

Jef Geys,
ABC Ecole de Paris
(*ABC School of Paris*),
1959–61, drawing.
Courtesy the
artist and M HKA
collection

The Really Ignorant Schoolmaster: Jef Geys, Amongst Many Others

– Dieter Roelstraete

*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 Documenta 11 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

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

Dieter Roelstraete considers the highly localised practice of Jef Geys, who has used his experience as a schoolteacher to cloud the difference between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ in the art field.

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

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

1 Anonymous, ‘The Summoning of Everyman’ (c.15th century), available at <http://www.online-literature.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).

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

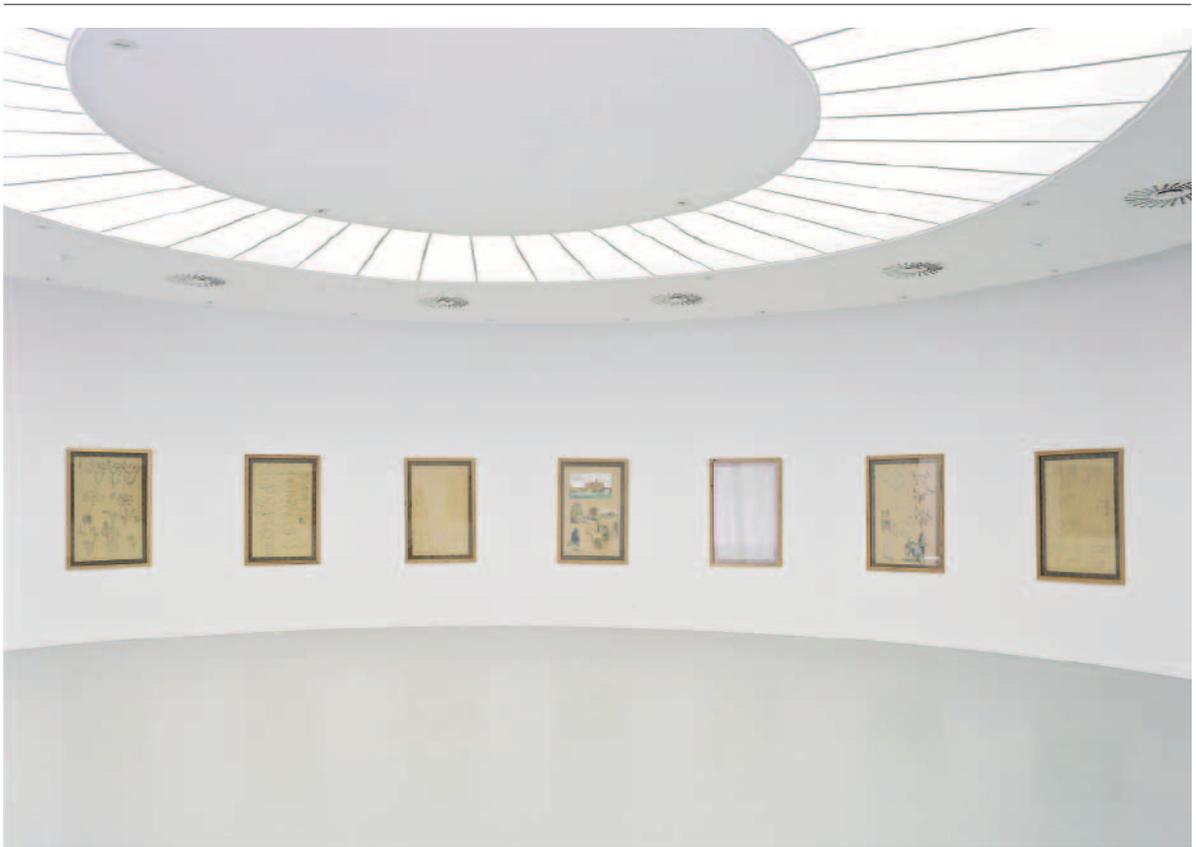
✱

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

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.



