

Jef Geys (Leopoldsburg, 1934—Genk, 2018) lived and worked in Balen, a town in Flanders, Belgium that is situated in De Kempen, a natural region that encompasses part of the low countries that extends east from Antwerp and terminates in the southwestern part of the Netherlands. Much of his work centers on this locale, reflecting the artist's position in the region's environment, history, language, and social relations—what Geys referred to as “terroir.” Vocationally, Geys taught “Positive Aesthetics” (his own invention) at the state middle school in Balen from 1960 to 1989. This precocious approach used Geys' own practice as an artist alongside the presentation of contemporary works of art—from Piero Gilardi to Daniel Buren to Roy Lichtenstein—to heighten an awareness in his students of the world around them, presenting concepts usually considered only for educated adults.<sup>1</sup> Geys staged projects in his classroom with his students and listed these activities among an inventory of artworks that he kept up to date from 1947 until his death earlier this year. What is most important about this inventory is how it establishes an equivalence between forms, between activities of the artist in everyday life and all that is commonly recognized as the production of an artist.

As early as 1966, Jef Geys began using his red heart motif, as both a signature and an arbitrary form. It appeared containing a list of numbers extracted from his personal identity cards and licenses, set within a self-portrait on the front cover of his newspaper the *Kempens Informatieblad*; on bottles of Champagne during Geys' tenure co-running Bar 900; and within the same contours, was baked as loaves of bread and sold in a gallery like any work of art. As a logo or signature form, it was modeled to point to the artist as its referent while alluding to whatever associations one might equate with the heart and the breast.

In Geys' work, the heart was one of the early examples of his interest in how a form can function as a mode of identification. He was interested in understanding what structures establish the channel of communication between a form and its referent, and to attempt to create associations of meaning beyond art's established codes:

Precisely during the period 1960–63, I was preoccupied with such things as “form” and what made “form” look different: camouflage and mimicry, in short, the hidden, the things which one seems to see.

Images-forms which are shown in a certain way, i.e. in a studied “correct” way, under “correct” guidance, embedded in a “correct” strategy, are readily accepted, as if they have existed all the time. Repetition, while creating habit, nearly at the same time leaves a taste of déjà vu. The end is an accepted boredom. Images-forms, no matter how strong they are, may appear perfectly normal, submitted, tame, having reached the saturation point. The images are experienced as something “retinal,” which is also the experience one is looking for: the significance underneath is kept at a distance. We are inclined to dispose of any images which cannot be used to finish our homework, as mere scenery for more important things that we supposedly have on our mind. To demonstrate this obvious wearing out of images, I started looking for basic forms with a very simple structure but a heavily loaded content.<sup>2</sup>

It was the fundamentals that interested Geys most, not as established universal truths, but as the basic assumptions that we all start with in making sense of the world—for instance, what structures classify hues into colors, line and space into shape. This began early, while Geys was studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp: “I’ve always been interested in the truth behind things, the motivation, going back. At that time I had this problem of classifying, of visual thinking. It’s your environment that turns you into an artist, just as art is made. Actually the word art is artificial.”<sup>3</sup>

This sociological question, of what fashions an artist, would be elaborated after graduation when Geys received his license to teach and returned to Balen for work. It was at this time that he designed the *Coloring Book for Adults* (1963–65) to alleviate his own impasse, creating this instructive work almost to teach himself how to be an artist. The *Coloring Book* infantilizes its subject, prescribing to its user an action as

banal as coloring in the most commonplace of culturally loaded forms. It contains the themes of: 1. the gendered female form in art history; 2. maps and geopolitical borders; 3. the mid-century model home; 4. human anatomy; 5. the masculine image of the soldier; 6. consumer commodities; 7. the automobile.

As an educational tool repurposed for the adult world, the coloring book follows a pedagogical theme in Geys' work that reflected the language surrounding his vocation, while throwing its purpose into sharp contradiction. By being displaced into adulthood, the coloring book served a divisive purpose, irritating Western art's fixation on the creation of the autonomous work of art by a singular individual, as well as the perceived need for a tool to serve a clear function.

