

PARIS

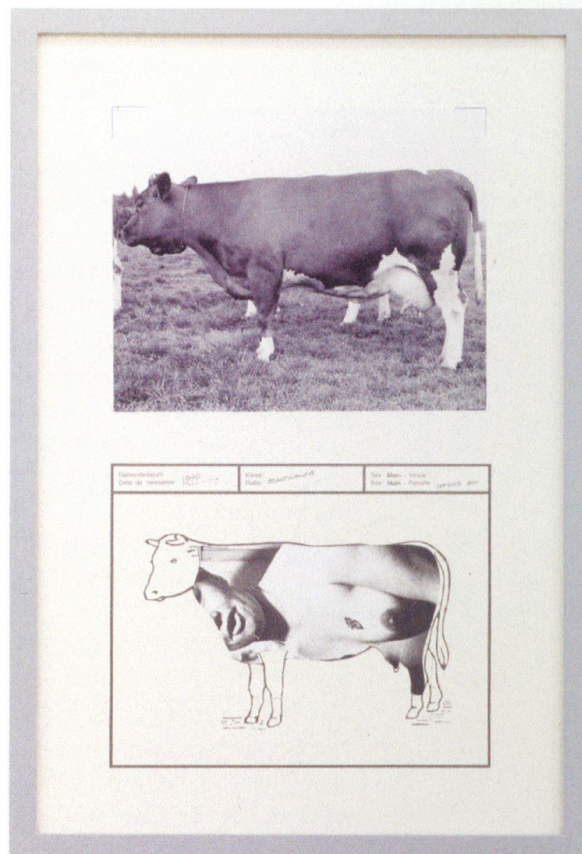
Jef Geys

AIR DE PARIS

Twenty-one black-and-white photographs of cows, arranged in a vertical grid seven high and three across, adorn the front page of the special edition of *KEMPENS Informatieblad* (*KEMPENS Information Journal*)—a sort of personal newspaper named for the Belgian Campine region in which Jef Geys lives—published for his exhibition at Air de Paris. They correspond to the new entries in his series “*Passeports de vaches*” (*Cow Passports*), 1965–, arranged in the show in a different, horizontally oriented grid. Based on actual documents that Geys first saw in the Belgian countryside nearly fifty years ago, each *Passeport de vache* consists of two components in a rectangular gray frame: the cow’s photograph in the top half and a form below with basic information (date of birth, name, and gender—always female, as no bulls or steers are included) and a generic outline of a cow in profile. Geys decorates each of the latter differently, alternating abstract designs or colors, texts, and sometimes snippets of 1970s pornography. Critic/curator Chris Sharp has linked Geys’s grids to a larger “democratic” impulse in his work, against hierarchies of content, or between art and non-art. In this case, the newspaper served an additional purpose: It historicized the exhibition even as it was taking place.

Geys’s parodic use of serial classification systems and archival media has affinities with better-known Conceptual art projects such as N.E. Thing Company Limited’s “ART/ACT” series, 1967–69. Yet administration, for Geys, is markedly personal, interconnecting biographical experiences with the diverse range of his art. If this sounds like the Joseph Beuys of *Life Course – Work Course*, 1964, Geys is his diametric opposite in terms of personal mythmaking, having largely avoided the spotlight for much of his career. Between 1960 and 1989, he taught art classes at a small village middle school. His role as a pedagogue provided opportunities for what might now be called “socially engaged art” but was then simply part of the job and rarely framed as “works” as such. His personal archive, maintained since 1958, has apparently catalogued his

Jef Geys, *Esmeralda*, 1970, ink, colored pencil, black-and-white C-print, offset print, 26 x 17 5/8". From the series “*Passeports de vaches*” (*Cow Passports*), 1965–.



entire oeuvre with precision, yet has never been exhibited in its entirety. Other long-term projects include *Day and Night and Day and . . .*, 2002, a thirty-six-hour slide show of photographs taken from the late 1950s through the early 2000s, sampling from the totality of the artist's work while reinforcing its elusiveness.

This exhibition, arranged by independent curator Francis Mary, had an introductory feel to it: It reads as a selection of greatest hits rather than, say, an excavation of Geys's surprisingly extensive output of drawings and paintings. A Hindi version of Geys's *!questions de femmes?*, 1960–, adorned the front window of the gallery. This work originally emerged from his teaching. In the early 1960s, he began listing questions from newspapers and magazines, on a roll of brown wrapping paper that was hung in the back of his classroom. He eventually reached 157, capping the list with a blank number 158, which invites the viewer to contribute her own. He picked out questions that he considered, as he slyly puts it, “typically feminine,” but they include prompts toward questioning and empowerment: “What is emancipation?” “What is the meaning of it?” “Does electoral suffrage exist everywhere?” And so on. The list is meant to instantiate a feminist intervention wherever it appears. Only gradually was it positioned as a proper work of art; it first appeared outside the classroom in a meeting of socialist feminists in 1970 and has been shown in art contexts only since 1980. The questions remain the same and the list has been translated into many languages, suggesting universal applicability, but Geys is no utopian; he seems to resist easy labels and art-historical classification. Giving Parisians a text many would struggle to decipher, pairing his best-known feminist work with a series of female animals, Geys delivered a show that was a study in subtle contradictions, his appearance as an “artist's artist” insisting on mystery.

—Daniel Quiles