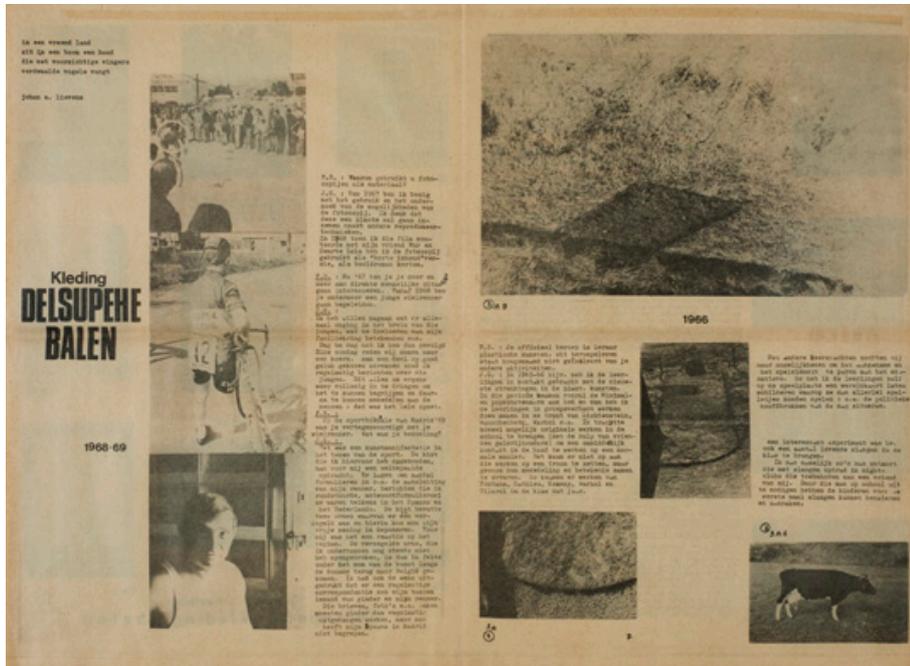


The Really Ignorant Schoolmaster: Jef Geys, Amongst Many Others Dieter Roelstraete

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Jef Geys, Brieven aan Roger — Kempens Informatieblad (Letter to Roger — Kempens Informatieblad), n.d., newspaper. Collection of the Flemish Community on loan to SMAK, Ghent. Courtesy the artist and SMAK

Of all my works I must show

How I have lived and my days spent

— Everyman¹

In the spring of 2008, Okwui Enwezor organised 'Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art' at the International Center for Photography in New York, an exhibition that included the same work by Jef Geys that had been on view in Enwezor's Documenta11 six years earlier — one of only a handful of occasions in the last decade that allowed a broader art audience to acquaint itself with the oeuvre of the notoriously elusive and wayward Belgian artist. The work, a 36-hour-long film-cum-slide show made up of tens of thousands of black-and-white photographs taken by the artist from the late 1950s to the early 2000s, is titled *Day and Night and Day...* and in Enwezor's eloquent words,

it belongs to this temporal category in which the archive is used to elicit the boundless procession of discrete levels of time, as a juncture between past and present. [...] It is both a personal and cultural meditation on time and the archive. [...] The film is not only structurally about the flow of images from a time past into the present; by virtue of its languorous movement, unfolding one panel at a time, the form of its delivery is also intended to confound the ability to distil the film into an index of a life's work. Working with the basic format of an inventory, in an almost chronological register, the photographs are activated as moving pictures by slow dissolves. Nothing much happens in the film apart from shifts in tone, gradations of muted gray and lightness, as the images unspool in a horizontal band. Unlike [Gerhard] Richter's Atlas [1961—ongoing], Geys's work is not one of accumulation and collecting; rather, it is an inventory of ephemeral images, slowly and arduously exposed one frame followed by the next, and next, day and night and day [...] the temporal relationship between each image is established through sheer density. The basic means of this proto-cinematic work belie the conceptual nature of its endless pursuit of history as the passage of time, as the relentless inscription of private memory onto the space of a collective public culture.²