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

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. 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

7 Marie-Ange Brayer, 'De Kleine Identiteiten', in Jef Geys and Roland Patteuv (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 Institute 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.

Jef Geys, *Quadra Medicinale*, 2009, drawing, 112 × 80cm. Courtesy the artist



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

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.

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

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.

inscribing his work in the non-positions of its minor subjects'.¹⁰ In another telling 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

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.

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

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.

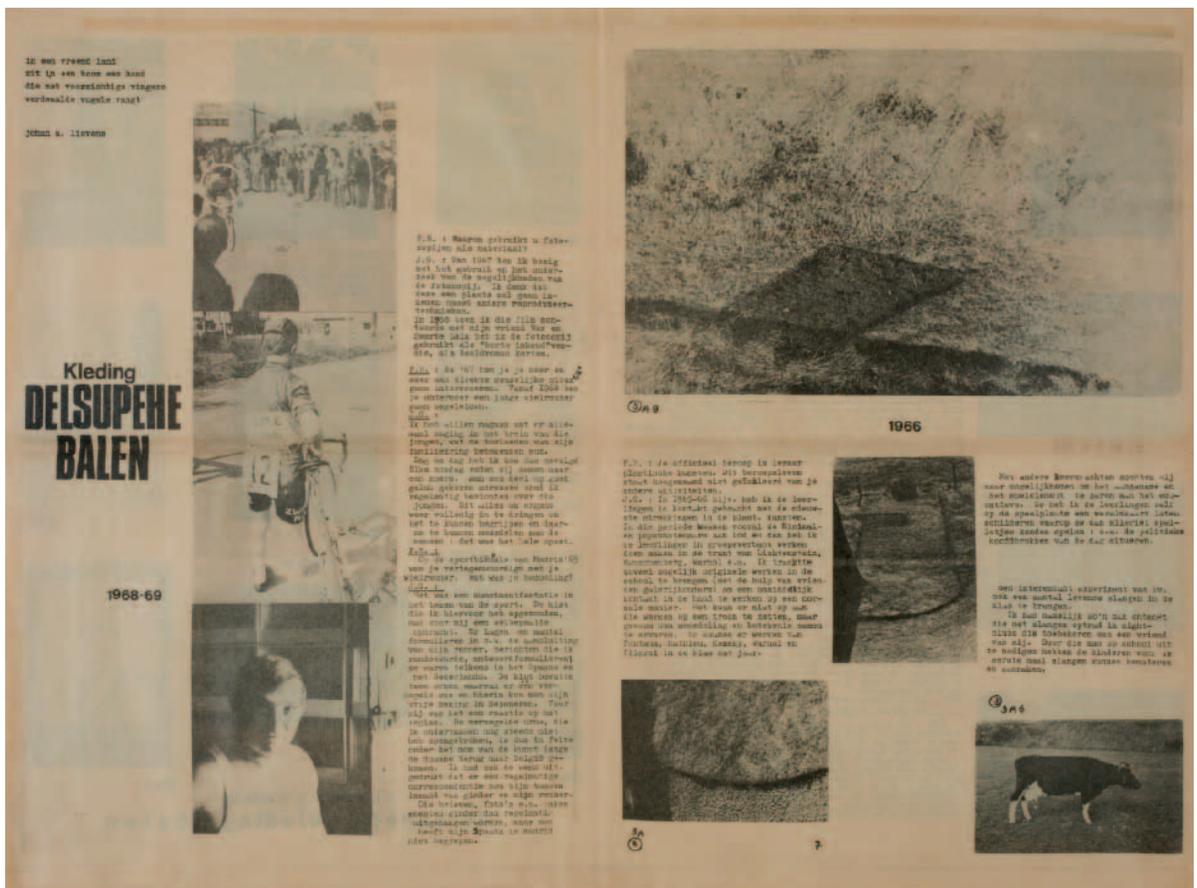
15 *Ibid.*, p.223.

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.



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

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



'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 Bial 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

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 gnomie '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.