This search for model forms lead Geys to "rediscover" the golden ratio as a metric based on the human figure. In many ways, the body became ground zero for Geys, pointing back to how he oriented himself toward the world, as a resident of a small town, a teacher, organizer of community groups at socialist community centers, and as an artist within these contexts. His primary influence for making this central to his teaching and his art, was from Soviet architect and educator Nikolai Ladovsky, who imbued his teaching of architecture at the Vkhutemas (the Soviet equivalent of the Bauhaus) with the "physiological effects... and spatial properties of form" as derived from practical human use and spatial perception.<sup>4</sup> With his *I-form* of 1968, a year that saw considerable police violence in Europe and abroad, Jef Geys outlined his body on the pavement and photographed what remained. As with the heart, he was interested in dealing with the shape of the body as the simplest identifying form of the individual. It signaled toward a broader dialectic in Geys' work between the particular (the body of the artist, Geys himself) and the universal (the body as a general form). This remained a productive contradiction for Geys, underlining the problematics of a humanism based within the contingencies of the individual's own body, Balen, Flanders, Belgium, ad infinitum.

Two years earlier, in 1966, the artist's outline served as a series of paper cut-outs, like

paper dolls but with a 1:1 human metric. In Geys' typical elaboration of a theme, the same year saw similar "dolls" in three-dimensional form, routed in wood and painted in different guises—"camouflaged" with signifying colors of football teams, flags, and military insignia. An object of childhood again greeted the adult world in abstracted form. Termed *Schildwachten* [sentinels, or more literally, "paint-watchers"], these wooden inferences of both personhood and standardization give a sly acknowledgment to fellow Belgian René Magritte's bilboquet motif.<sup>5</sup> Once painted, they resemble giant table-top football players as much as they suggest the shape of the American bombs that were decimating Vietnam at the time.

The *Schildwachten* refer to military guards, in name and resemblance, not unlike what Geys would have seen coming of age in Leopoldsburg, a small military town that was occupied by Germany in WWII. We should pause to place importance on Geys' proximity to the military context, to its strategies, codified language, and flags of signification. Much of the content for Geys' work was drawn from these surroundings, including the quadrant grid design of the town's military camp. The Roman grid appeared consistently throughout Geys' work as a reference to the universal metric of land division and town planning, a design which was exported from the lowlands during colonization, made emblematic in New York, and common to every modern city since. He reduced the quadrant design to 2x2 meter squares, and installed it in his own garden as planter boxes to grow seasonal fare. The grid of quadra in his garden provided a ground for which many of his future projects were based:

For me nothing is so binding as the laws of the grid. Trying to escape the rules of the game makes the game unnecessarily false. Grids are there because we need to speak, because rules and laws try to dominate our traffic. Sometimes the invisible rules of the game are more interesting than the game itself. In the beginning there are rules that we all can and want to recognize.<sup>6</sup>

Characteristic of the sense of contradiction that runs throughout much of Geys'

work, the prescribed rules and protocol that he established for his own production were used equally in their capacity for limitation as they were for their productivity. For instance, Geys seemingly established a serial structure arbitrarily or retrospectively, e.g., when he annually painted the design of one of the seed packets from his garden between 1963 and 2018; or when Geys published *All the Black and White Photos until 1998*, which compiled all of his contact sheets without editing or censoring. By camouflaging the logic of the work with a new rubric, he invited a legible meaning that speaks at a different register, one which may even be out of his hands. It was a way of deceiving himself and remaining suspicious of his own intentions, throwing a net over poetic choices to give the appearance of order. Jef Geys saw structure as a necessary deception:

Through the art of Jef Geys runs a chain of variations on the theme of *concealing*: wrapping, travesty, con-trick, kitsch, camouflage... Most of the time the artist attacks the social *deceit* indirectly. He seems to adapt; but at the same time he provides shifts which reveal his critical intention; which make the machine of deceit grind and shudder. Complicity and sabotage.

Recurrent questions are: how do those who are in control, *deceive* “the masses”; which part of their memory do they try to erase? The non-conformist who asks those impertinent questions, has an amazing stock of popular candour and brutality. But no smug naïvety; he knows he is neither a saint nor a hero; he knows that the idea of art itself has been open to suspicion for long. Therefore Jef Geys passes criticism on art and the para-artistic phenomenons while at the same time he shows he is conscious of his own ambivalent position: he cannot remain completely outside the deceit. (Nobody can.) This explains his sharp camouflage-games; they caution the public or make them feel uncomfortable. (Sometimes: as if someone is lecturing you about the deceit of the world while he is pinching your wallet.)<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, deception was central to Geys’ work—in his strategic dealings with the

art industry, he often proposed the unrealizable or absurd, not as self-sabotage but as productive sleights-of-hand. There was his famous proposal to blow up the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp; his letter to dealer Ileana Sonnabend suggesting she exhibit his vacation photos from the South of France; his bid to install a structurally unfeasible viewing platform at Le Magasin, Grenoble; or his many letters to appointed bureaucrats suggesting they allow Geys to plant vegetable gardens on state property, one of which was addressed to French president Jacques Chirac. For an artist interested in the “the invisible rules of the game,” these were productive interventions, revealing something particular in each instance, be it either cultural or common sense, about the structures that circumscribe what can and cannot be done or said by an artist.

