

JEF GEYS

Cubitt, London

Although he has been making art for more than 50 years, Jef Geys has quietly avoided developing any signature style or methodology. The Belgian artist has spent most of this time in the village of Balen, Flanders, where, from 1960 until 1989, he had a parallel vocation as a teacher in a regional primary school. Clearly someone who has – to paraphrase Lucy Lippard – been lured by the local, Geys is also a resolutely international artist. He draws on, and is part of, the wider current of Conceptual art that emerged in the 1960s (when he would take his young students to visit Marcel Broodthaers); in recent years, he represented Belgium at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and is now exhibiting concurrently at Cubitt in London and Wiels in Brussels. Geys's work usually involves documents and archives, information systems and taxonomies – all mixed with his own good humour and adherence to the politics of place. This latter point is evidenced in his 40-year editorial management of Balen's newspaper *Kempens Informatieblad*, which mixes regional news with features on international art.

Geys's exhibition at Cubitt focused on three contrasting sites for sociable eating and drinking: bars, domestic dining rooms and restaurants. Most of the wall space was devoted to *Bar 900*: a roaming proto-curatorial art and performance programme organized by Geys – and featuring the likes of James Lee Byars, Günther Uecker and Bernd Lohaus – that was staged at various Belgian night-clubs in the 1960s. Performances and sculptural projects were presented alongside the clubs' own showcases of drag acts, sex shows and cabaret routines. One wall was covered in posters advertising the clubs, while a vitrine contained further ephemera, including a map of Flanders with circles picking out the locations of the bars. A blown-up photograph of Geys taken at the time adorned another wall, his arms flung open wide as if welcoming viewers into his nocturnal world.

This interweaving of everyday life into art can also be seen in 'What are we having for dinner tonight' (1993): a series of videos originally broadcast live on a Rotterdam TV station showing families sitting down to their evening meals. Three monitors showed the original material, which is as bland as the reality formats of the later 1990s and early 2000s. Commissioned by Witte de With

as part of Rotterdam's 1993 architecture festival, the series originally included a number of different elements which were not presented Cubitt. Geys invited nine families from the austere, postwar housing project at Alexanderpolder to contribute to the festival: photos of their homes were shown at Witte de With; residents reported on their daily experiences for a number of special editions of *Kempens Informatieblad*; and, each evening, a local TV station broadcast footage of one of the nine participating families sitting down to eat. If the work invokes a pun on the idea of TV dinners, it was interesting to note how the families sit at tables together and are not atomized in front of television screens. There are few signs here of the purported corrosive effects of socialist housing schemes on the family unit.

A related newly commissioned work, *What are we having for dinner tonight 2013* (2013), delves into the contrasting realm of gastronomic cuisine. The project utilizes a new piece of technology called an 'Apic', a digital photographic tool for chefs and restaurant owners that takes high-quality images of food, allowing them to be uploaded to a database and tagged with labels and recipes. A number of these specialist machines have been installed in high-end restaurants around London, and were used to stream images of prepared dishes into the gallery, where they were projected onto a wall.

After several decades of artistic intervention in the culinary it is hard not to recall Claire Bishop's withering assessment of the 'conviviality' model of Rirkrit Tiravanija's meal-based exhibitions. Nevertheless, Geys's projects are not just another example of consumer-friendly institutional critique. Indeed, some of his work is positively antagonistic, even Dadaist – one striking example is when, on the occasion of his exhibition at Antwerp's Museum of Fine Arts in 1970, he submitted a proposal to blow up the museum. Geys's work revels in conflicting meanings: the drunken excess of *Bar 900*; the demographic contrast between the everyday families in the original *What are we having ...*; and the exclusivity of the 'Apic' project. While some of his works share an egalitarian concern for empowering participants or merging art and life, others do not. These are collaborative rather than participatory works, and the audience merely witnesses the archive, making the viewing experience somehow belated and even alienating. I left this exhibition hungry for more information on this most enigmatic of practitioners.

COLIN PERRY

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