Previous spread:
Jef Geys, *Trifolium
pratense*, 2010.
Photograph taken at
the end of Woodward
Avenue, Pontiac, MI

Jef Geys's Art Making Ethics

– Chris Sharp

Left:
Woodward Avenue,
2010. Installation
view, Museum of
Contemporary Art
Detroit. Photograph:
Corine Vermeulen.
Both images courtesy
the artist

Of the difficulty of not heroising Jef Geys. Of not launching into a shameless panegyric about the legendary and exemplary integrity of his practice. These are the ways I had initially wanted to begin this article. But when I tried, I found myself struggling to organise his potentially heroic qualities according to a system and within a language of which they are both critical

Chris Sharp looks at the work of Jef Geys – a democratic artist par excellence – and finds a practice dedicated to the question of art's social usefulness.

and ultimately foreign. Or to put in another way, my measuring stick seemed suddenly rotten and inadequate. I threw it away. And I decided to start from a different, albeit not entirely unrelated angle, one more comparable to Geys's measuring stick. But where to find it exactly? In the artist's practice itself. Behold, on the second page of the *Kempens Informatieblad* publication that accompanied his exhibition *Woodward Avenue* (2010) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit, the following text, authored by Geys himself:

Like on every dead body good and bad insects appear on the remainder; here on Detroit. Carcass opportunists. Some (let's say about 10%) are relief workers with good intentions. In the Detroit situation like for example in Madagascar, Senegal, Leningrad, etc. [...] 'art hoppers' come along to this ruinous community which is for them a temporary playground. Before you know widescreen pictures of abandoned supermarket carts and buildings in decay are published in the glossy magazines.

If there's no support of the government or surrounding communities the praiseworthy intentions of good meaning people are bound to fail. If you can't set up a whole new program with a clear view on the specific situation of art; what it is, was, could be, should be: STOP! If you want to join the flying circus of 'would be curators' who hop from one carcass to another, so be it, travel on from one colloquium to another and be a member of what seems to me more than ever the 'Club Med art of the years 2000...'¹

These two baleful paragraphs function not only as a warning of sorts, but also, more importantly, as a righteous condemnation of certain modes of operating in the art world and – to put it mildly – as a statement of intent, a work ethic or even an ethic *tout court*, in negative. I am strongly tempted to believe that significant clues as to how Geys operates and has operated in the world and the art world, however remotely, for the past nearly fifty years are woven deeply within the very fabric of these two paragraphs. For all their awkward phrasing, reckless, would-be profusion of *sics* (more on that later) and general vitriol, they are instrumental to understanding what motivates Geys as an artist and, possibly, a human being.

I should start by perhaps stating the obvious: implicit in Geys's brief but potent text is a fundamental belief in art's essential capacity to make a positive social impact, to register as something much more than a cosmetic enhancement of the lifestyle of a privileged few. Rather, it sees art as that which promotes an actively ethical engagement with the world. This is done by appealing to the critical agency of a given subject so as to help him or her learn to take as little for granted as possible (what more could be asked of art? Of an

1 See Jef Geys, 'Woodward Avenue', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Detroit, 2010, p.3.

exhibition, a poem, a novel, a movie? What more basic service could art possibly offer than helping one become more present in one's own life? In others'? In the world? Perhaps this is what Robert Filliou meant when he said: 'Art is that which makes life more interesting than art.'). In case the text cited above did not make it clear, Geys is not, by any stretch of the imagination, some kind of utopia-addled hippy; a deeply Foucauldian and occasionally obstreperous distrust of power structures and how they manage our lives may be found in the negative penumbra of his positive aesthetics. It is how he chooses to identify, negotiate and challenge those structures through the development of ethical methodologies that accounts for his positive contribution as an artist.