Establishing the mythic persona of the artist was a strategy that allowed Geys to put into question the relationship between the private life of the individual and the public identity contained within the role of the artist, continuing the theme that Joris Note identifies as a form of “concealment.” Not unlike dressing the *Schildwacht* in a variety of painted appearances, Geys intentionally displaced the role by appropriating other identities—what he called “disguises.” For instance, there was Mary Davenport, a nom-de-plume assumed by Geys for a body of work picturing equine figures; and Geys’ adoption of the name of a village boy, Gijs Van Doorn. Geys elaborated his own persona like any other form in his work, and with considerable foresight, saw the complicity between the activity of the artist and their public persona as a site to establish one’s autonomy as an artist.

This remains as evidence of Geys’ singular attitude towards his position in the world, it was an idiosyncratic political stance, underwritten by a radical equivalence between all that he did. This is evident in his position on aesthetic experience that he elaborated in his work, promoting a social equality that disregarded the classist connoisseurship on which the art system has been established, ever since the invention of taste. He equated the engineering and finish of a BMW as equal in beauty to a Rubens; botanical forms as elaborate and “useful” as pornographic drawings or corporate images; and the

production of a painting factory in Leopoldsburg that produced paintings of “common” Flemish taste to be as insightful on the state of artistic production as the authorship of the artist himself.

Beginning and ending in and around De Kempen, Jef Geys made this equivalence most legible by maintaining his lifelong inventory of works. While constantly referring to and reinterpreting his own output, the continuity of this index retains a steady equilibrium, giving all of Geys’ divergent activities as an artist the same standing. Above all, the taxonomy of this expansive list is rooted in a sentimental materialism, cataloging everything from the commonplace to the perceptively eminent: a class field-trip to visit the studio of Marcel Broodthaers; the natural products of Geys’ garden; a drive with cabbages around the region to “show” them the countryside; exhibiting at Documenta; the presentation of a snake handler in the classroom; the book compiling all of his black and white photographs; appearances on television; and a number of letters addressed to heads of state. Within all of this was a spirited questioning of art’s position in the world, and consequently, the role of the artist in social life. Jef Geys rearticulated modernity’s question concerning the purpose of the artist into a mode of working that sensed the boundaries of the role; he tested its limits, asking what circumscribes the expectations of what an artist is and does.

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In April of 2017, I invited Jef Geys to make this exhibition and he agreed. This came after a series of earlier attempts between the artist and Yale Union’s curatorial staff. First among those attempts was an exhibition proposal in 2014 which was not taken up by the institution, followed shortly thereafter by another, also not completed, then a project to publish an archive book, which lapsed after Yale Union missed the deadline for its awarded funding and had to return the grant. This culminated in early 2016, when Geys announced on his blog that the final proposal he had planned for Yale Union would be “shut down.” This project expanded from an invitation from the

Belgian Postal Service for Geys to produce his third commissioned stamp, but was cancelled due to the postal service's refusal to print a stamp picturing the artist seated with his neighbor sitting nude atop his lap in accordance with its strict policy of "No nude or half-naked figures."<sup>8</sup> Geys had potentially planned for its refusal from the beginning, since he had previous experience with the regulations of the postal service around the depiction of nude figures. This image was to serve as the content for the exhibition, where it was to be incrementally blown up twenty-two times. From Yale Union's institutional perspective, the proposed image was fraught by its racialized content (Geys' neighbor was Black), and the artist's proposal was rightfully deemed untenable for exhibition.

In making his exhibition proposal for Yale Union, Geys had known from the start that it would be unacceptable to the authorities of the Belgian Postal Service, and most likely, knew its content to be untenable in the eyes of its audience in the United States. Having never met the artist in person, and for his life to now be behind us, I'm in no position to speculate on, or reveal, his intention. What I do know is that it was in Geys' spirit to spin a game out of both social and formal contracts, to use methods of "multiplication, infiltration, and camouflage," to apply pressure on these situations, test their limits, and even "coerce a repressive response" as a result.<sup>9</sup> For Geys, these games were just as much part of his ethic as an artist as it was productive for the work itself. He laid out obscure rules for the production of his work and its display, setting tasks and assignments for curators, joyfully appointing friends "uninitiated" in the dealings of the art world to install his work, and testing the commercial competency of his dealers by installing ultimatums to the sale of his art. By testing the willingness of the individuals involved with his work to perform their roles within his imposed limits, Jef Geys exposed the social mores and formal structures that otherwise keep the most unassailable limits in check. By enacting this deception with Yale Union, he revealed the thin gradient between what is institutionally possible and what is easily deemed unfeasible.

