

# CFA

## Who was Jef Geys?

by Dirk Snauwaert

*A brief overview of late Belgian artist Jef Geys,  
spanning key projects, approaches, methodologies,  
and complexities*



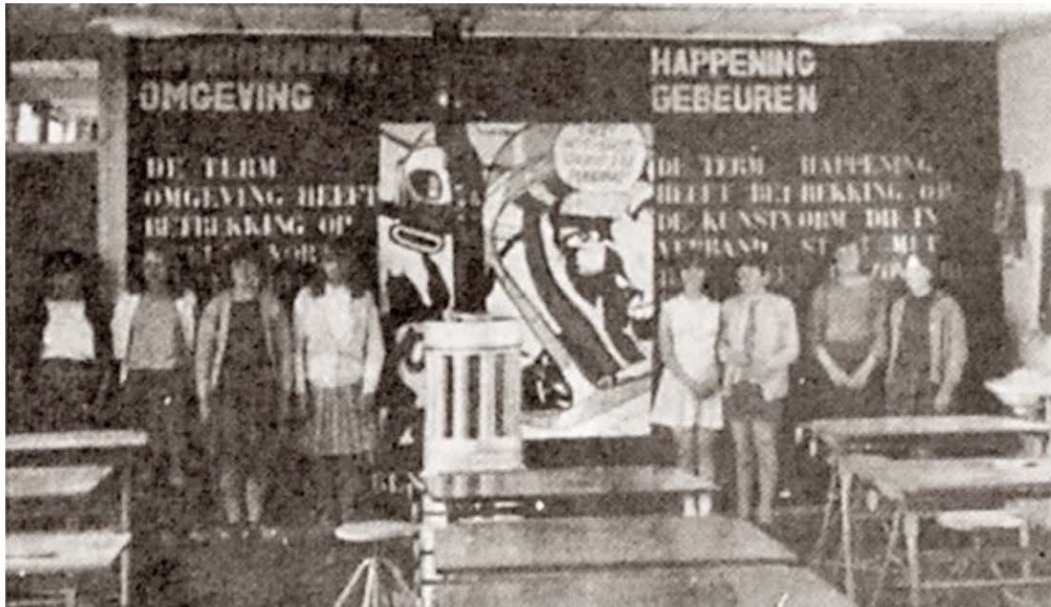
Jef Geys in 1986. Photo: Lieven Herreman.

The work of Jef Geys (1934-2018) constitutes one of the undisclosed territorialities of the neo-avant-garde, of which the artist gave the international art world a cryptic overview in 2002, within the largest platform for self-promotion: documenta in Kassel. The 36-hour-long projection *Day and Night and Day* was widely mentioned for its duration but hardly for the way it exposed an entire lifetime trajectory, for its manic exhibitory quality combined with its anti-narrativity.



Jef Geys, "All Black and White Pictures until 1998", Collection: Collection MUHKA, Antwerp.

All the photographs that Geys made until 1998 passed by in a photographic overflow that laid out the scope of what he considered as constitutive of his practice. Blurring the lines between the different environments of his topographical or social operations, his pictures were made in his home-town in rural Balen, but also during holiday trips, at the school where he taught 'positive aesthetics' from 1966 to 1989, during regional socio-cultural and political actions, and in the depicted sceneries in the Belgian and international art worlds.



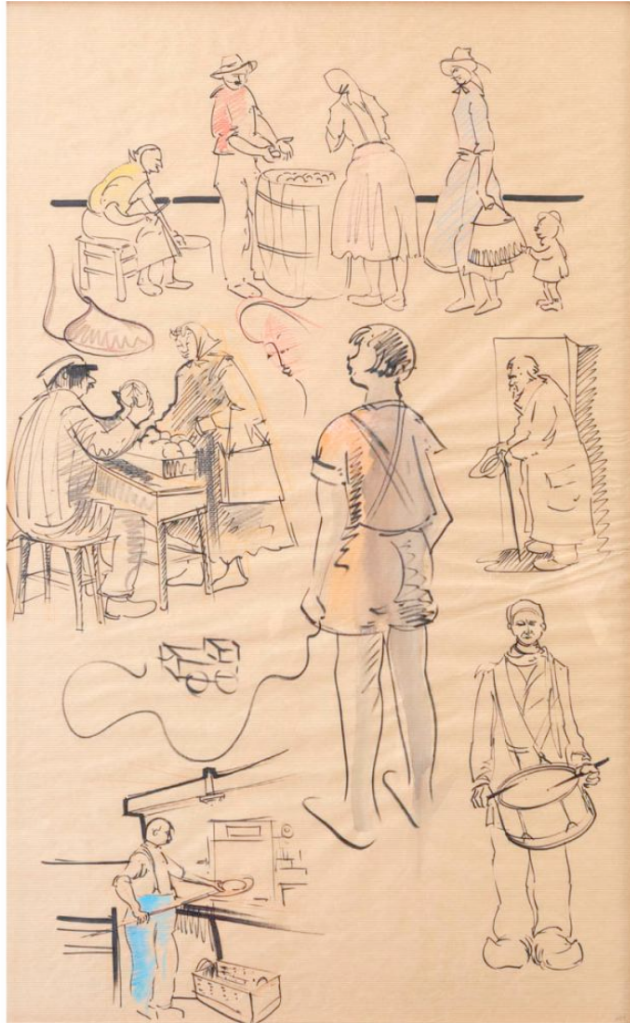
Classroom in Balen (Belgium) where Jef Geys taught "positive aesthetics" from 1966 to 1989. With an artwork by Roy Lichtenstein in the background.