This complex belief system has played a crucial role in Geys's practice almost from the beginning of his career in the late 1950s — from his early projects that exposed the absurdity of cow passports (issued in Northern Europe at the time) and his proposal to blow up a museum in Antwerp due to its lack of structural soundness, to his educational activism as an elementary-school art teacher in the small Belgian town of Balen (where he still lives) from 1960 to 1989. Manifestations of that system can perhaps best be seen in two recent exhibitions: *Quadra Medicinale*, his project for the Belgian Pavilion of the 2009 Venice Biennale, and *Woodward Avenue*, a variation of the pavilion situated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit. For the Venice incarnation of this deceptively simple project, Geys asked four qualified acquaintances in four different cities — Brussels, New York, Moscow and Villeurbanne, France — to collect twelve different kinds of weeds which 'definitely grow on the street' within a one- to two-kilometre quadrant of their respective homes or workplaces. In addition to locating the plants, Geys requested that his

collaborators photograph them in their natural urban habitat, and 'harvest them', dry them, pin them up and provide their identifying information, such as their Latin name and the genus to which they belong. He was particularly interested in the medicinal qualities of the plants, and how they might ideally be used, for example, by a homeless person to relieve the pain of a toothache. The artist then collected all the material from his collaborators, processed it and formalised it into a navigable, two-dimensional whole in the form of photographs, dried and framed plant samples and maps, which was presented in the Belgian pavilion in a serial, or grid-like, no frills format.

In Venice, at the viewer's eye level, could be found a framed dried plant sample with its relevant scientific information, Latin name and medicinal properties. Below this were two colour photographs mounted on a single support: one of the weed growing in the urban environment, and the other of signs on the street where it was found. This systematic, tripartite presentation of information was occasionally complemented by blown-up, black-and-white Google-map details of the specific urban quadrants themselves. Meanwhile, the upper perimeter of the walls featured larger, dried, flattened and framed examples of the same plants, often corresponding to the small representations directly underneath. The pavilion also housed a broad selection of drawings largely of plants, erotica and military motifs,² a few visual references to former, albeit related works and an enlarged version of Geys's presentation of the project translated into twelve languages.³ Eschewing any romantic, symbolic or idyllic value normally associated with the depiction of plant life, and prioritising, quite simply, the facts, the mood of the pavilion was sober and scientific. In reaction to the project's presentation,

2 More specifically, the drawings, which were executed with the skill of an accomplished draughtsman on brown paper, sometimes juxtaposed plants with images of human reproductive organs, soldiers or tanks. Going back to one of the artist's earliest projects, *ABC École de Paris (ABC School of Paris, 1959–61)*, in which Geys ironically applied himself to acquiring the rules of good drawing through a correspondence course, it should be noted that drawing as a technique has always played a fundamental role in his practice. Interpretable as ironic studies after nature, the combination in the pavilion of these three motifs brings to mind a provocative and highly ambiguous series of equivalences, as if reminding the viewer that the human organ capable of encoding botanical information into a cultural and medical archive is no less responsible for the codes of pornography and the sophisticated machinery of warfare.

3 Although what I have just described may account for the visual contents of the exhibition, it does not necessarily account for its personal historical parameters, and the fact is that it could be seen perhaps not so much as a compact retrospective of Geys's entire career, but rather as the end of a broad arc of interests and preoccupations that have informed it — a subject which admittedly merits another, much longer essay altogether.



Jef Geys, *Quadra Medicinale*, 2009. Installation view, Belgian Pavilion, Venice Biennale. Photograph: Katrin Greiling. Courtesy the artist

Ina Vandebroek, Geys's principle scientific collaborator on both the Venice and Detroit exhibitions, noted that it 'emanated scientific rigour as well as simplicity and refreshing orderly stillness. Through this work of art I also saw a man's ode to science.'⁴ Indeed, the project sought to create and function as a method as much, if not more, than a work of art. One of Geys's goals here was to create a template that could be applied to any city as a scientifically plausible point of departure, and one to be carried on, elaborated and

applied by others — a sort of ur-open source mode of operating very much in conformity with Geys's practice.⁵