In a review published in *The New York Times* during the show's run, art critic Holland Cotter was rather less effusive — but certainly no less appreciative — about the aforementioned tens of thousands of images, stating matter-of-factly (i.e. in a manner I imagine Geys himself would have applauded: as matter-of-factly as the work itself): 'Whether they provide evidence of aesthetic development [...] or insight into the artist's maturing mind and soul, will be known only to the most devoted of viewers'³ (i.e. to those both hardy and devoted enough to sit through 36 hours of mind-numbing, sleep-inducing *visual sameness*). For more than anything else — that is to say, more, first and foremost, than being a monument of autobiography, a portrait of the artist as an ageing man braving the steady onslaught of time — this, I believe, is both the essence of *Day and Night and Day...* as well as the one quality that singles it out as one of Geys's most programmatic and exemplary, perhaps even manifesto-like works: the fundamental *equivalence* of every single picture ever taken by the artist during a forty-year period of feverish creative activity which saw the recalcitrant Geys become a referential figure (obviously despite himself) in post-War European art. Not only does Geys's diaristic project, first published as a collection of five hundred contact sheets in a book with the typically laconic, self-explanatory title *Al de foto's tot 1998* (*All the photos up to 1998*, 1998), completely disregard the boundaries between public and private life — a sardonic nod to those age-old avant-garde adages, revived in the post-War era by the ascendance of Fluxus, that call for the dissolution of art into life and vice versa⁴ — but it also, consequently, tramples on all institutionalised distinctions between art and non-art (between a good photograph and a bad photograph, between an artistic photograph and a non-artistic photograph) and, much more importantly still, between the artist and 'other' people (between the expert, connoisseur or authority on the one hand and the amateur or ignorant on the other). And here, Geys's notion of the fundamental equivalence of 'all the photos up to 1998' — that quality which produces the hypnotic effect of overwhelming visual sameness in the 36-hour movie based on these photographs — becomes the mere surface effect of a much more deeply rooted *political* passion: a passion for equality and egalitarianism. *Liberté*, the very condition of art making, yes, of course — but only ever together with *égalité* and *fraternité*.⁵

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First, some of the basic facts. Born in 1934 in Leopoldsburg (a small town in rural northeast Flanders best known for its military base, where both his father and later his brother were stationed), Geys's childhood was shaped in no small part by the experience of the World War II — well-dressed Nazis were a common sight around the local garrison, and the nearby village of Hechtel eventually became a theatre of dramatic rearguard fighting when the German army was forced out of Belgium in the autumn of 1944. If our attention to locality — Hechtel, Leopoldsburg and the sandy Campine region (of the *Kempens Informatieblad* fame) to which these toponyms belong — has so far sounded unnecessarily detailed, it is worth pointing out here, at the very outset, that Geys is an intensely 'local' artist.⁶ His work evidences an uncompromising attachment to a handful of small villages in Belgium's decidedly unglorifiable northern neck of the woods — the centripetal point of which is the village of Balen, where the artist has lived and worked for more than half a century — and this is inextricably bound up with the militancy of his artistic stance in general: that of a radical peripherality and self-conscious marginalisation ('exile' would probably be too romantic a term) through which the artist seeks to articulate his unyielding resistance to the centralist and centralising powers of the (art) system. And if our attentiveness to biographical detail (birth, childhood, family life) has so far been equally pious, it is worth remembering here that living in Geys's case cannot possibly be separated from making art — that there is no such thing as a biographical fallacy when discussing the work of an artist whose artistic activity *coincided* with his work as a schoolteacher for almost thirty years.



Jef Geys, *ABC École de Paris (ABC School of Paris), 1959–61, drawings. Installation view, M HKA, Antwerp. Courtesy the artist and M HKA collection*

Indeed, ‘education’ is one (if not *the*) essential aspect of Geys’s artistic practice, if only because for the better part of his life as a ‘professional’ artist — that is to say, one whose aim very early on became to complicate the partly class-based distinction between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ artists as much as critically possible — he was an art teacher in a small village school, working with children aged ten to fifteen from 1960 until 1989.