Subverting categorisations was a typical gesture for his generation, which used extradisciplinarity as a way to expose the conformism of stylistic and formal classifications based on academic criteria. Jef Geys positively echoed such practices in his tendency to archive and recollect knowledge. His presentations in exhibitions showed a diagrammatical organisation of his research in the form of laconic observations of phenomena, facts and documents. However, his display eluded any kind of narrative or communicative turn by leaving out titles and legends, following an erratic organisation and providing cryptic, hermetic information about what the (photographic) documents represented. Rather than being a mere documentation or proof of a visual fact, the slow sequence of images at documents became more of a cinematic reverie with a deep autobiographical scope. The use of juxtaposition as a serial and de-dramatizing device, as well as the absence of careful framing and composition, installed Jef Geys' work along the line of early conceptual photography, with its insistence on the indexical and the document, diagrammatic grids, and the substitution of professional media skills by an impersonal, factual or dilettantish imprint.



Jef Geys, issues of the Kempens Informatieblad, installed at Künstlerhaus Bremen, 2019. Copyright photo: Fred Dott, Hamburg, <http://www.freddott.de>,

Lists, overviews, cataloguing, classification: these tools for knowledge production and organisation underpinned Jef Geys' entire work, including his frequently updated worklist running up to over 844 issues towards the end of his life; the catalogue describing and commenting upon his first decade of production, entitled *A 'Novel' About Motivation and Reality* (1973); and the self-edited *Kempens Informatieblad*, a cheap newspaper that accompanied his exhibitions from 1971 and replaced the institutionalised form of the catalogue, totalling some 59 publications. Sequentiality, the repetition of similar protocols resulting in a specific temporality, made Jef Geys one of the artists who developed this diagrammatic, analytical method of structuralist analysis, of conceptual art eluding subjectivities that would get carried away in visual rhetoric.



Jef Geys, plate from "ABC école de Paris".

From the start, Jef Geys set the tone with a 'method for learning to draw in the style of the Parisian School.' *ABC école de Paris* (n.d., ca 1962-63), a large series of schematic drawings that mimicked an (expensive) training manual for amateur artists, parodied the adaptation to style, the subdivisions by genre, and the categories for appreciation that were then still predominant in the art historical discourse, be it in complete contradiction to the transgressiveness of Parisian avant-garde schools.



Installation view of Jef Geys' "Seedbag" paintings 1962-2001 at the Kunstverein Munich, 2001.

Jef Geys self-consciously worked his entire life from a peripheral situation. He lived in a rural town on the shore of the Albert canal, the economic-industrial artery of Belgium, witnessing the fast development of post-war industrialisation and suburbanisation, near the border with the more liberal Netherlands. He focussed on the promises of progress through commodification and standardised production and distribution in affluent societies. The *Seedbags*, which he made each year from 1962/3 until his passing, were painted replicas of commercial seed sacks for amateur vegetable gardeners. Each *Seedbag* was accompanied by a sign indicating the plant's scientific Latin name and the year in which the artist grew the seeds and painted their wrappers.



Jef Geys' small "Seedbag" paintings in the annual fair of the cultural association, n.d.

The gap between the embellished and stylised representation, the abstract and theoretical dimension of the information, as well as the ordinary experience of cultivating and harvesting the physical plant, conferred different layers to the *Seedbags* series. Not only did it touch upon the art's illusionist play between representational imagery and language, but it also sceptically deconstructed the simulations of the mediatic print-work. The operation alluded to the direct physical and empirical experience of caretaking that is supplanted by the realisation of self-sustainment processes in ordinary vegetable gardening.