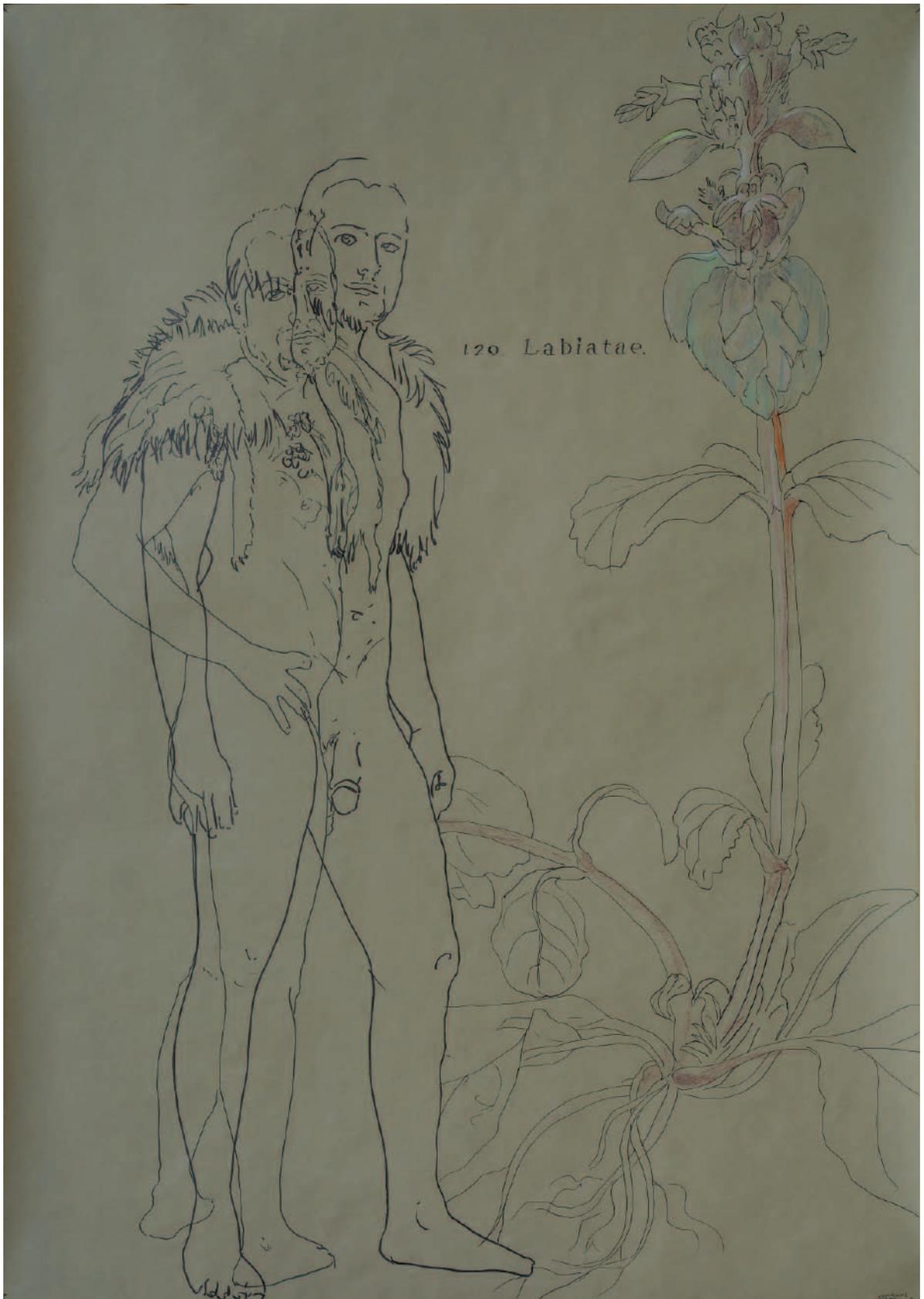
In addition to the project's use of traditional artistic strategies, artistic status can be located in two particular factors in *Quadra Medicinale*: its somewhat nebulous and deeply imbricated relationship with the grid, and the *Kempens Informatieblad* publication that accompanied it.⁶ Foregrounded in the work's title, the grid lurks with a kind of impish ubiquity not only throughout this

4 Ina Vandebroek, 'The Art in Ethnobotany', 2009, available at www.nybg.org/plant-talk/2009/06/people/the-art-in-ethnobotany/ (last accessed on 7 January 2010).