For three decades, this school, which one critic has referred to as a small-scale equivalent of the Dessau Bauhaus, functioned as an artist’s studio, a laboratory and an exhibition space (for a time, Geys was able to exhibit original artworks by Jim Dine, Lucio Fontana and Roy Lichtenstein inside the classroom; he also took his class on a field trip to Marcel Broodthaers’s studio), a platform for educational experimentation and a testing ground that allowed Geys to pose those questions about art that cannot be asked so innocently in the paranoia-stricken power centres of the global art system.⁷ Long before the art world ‘discovered’ the art academy, the art school and the discourse of artistic education as a curatorial hotspot (and hence also as a site of symbolic capital merely waiting to be converted into real capital), Geys toiled in the trenches of the most basic, unglamorous art education, blissfully free from the institutional constraints of a culture of artistic-political correctness or bourgeois taste.⁸ It is in the art classes of the village school in Balen, for instance, that Geys’s *Vrouwenvragen (Women’s Questions, 1960—ongoing)* first took shape: a list of more than a hundred questions, written down in Geys’s signature faux-mechanical handwriting on a long strip of dull brown packing-paper, that relate to the ‘women’s questions’ of the day (‘emancipation: what is it?’, ‘does clothing have anything to do with feminism?’, ‘is it OK to have beauty pageants?’, ‘what about abortion?’, etc.). Many of these Geys assembled during long hours spent consulting various newspapers in the village library, after which these questions were submitted to his adolescent female students in vocational training for lengthy group discussions.⁹ Early on, then, Geys’s art classes became the stage for resolutely non-artistic intellectual pursuits, a site for the interrogation of art as much as for the expansion of its conceptual purchase: for a couple of years, Geys would either start or conclude his classes by asking the school’s immigrant children (i.e. those born to either Turkish or Moroccan parents) to teach their Flemish classmates a handful of foreign words — an anecdote which one critic reads as demonstrative of Geys’s lifelong attempt to ‘continuously tear apart the dominant language of logocentric discourse, thereby inscribing his work in the non-positions of its minor subjects’.¹⁰ In another telling

‘Geys’s insistence on the emancipatory potential of boring routines is informed by an underlying suspicion of ‘genius’ as one of the more genteel manifestations of institutionalised inequality.’

experiment, conducted in the pivotal year of 1968, Geys proceeded to playfully expand his students’ knowledge of contemporary geography — a geography that was, of course, thoroughly politicised, marked as it was by such distinctions as North versus South Korea and North versus South Vietnam — by inviting them to help him

draw a giant world map on the school’s playground — only to be rebuffed by the school’s geography teacher, who found Geys’s intrusion into his well-defined terrain unacceptable, feeling that the art teacher had no business teaching geography, much less politics.¹¹ And

whenever Jef Geys—the-art-teacher was content to perform the role of the cobbler sticking to his last (a vocation which we will be returning to shortly), he primarily did so to ironically question the very procedures that art schools around the globe trust to produce ‘art’ — that is to say, that exact type of art that, because of its accolades, will never succeed in threatening the aforementioned geography teacher, *in upsetting the order of things*. The best-known example of this ironic affirmation of the rules that govern the field of art production and art appreciation — and I am using Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology consciously here — is *ABC École de Paris (ABC School of Paris, 1959– 61)*, a suite of more than 200 drawings, executed on the same cheap brown packing-paper as *Women’s Questions*, in which Geys took great pains to obey the basic grammar of the art of drawing shoes, drawing horses, drawing hats, drawing hands, drawing drawing equipment — all of which resulted in expensively priced kitsch rather than ‘real’ art.¹²