The current exhibition contains a familiar tenor, wherein Geys set up a game and

prescribed a task usually under the jurisdiction of the artist, to the role of the curator. Yale Union invited me to pursue developing this exhibition with Geys, to which he responded by repurposing a proposal that he had made to CNEAI, Paris that had not been realized. His outline for this exhibition was comprised of a commission and if we desired, additional work from the inventory of his dealer. The commission was to fabricate seven *paravents*, or folding screens, for which certain aesthetic judgments were delegated to the curator within a set of rules determined by the artist. The task was to select and crop sections from large pieces of photo-wallpaper that were originally produced for *As Sombras de Lisboa*, an exhibition at Culturgest, Lisbon in 2012. Geys had directed Culturgest's curator to select images from a contact sheet of photographs that Geys had taken while on vacation in Lisbon in 1998. From this contact sheet, the curator was to make a selection of images to be presented as large-scale wallpaper prints in varying sizes that would serve as the background on which to hang the photographs of the same images. The artist determined the smallest size of print, and prescribed the biggest to suit the largest gallery wall, leaving the curator to make a total selection that would conform to either seven, thirteen, or twenty-one photos. He chose thirteen, arranged their placement within two rooms, and placed the framed works on each field of wallpaper, in effect making the total decision as to how the compositions and the resulting exhibition cohered as an aesthetic whole.

Following Geys' instructions, I was delegated with selecting which segments of the images leftover from Lisbon were to fit within the dimensions of the three panels of the folding screens. This left my own aesthetic judgment as the reason for the resulting visual experience of these works. Continuing the logic of the exhibition from which the wallpaper was derived, Geys intentionally set up a game between himself and the curator of the exhibition to produce the final work. Geys had expressed disgust with the idea of the curator as auteur,<sup>10</sup> and in this work, intended to meddle with the expectations of the curatorial profession and its ego. A shared sentiment among people in art who had known Geys is that working with him required exposing something beyond our public front, a certain disclosure of vulnerability. By allowing a humiliating

amount of agency, he applied pressure on the individuals involved, making us face certain expectations in making exhibitions today—for instance, the unreasonable demand for excessive confidence in one’s own expertise and vision, and for the capacity to perform them tirelessly. (Nicholas Tammens, April 2018)

## NOTES

1 Anna Harding, “Jef Geys School Projects 1960–2005.” In *Magic Moments: Collaboration Between Artists and Young People*, Anna Harding, ed. London: Black Dog, 2005.

2 Jef Geys, “STORY.” In *Jef Geys, Architecture as Limitation*, exh. cat., São Paulo Biennial, 1991.

3 Jef Geys, *Wien, Vienna, Wenen*, exh. cat., Bawag Foundation, 2009.

4 Jef Geys, “STORY.” In *Jef Geys: Architecture as Limitation*, exh. cat., São Paulo Biennial, 1991. For further elaboration, see Jamie Stevens, *Chalet*, exh. text, La Loge, Brussels, 2017.

5 Thanks to Dirk Snauwaert for this important connection.

6 *Kempens Informatieblad*, Special Edition Biennale Venetië [Venice Biennale], 2009.

7 Joris Note, *Jef Geys, ABC Ecole de Paris*, Stichting Kunst & Projecten, 1990.

8 See “Yale Union–Portland–Format tentoonstelling Jef Geys”, <https://jefgeysweblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/25/yale-union-portland-format-tentoonstelling-jef-geys/> (Accessed April 9, 2018); and “shutting down Portland Project,” <https://jefgeysweblog.wordpress.com/2016/03/11/shutting-down-portland-project/> (Accessed April 9, 2018).

9 Anke Bangma quoted in “Translatrix: R.H. Quaytman on Jef Geys.” In R.H. Quaytman, *Allegorical Decoys*. Gent, Belgium: MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2008: 35–46.

10 Interview with Dirk Snauwaert, ‘*ARCHIEF 3*’ *JEF GEYS*, Frans Masereel Centrum, 2016; and “Entrevista Miguel Wandschneider – Jef Geys” [Interview Miguel Wandschneider – Jef Geys], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTbP7NeQToU> (Accessed April 6, 2018).

JEF GEYS

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Curated by Nicholas Tammens

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