5 While working on this text, I received a link from Geys to a project by ethnobotanist Dr Peter Giovannini, which applies Geys's method and Vandebroek's research to the cities of Berlin and Rome: <http://petergiovannini.com/ethnobotany-photo-pictures/Urban-wild-food-plants-weeds.html> (last accessed on 18 February 2011).

6 The *Kempens Informatiebladen* (the name denotes a newspaper for the larger region around Geys's hometown of Balen) are exhibition publications that take the form of a newspaper, and which have accompanied most of Geys's projects and exhibitions since the late 1960s. In accordance with the democratic nature of his work, the *Kempens Informatiebladen* are always made available for free or at a low price, and are Geys's personal solution to the dissemination of information about his work. As Roland Patteeuw wrote about the *Kempens Informatiebladen* in Geys's only, to date, traditional catalogue, published on the occasion of his exhibition at the BAWAG Foundation in Vienna in 2009: 'Saving and archiving information. For Jef Geys this activity belongs to the area where the proper rules of the game are made and where the contents of each project is situated against a large social background. But informing doesn't mean explaining. Indeed, the artist never gives any details about his activities. Loads of information can be found in the *Kempens Informatieblad* [...which] covers the background information about the concerning [sic] projects. At the same time it functions as a register of observations and activities in the broadest sense of the word.' In other words, even if Geys is unwilling to explain or have his projects explained, he is nevertheless dedicated to rendering his thinking process partially clear and accessible. This democratic principle extends to the formal quality of the work itself. Cited in Christine Kintisch (ed.), *Jef Geys, Wien, Vienna, Wenen* (exh. cat.), Vienna: BAWAG Foundation, 2009, p.13.

Two more aspects of the Venice *Kempens Informatieblad* merit mentioning. Firstly, Geys had originally hoped to make the newspaper edible, but was unsuccessful; secondly, the publication was available for a donation of one euro, the proceeds of which were donated to the Catholic association Caritas that helps homeless people and refugees (a donation of about €9,000—€10,000 was generated during the biennial).



Jef Geys, *Quadra
Medicinale*, 2009,
drawing, 112 × 80cm.
Courtesy the artist

project, but throughout the artist's entire practice. If I refer to it in such unflattering terms, it is because the grid, in Geys's deployment, never betrays its thoroughly paradoxical nature. Indeed, it conforms to a certain ambiguity that can be seen throughout its application in contemporary art; Rosalind Krauss's diagnoses of it as 'fully, even cheerfully schizophrenic' was a consequence of its proclivity to simultaneously project centrifugally outward (as in Mondrian's diamond-shaped paintings) as well as centripetally inward (as in the depiction of windows), while just as readily rendering itself serviceable to spiritual and materialist or scientific discourse.⁷ Similarly, Geys's preoccupation with the grid keeps even the best of his students guessing. *Quadra Medicinale*, in particular, is predicated upon both the rigorous implementation and subtle, irrepressible annulment of the grid. From the map's demarcation of geographic zones to the taxonomical organisation of the framed plants and photographs, the grid reigns throughout the pavilion with a Procrustean severity. And yet, the annulment of the grid stems, both symbolically and literally, from the very existence of these plants — otherwise known as weeds — and their anarchic tendency to grow willy-nilly, regardless of the ordering, grid-like fabric of the modern city.

One suspects that an active and essential truth of Geys's practice can be seen at work within this surreptitiously self-negating structure. It is as if he both accepts and even encourages the human need for structural systems of organisation and classification, while simultaneously bearing witness to their oppressiveness