Let us return, briefly, to the figure of Geys’s geography-teaching colleague, a figure so stereotypical I am almost inclined to accord him mythological status: the Geography Teacher as Ignorant Schoolmaster. A titular allusion to a famous book by French philosopher Jacques Rancière from 1987, who, as we know, has one or two things to say about ‘the doctrine urging everyone to mind his or her own business’ that Geys encountered so ostentatiously and aggressively on the playground of his school in Balen in 1968. In *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), which centres on the emblematic figure of the shoemaker (just as mythological as the geography teacher) and his position (‘rank’) in the history of philosophy, Rancière notes how ideology ‘simply may be the fact that each does “his own business” in a universe where fabrication and imitation, truth and doxa, exchange their powers’.¹³ The geography teacher of Balen here figures as the exemplary ideologue, the apologist of a status quo built on the supposition that art teachers teach ‘art’ (of the type described above, of the type prescribed by the ABC of the *école de Paris*) only — the ‘ignorant’ advocate of an order of things founded on the assumption that a shoemaker makes shoes only. And indeed, ‘order is menaced wherever a shoemaker does something else than make shoes. By the same token, anyone who upsets the order of estates can be called a shoemaker’.¹⁴ Geys the shoemaker — and Geys the *really* ignorant schoolmaster, who invites his students to teach him instead, to teach each other things he does not know himself, who seizes the practice of both art and art teaching as a practice of (among, between) equals as well as one that produces equals; *a practice that produces equality because it supposes equality*. For equality truly is ‘a presupposition, an initial axiom — or it is nothing’.¹⁵

In another book by Rancière to which these characterisations refer, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1987) — five lessons whose overarching motto is nothing other than ‘the equality of intelligence’ — the French thinker asserts that ‘reciprocity is the heart of the emancipatory method’, and ‘emancipation is the consciousness of that equality, of that reciprocity that alone permits intelligence to be realised by verification’.¹⁶ Now with regards to this intelligence, its

*act is to see and to compare what has been seen. It sees at first by chance. It must seek to repeat, to create the conditions to re-see what it has seen, in order to see similar facts, in order to see facts that could be the cause of what it has seen. It must also form words, sentences and figures, in order to tell others what it has seen. In short, the most frequent mode of exercising intelligence, much to the dissatisfaction of geniuses, is repetition. And repetition is boring.*¹⁷

Repetition is also a key ingredient (as we have seen in our discussion of both *Women’s Questions* and *Day and Night and Day...*) in much of Geys’s work — its insistence on the emancipatory potential of such boring routines informed by an underlying suspicion of the art world’s celebration of ‘genius’ as one of the more genteel manifestations of institutionalised inequality. (Rancière calls the belief in genius ‘the madness of superior beings’, by the way, and ‘every institution [...] a dramatisation of inequality’.¹⁸) In many ways, Geys does the opposite of his near-contemporary Joseph Beuys, whose proposed solution to the problem of inequality, within the oligarchic art world as without, basically consisted of *elevating* everyone to the status of genius; in this very act of ‘elevation’ — a feat of magic routinely sealed by the artist’s auratic signature — the underlying concept of genius’s hierarchy was basically kept intact.¹⁹ In Jef Geys’s practice, the artist’s very name becomes the site for equality’s most extreme instantiations: in 1989 he invited a fourteen-year-old boy named Gijs Van Doorn (his given name having the same sound as Geys’s family name) to show his ‘artwork’ alongside that of his senior namesake in a commercial gallery in Knokke, a fancy Belgian seaside resort, making sure there was very little to distinguish one

man's work from another's child's play. On a much earlier occasion he also toyed with the potential for confusion afforded by his lifelong association with friends and colleagues such as Jef Van Dijck (the man who introduced Geys to Brecht and Russian avant-garde theatre) and Jef Sleenckx, a Belgian socialist who, while still in his thirties, taught at the same school as Geys, and whose subsequent career in national politics took off after his involvement in a strike at a local zinc-processing factory for which Geys designed a couple of union banners.²⁰ The egalitarian erasure of proper names reached its apogee, finally, in a sound piece realised in 1968 for which Geys mixed his own voice with that of the Zangeres Zonder Naam, a Dutch-born singer of distinctly lowbrow popular songs whose artist's alias literally translates as 'Singer Without Name' — a decidedly unholy alliance out of which only an artist without qualities could have emerged.²¹

