promoting serious reflection on a human being's ethical duty toward him or herself, fellow human beings and the community, and also one where such a duty may be questioned, explored and actively redefined. Even in Herbert Marcuse's utopian vision of a society transformed into 'Art as Form of Reality' (1972), art, as we know it, would still be assigned its own separate space, transcendent of daily life, functioning as a privileged 'otherness' capable of questioning and challenging the status quo.¹⁴ And it is this privileged space, at the very heart of the everyday, wherein Geys continually challenges himself, and whoever encounters his work, to take as little for granted as possible.¹⁵

Footnotes

1. See Jef Geys, 'Woodward Avenue', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Detroit, 2010, p.3.↑
2. More specifically, the drawings, which were executed with the skill of an accomplished

draughtsman on brown paper, sometimes juxtaposed plants with images of human reproductive organs, soldiers or tanks. Going back to one of the artist's earliest projects, *ABC École de Paris (ABC School of Paris, 1959–61)*, in which Geys ironically applied himself to acquiring the rules of good drawing through a correspondence course, it should be noted that drawing as a technique has always played a fundamental role in his practice. Interpretable as ironic studies after nature, the combination in the pavilion of these three motifs brings to mind a provocative and highly ambiguous series of equivalences, as if reminding the viewer that the human organ capable of encoding botanical information into a cultural and medical archive is no less responsible for the codes of pornography and the sophisticated machinery of warfare.↑

3. Although what I have just described may account for the visual contents of the exhibition, it does not necessarily account for its personal historical parameters, and the fact is that it could be seen perhaps not so much as a compact retrospective of Geys's entire career, but rather as the end of a broad arc of interests and preoccupations that have informed it — a subject which admittedly merits another, much longer essay altogether.↑
4. Ina Vandebroek, 'The Art in Ethnobotany', 2009, available at www.nybg.org/plant-talk/2009/06/people/the-art-in-ethnobotany/ (last accessed on 7 January 2010).↑
5. While working on this text, I received a link from Geys to a project by ethnobotanist Dr Peter Giovannini, which applies Geys's method and Vandebroek's research to the cities of Berlin and Rome: <http://petergiovannini.com/ethnobotany-photo-pictures/Urban-wild-food-plants-weeds.html> (last accessed on 18 February 2011).↑
6. The *Kempens Informatiebladen* (the name denotes a newspaper for the larger region around Geys's hometown of Balen) are exhibition publications that take the form of a newspaper, and which have accompanied most of Geys's projects and exhibitions since the late 1960s. In accordance with the democratic nature of his work, the *Kempens Informatiebladen* are always made available for free or at a low price, and are Geys's personal solution to the dissemination of information about his work. As Roland Patteeuw wrote about the *Kempens Informatiebladen* in Geys's only, to date, traditional catalogue, published on the occasion of his exhibition at the BAWAG Foundation in Vienna in 2009: 'Saving and archiving information. For Jef Geys this activity belongs to the area where the proper rules of the game are made and where the contents of each project is situated against a large social background. But informing doesn't mean explaining. Indeed, the artist never gives any details about his activities. Loads of information can be found in the *Kempens Informatieblad* [...which] covers the background information about the concerning [sic] projects. At the same time it functions as a register of observations and activities in the broadest sense of the word.' In other words, even if Geys is unwilling to explain or have his projects explained, he is nevertheless dedicated to rendering his thinking process partially clear and accessible. This democratic principle extends to the formal quality of the work itself. Cited in Christine Kintisch (ed.), *Jef Geys, Wien, Vienna, Wenen* (exh. cat.), Vienna: BAWAG Foundation, 2009, p.13. Two more aspects of the Venice *Kempens Informatieblad* merit mentioning. Firstly, Geys had originally hoped to make the newspaper edible, but was unsuccessful; secondly, the publication was available for a donation of one euro, the proceeds of which were donated to the Catholic association Caritas that helps homeless people and refugees (a donation of about €9,000–€10,000 was generated during the biennial).↑
7. Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1986, p.60.↑
8. See J. Geys, 'Middelheim — quadrant plants', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Biennale Venetië, 2009, p.23. Geys has worked with or tried to work with Middelheim, an open-air sculpture park in Antwerp, on several projects. In *Digging Middelheim (1969)*, Geys proposed to transform part of the space into a garden, a proposal that was met with silence. A more abstruse project, *The Dream of the Caddie*, involved a golf player, a compass and the division of a c.30-metre diameter circle into fundamental geometric parts, and was rejected outright for the 1984 Middelheim Biennial. In *Middelheim — quadrant plants*, Geys divided Middelheim into 110 quadrants, and asked a collaborator to harvest and frame, as in *Quadra Medicinale*, one plant per quadrant. He then made one drawing per quadrant, combining an erotic motif and a corporate logo, such as that belonging to Philips or IKEA. ('The border', Geys wrote in the *Kempens Informatieblad*, 'between what one calls pornography and the cunning tricks of the "business world" is for me close to one another [sic].') J. Geys, 'Quadra Medicinale', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Biennale Venetië, *op. cit.*, p.23.↑
9. This is not necessarily due to the fact that English is his second language. A good source tells me that he demonstrates similar characteristics in his native language, Flemish.↑
10. During a research trip in Belgium, I had the good fortune to meet with Geys. However, within five minutes of meeting him, he explained to me, when I rashly posed a question,

that there would be — I quote from memory — ‘no questions. I will speak, and you will listen. People have to do their homework. You can’t just show up here and expect to have everything explained to you’. Never mind that later, in his studio, when I ventured another question with the preface ‘This might be a stupid question,’ he, true to his nearly thirty years of teaching experience, responded, ‘There are no stupid questions.’ Conversation with the artist, 4 December 2010.↑

11. Geys’s CV merely consists of an undated, chronological inventory of projects — which is to say that the projects are numbered, or were numbered until recently (he stopped doing even that), but undated.↑
12. See J. Geys, ‘Quadra Medicinale’, *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Biennale Venetië, *op. cit.*, p.6.↑
13. J. Geys, ‘Woodward Avenue’, *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Detroit, *op. cit.*, p.20.↑
14. See Herbert Marcuse, ‘Art as Form of Reality’, *New Left Review*, no.74, 1972, pp.51—58.↑
15. Disclaimer: this text of course comes nowhere near describing the complexity of Geys’s work. If I have neglected to discuss such key points and factors as his interdisciplinary approach toward art making, I have done so in the hope of unpacking some of the formal and conceptual anomalies which attend his practice, and ideally rendering it a bit more accessible. For a more traditional appraisal of the stakes of Geys’s work, I urge the diligent reader to consult Dirk Snauwaert’s concise and incisive ‘Handbook/Instruction manual/Guidebook’ (2009) that accompanied *Quadra Medicinale*; the full version can be downloaded here in English: http://www.wiels.org/site2/event.php?event_id=182&lng=en (last accessed on 24 January 2011).↑