and inadequacy, and consequent need to be continually challenged. Indeed, reflecting on *Middelheim — quadrant plants* (1999), a formal and conceptual predecessor of *Quadra Medicinale*, which was also based on the grid, Geys wrote: 'For me nothing is so binding as the laws of the grid. [...] Grids are there because we need to speak, because rules and laws try to dominate our traffic [*sic*].'⁸ Moreover, in a singular twist on Geys's many symbioses of form and content, his language also instructively performs the paradox he is trying to convey. His deliberately wonky syntax and linguistic waywardness destabilises sense, demonstrating in negative the necessity of rules, of grammar, of structure.⁹ Perhaps even more importantly, it forces the reader to engage, in an exceptionally active way, with his words in order to understand his meaning. Although Geys is a democratic artist par excellence, nothing is ever a given in his practice. Any genuine purchase on what he does must be earned — by which I mean not glibly amassed, but slowly and strenuously sifted through, processed and constructed into a hard-won comprehension.¹⁰ This resistance to promoting any kind of facile comprehension is apparent also in his allergy to traditional modes of documentation and art world circuits. Indeed, never, it would seem, has so little ink been spilt on such a significant artist. Rarely, for example, has the internet's paucity of material, of representation been so incommensurate to the breadth and importance of an artist's career. But if this is so, it cannot but be a consequence of his refusal to abide by such basic professional protocols as, say, simply maintaining a traditional CV,

7 Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1986, p.60.

8 See J. Geys, 'Middelheim — quadrant plants', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Biennale Venetië, 2009, p.23. Geys has worked with or tried to work with Middelheim, an open-air sculpture park in Antwerp, on several projects. In *Digging Middelheim* (1969), Geys proposed to transform part of the space into a garden, a proposal that was met with silence. A more abstruse project, *The Dream of the Caddie*, involved a golf player, a compass and the division of a c.30-metre diameter circle into fundamental geometric parts, and was rejected outright for the 1984 Middelheim Biennial. In *Middelheim — quadrant plants*, Geys divided Middelheim into 110 quadrants, and asked a collaborator to harvest and frame, as in *Quadra Medicinale*, one plant per quadrant. He then made one drawing per quadrant, combining an erotic motif and a corporate logo, such as that belonging to Philips or IKEA. ('The border', Geys wrote in the *Kempens Informatieblad*, 'between what one calls pornography and the cunning tricks of the "business world" is for me close to one another [*sic*].') J. Geys, 'Quadra Medicinale', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Biennale Venetië, *op. cit.*, p.23.

9 This is not necessarily due to the fact that English is his second language. A good source tells me that he demonstrates similar characteristics in his native language, Flemish.

10 During a research trip in Belgium, I had the good fortune to meet with Geys. However, within five minutes of meeting him, he explained to me, when I rashly posed a question, that there would be — I quote from memory — 'no questions. I will speak, and you will listen. People have to do their homework. You can't just show up here and expect to have everything explained to you'. Never mind that later, in his studio, when I ventured another question with the preface 'This might be a stupid question,' he, true to his nearly thirty years of teaching experience, responded, 'There are no stupid questions.' Conversation with the artist, 4 December 2010.

dating works or even deigning to attend his own openings.¹¹ Geys cannot be commodified, bought or sold on any level, least of all intellectually. The only currency his work seems to tolerate is that of one's time and energy.

The *Kempens Informatieblad* that accompanied *Quadra Medicinale*, which the artist and commissioner referred to as a 'Handbook/Instruction manual/Guidebook' for the pavilion, was no exception to this rule. Although the publication presented an extensive chronological overview of Geys's production, written by the artist himself, primarily as it related to the pavilion, it required a fair amount of intellectual legwork before yielding anything tangible and comprehensive. Short, error-riddled texts accompanying works were at times more gnomic than informative; the images were obscure; and the overall tone seemed to presuppose a familiarity (which for most of the audience would have been unlikely) with Geys's career since its beginning. Indeed, this *Kempens Informatieblad* was characterised by his proclivity to elliptically sum up past projects with laconic, non-descriptions (i.e. '...touring around Belgium with my cabbages on the backseat of my Citroën 2CV: showing the landscape to the cabbages with clumps of ground packed in plastic'), as if an artistic career merely needed to be evoked in order to exist.¹² That, or it was already the stuff of legend.