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'Ohne Eigenschaften': I am not the first to invoke the spectral figure of Robert Musil's man without qualities in the context of Geys's work, which is just as inexhaustible as the great Austrian writer's monumental literary achievement. I admit, for instance, to not having said a single word about what many may well agree to be one the artist's most important and long-running projects, that which first acquired concrete shape and form at the 1991 Bienal de São Paulo (here, too, a school would soon be manoeuvred into the centre of art world attention). And I have hardly spoken, really, of the *Kempens Informatiebladen*. But I must conclude regardless for now, and no finer words can be found to describe the plight of the man from Balen than those uttered, at some point in the book's eleven hundred or so pages, by Musil's own early twentieth-century everyman:

*'I quite agree with you,' Ulrich hastened to say. 'There is nothing I am less fit for than being myself.'*²²

Footnotes

1. Anonymous, 'The Summoning of Everyman' (c.15th century), available at <http://www.onlineliterature.com/anonymous/everyman/1/> (last accessed on 15 March 2011).[↑]
2. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, Göttingen and New York: Steidl and International Center of Photography, 2008, pp.25–26.[↑]
3. Holland Cotter, 'Well, It Looks Like Truth', *The New York Times*, 18 January 2008. Also available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/18/arts/design/18arch.html> (last accessed on 8 February 2011).[↑]
4. Geys was never formally (or even informally) involved with Fluxus, an association he resists for the same reason he steers clear of the labels of Concept art or Nouveau Réalisme — because they are essentially disciplinarian art world nomenclatures. It is perhaps the work of an artist such as Robert Filliou that offers the most congenial comparative model: even if Filliou, in his oft-repeated claim that one should cultivate 'genius without talent', still clings (if only ironically) to the dodgy, classificatory notion of genius, he does so under the aegis of what he himself called the 'equivalency principle', a jokey faux-theory first propounded in 1968, according to which all artworks are fundamentally equal, whether they be 'well-done', 'badly done' or 'not done' at all. Another artistic practice rooted in a comparable set of principles that Geys's could be linked to in the context of egalitarianism is that of Hans-Peter Feldmann, who also shares Geys's interest in the diaristic (see, for instance, *Die Toten 1967–1993*, published in 1997), and whose own occasional forays into autobiography approximate the resolutely proletarian aesthetic of Al de foto's tot 1998 as well as Geys's long-running *Kempens Informatieblad*.[↑]
5. In Jan Hoet's landmark 1986 exhibition 'Chambres d'Amis', Geys's characteristically unobtrusive contribution consisted of printing the three ideals of the French Revolution in three languages on a number of doors that were then installed in the private quarters of those inhabitants of Ghent who had agreed to open their homes to the exhibition's scattered art trajectory. However, while most of the art in 'Chambres d'Amis' was shown inside the lavish houses of well-to-do art lovers (mostly nineteenth-century bourgeois interiors), Geys consciously chose to exhibit his work inside the working-class houses that had been left out of the exhibition circuit.[↑]
6. *Kempens Informatieblad* is a freely distributed 'regional' newspaper which Geys took over in 1971; Geys has published a new edition of the decidedly lowbrow-looking *Kempens Informatieblad* for pretty much every exhibition he has done since.[↑]
7. Marie-Ange Brayer, 'De Kleine Identiteiten', in Jef Geys and Roland Patteuw (ed.), *Jef*