Jef Geys, "Coloring Book for Adults", 1964-65, detail, 6 of 7 panels.

This acting out of emancipation and self-determination as opposed to the ideological conception of social and historical determination by society, tradition or routine, was a recurrent motive in Jef Geys' methodology. The *Coloring book for adults* (1964-65 ...) is striking in its various emanations, which formed an insidious comment on the middle class suburban lifestyle and its neo-modern aesthetics. Seven panels, as well as books and prints, featured schematised line-drawings that covered a wide range of examples, variations, details, functions and gestures related to the seven fundamental categories of human life: women, home, car, body, military, world and objects. Oscillating between the manual and figurative genre painting, Jef Geys made these depictions on large panels with lacquered surfaces that followed the idiom of Pop aesthetics. Much later, in 1978, he collaborated with an amateur filmmaker for the production of a film that would go deeper into the didactic nature of the illustrations, which clearly echoed the pedagogical tools that an elementary school teacher would use.



As a teacher, the artist confronted his students with mutual experiential and learning processes. He created works or tools for these experiments in the classroom, whether using his own work or that of fellow artists. He would borrow artworks from galleries and exhibit them in the classroom (Piero Gilardi and James Lee Byars among others), or take his students on field visits to various sites and exhibitions, such as Marcel Broodthaers' fictitious museum. A display system in the back of the classroom contained items that had a function in the teaching process. The blackboard on the opposite wall was stencilled with different terms drawn from actuality and public debate, onto which students could intervene.



Classroom in Balen (Belgium) where Jef Geys taught "positive aesthetics" from 1966 to 1989. With an artwork by Piero Gilardi stands in the foreground.

The pragmatic aspects deployed in his profession as a teacher were compensated by other activities driven by the youth and counterculture. When a friend of his started running local bars, Jef Geys helped out with the decorum, the musical arrangements and other attractions for the likeminded as well as ordinary customers. These bars existed during the years of contestation against the conservative status quo, alongside claims of sexual liberation, egalitarianism or social self-organisation. Upon the artist's invitation, the bars hosted cabaret and circus acts as well as artist appearances or the projection of Andy Warhol's films.

Jef Geys interfered in the ordinary social fabric by means of pedagogical or agitational projects that served as triggers for debate. This also brought him to compose lists of all mentions in the public opinion and press of issues related to 'women's questions.' Such topics were treated in the classroom before being exhibited in the annual fair of the local women's cultural association. In the late 1970s, the artist also listed political and social questions onto rolls of brown wrapping 'kraft' paper. These were to be displayed in the public realm without indication of an author or motive. The *Initiation to Marxism* (1982) listed conflicting theories of Marxism that he had studied comparatively, noting the different concepts that divided the ideological schools of thought which dominated the splintered leftist intellectual spectrum.



Installation view of Jef Geys' participation to the Sao Paulo Biennial, 1991.

Jef Geys' interventions in international platforms such as the São Paulo or Venice bienniales combined a site-specific contextual logic with autobiographical and didactical features, bringing about sceptical questionings of forms and representational conventions. In São Paulo, analytical skeletal models of case houses of modernity stood at the centre of the biennale building by Niemeyer, contrasting rivalling notions of spatial organisation advanced by modernist and post-modernist architecture. The artist had previously investigated the problematic way in which internationalist formalism related to the scale of human proportions.



Installation view of Jef Geys' "Quadra Medicinale", Belgian Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale.

For the Belgian pavilion in Venice, he counter-posed the grid-like design of the San Michele island of the death with the organic root-structures of wild plants and weeds growing in and between the urban grid and possessing qualities which – if knowledge was reactivated – could cure basic health problems. *Quadra Medicinale* was composed of case studies held in four urban environments, each displayed on panels of scientific botanical information, completed with self-healing knowledge for the homeless and the poor.



Jef Geys' work in the exhibition "Chambres d'Amis", Ghent, 1986. Photo: Dirk Pauwels.

Co-determination by analysis of the basic context and dynamics of society was the decorum onto which several of Jef Geys' works resonated, such as the selection of five homes of people living on welfare for the *Chambres d'Amis* exhibition in private homes in Gent in 1986. An ordinary door opening up onto the wall was installed in each home, bearing an inscription of the principles of the democratic republic: Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood. It is from these very principles that the art museum drew its legitimation as the space where freedom of expression is axiomatic.

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