- Geys* (exh. cat), Brussels: Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, 1992, p.4. A more engaging comparison can perhaps be made with the various early Soviet experiments in anti-hierarchical, communal art making, with regards to which Geys himself, in a rare moment of autobiographical candour, has noted the following: ‘One of the characters from the heroic Russian period who attracted me the most was Nikolai Ladovsky. At the Moscow Vkhutemas Vkhutein Insitute in the 1920s he propagated the synthesis between painting, sculpture and architecture and the use of psychoanalysis to create architectural space. He was deeply convinced that good innovative architecture is possible only as the result of close cooperation between the producer (architect) and the consumer (the masses).’ J. Geys, ‘Story’, in Piet Coessens and J. Geys (ed.), *Jef Geys: Bienal São Paulo 1991* (exh. cat), Ghent: Imschoot Uitgevers, 1991, unpaginated.↑
8. See the following characterisation by Joris Note, one of Geys’s longtime literary travelling companions (that’s really what he is, quite literally), from 1990, when the last thing any self-respecting artist wanted was to be called ‘didactic’: ‘in a paradoxical, chuckling way, the slightly lawless art of Jef Geys is didactic’. J. Geys and R. Patteuw (ed.), *Jef Geys: ABC École de Paris, Zedelgem: Stichting Kunst and Projecten*, 1990, unpaginated.↑
 9. If *Women’s Questions* is one of Geys’s better-known works, this is partly because the questions continue to be translated in a steadily expanding number of languages, from French and Japanese to Arab and Chinese — a different language each time the work is exhibited in a different linguistic context (the questions themselves remain the same, not in the least because of many of the problems addressed in this list remain the same).↑
 10. M.-A. Brayer, ‘De Kleine Identiteiten’, op. cit., p.11. Translation the author’s.↑
 11. In the 1966–67 period, Geys had also encouraged his students to compose a picture of ‘their’ world that could not differ more from that delivered to us by the institution of geography, however politically enlightened, inviting them to bring self-made photographs to their art class for extensive group discussion.↑
 12. In Brayer’s words, Geys ‘presents as “work” that which precedes work, i.e. an ABC’. M.-A. Brayer, ‘De Kleine Identiteiten’, op. cit., p.6.↑
 13. Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker), Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, p.74.↑
 14. Rancière continues: ‘thus the learned editor of the *Journal des économistes* has no hesitation about the identity of the German communist expelled by the French government for his incendiary writings. Mr Karl Marx, he informs his readers, is a shoemaker.’ *Ibid.*, p.60.↑
 15. *Ibid.*, p.223↑
 16. J. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1987, trans. Kristin Ross), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p.39. Elsewhere he suggests that ‘equality and intelligence are synonymous terms, exactly like reason and will. This synonymy on which each man’s intellectual capacity is based is also what makes society, in general, possible.’ *Ibid.*, p.73.↑
 17. *Ibid.*, p.55.↑
 18. *Ibid.*, p.96.↑
 19. Along with that of Robert Filliou (see note 3), the work of Joseph Beuys offers another interesting set of analogies and comparisons, and much of their (admittedly low-lying) convergences concern the status of both writing and the artist’s name, and the writing of the artist’s name in particular: whereas Beuys’s signature still bears the mark of the ancient model of artistic authority and autocratic legitimacy (a whimsical, only half-legible scribble suffices to ensure the mysterious emergence of value), Geys’s instantly recognisable handwriting is much more machinic, consciously de-auratised — everyman’s signature, and all the more legible because of it.↑
 20. In the words of Marie-Ange Brayer, the exhibition that coupled Jef Geys with Gijs Van Doorn ‘eroded the polar opposition of art and non-art by way of a process of homonymy’. M.-A. Brayer, ‘De Kleine Identiteiten’, op. cit., p.10.↑
 21. Until quite recently, Geys catalogued every single artwork or artistic act in a chronological list, beginning in 1947 with the cryptic entry gnomonic ‘Brothers of Love (School of the Christian brothers)’ and ending in 2009 with entry number 665, ‘The Armory Show New York, Erna Hecey Gallery’. I have used this list, not dissimilar to

works such as *Day and Night and Day...* and *Women's Questions* in its droning uniformity, as the primary source for my research into the use of various proper names throughout Geys's career. It can be viewed at

http://www.ernahecey.com/uk/jef_geys_biography.php (last accessed on 8 February 2011).↑

22. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike), London: Picador, 1995, p.296. Joris Note has referred to Musil's novel in an unpublished text on Geys's work that has been a valuable source of information for the present essay.↑