If this self-mythologising tendency seems implicit in the *Quadra Kempens Informatieblad*, it becomes explicit in the *Kempens* that accompanied the Detroit incarnation of the project. Elaborating upon the methodology developed for Venice, Geys invited Vandebroek to apply the same methods as *Quadra Medicinale* employed to one of Detroit's main thorough-fares, Woodward Avenue. Beginning at Cadillac Square, in the centre of Detroit, and continuing on to Saginaw Street, and almost thirty miles north into the neighbouring city of Pontiac, Vandebroek collected twelve samples of the urban flora otherwise known as weeds at twelve different intersections, documenting the process and classifying the plants. This incarnation, however, was complemented by a much greater involvement by Vandebroek, featuring

a workshop with local, herbal healers at the museum itself, and a documentary, made according to Geys's directions, of Vandebroek conducting an ethnobotany workshop with traditional health practitioners in Eterazama, Bolivia. (Ethnobotany could be briefly described as an attempt to study and register indigenous healing techniques and lore, and to synthesise these with biological medicine.) As linked to language, culture and ethnographic studies as to medical science and the practical application and improvement of medical care in less favoured communities in South America — in Bolivia in particular — Vandebroek's work is emphatically practical.

The *Kempens Informatieblad* for *Woodward Avenue* features a multi-voiced, elliptical narrative, in the style and spirit of, say, William Faulkner, which revolves around the death and funeral of a gallerist by the name of Ghislaine Delforge. A host of written monologues, which correspond, at least in part, to those of real people — ranging from Geys's friend, the writer Walter van den Broeck, to his own daughter, Nina Geys, among many others — variously reflect on Delforge, as well as on Geys himself. All but outright reviled throughout, Geys is evocatively depicted as some kind of intransigent zealot and is generally spoken of, one feels, with a sense of embittered dread (except, of course, by his daughter and van den Broeck). Indeed, one gets the sense that these monologues all form a community in which Geys, for better or for worse, functions as a kind of conscience. That Geys should elect to accompany an untraditional community-based exhibition with such an eccentric text in a city far from the centres of the usual art circuit and in a country where he has rarely exhibited is perhaps not as puzzling as it may at first seem. I see within his decision two interdependent beliefs: that of the practical significance of the myth of the artist to the efficacy and cogency of art, and that of the importance of maintaining, against all appearances, the division between art and life (the formal fictionalisation of the self serves — at least here, given the story's reliance on narrative convention — not to make that self more real, but rather the stuff of fiction). Contrary to what such an unorthodox

11 Geys's CV merely consists of an undated, chronological inventory of projects — which is to say that the projects are numbered, or were numbered until recently (he stopped doing even that), but undated.

12 See J. Geys, 'Quadra Medicinale', *Kempens Informatieblad*, Speciale Editie Biennale Venetië, *op. cit.*, p.6.



Jef Geys, *Al de foto's tot 1998 (All the photos up to 1998)*, 1998. Installation view, M HKA, Antwerp. Courtesy the artist and M HKA collection

career would suggest — a career that has always been and continues to be categorically antagonistic toward the mechanisms of the mainstream art world — Geys is not necessarily out to ‘blur the boundaries between art and life’, or, more radically, to dissolve art into life. Had that been the case, he probably would have stopped participating in and contributing to a community he deems so reprehensible decades ago — which is to say, carried such a belief to its logical conclusion. Nor does his continued participation make him a martyr to the cause of art — he knows how to keep his distance from the dealings of what he has been known to refer to as ‘the mafia [*sic*] which calls itself the international art trade’.¹³

To return to the condemnation quoted at the beginning of this essay, Geys does have ‘a clear view on the specific situation of art; what it is, was, could be, should be’. I see it thus: it is a privileged mobile ‘site’, demarcated as art, that is capable of hosting and promoting serious reflection

on a human being’s ethical duty toward him or herself, fellow human beings and the community, and also one where such a duty may be questioned, explored and actively redefined. Even in Herbert Marcuse’s utopian vision of a society transformed into ‘Art as Form of Reality’ (1972), art, as we know it, would still be assigned its own separate space, transcendent of daily life, functioning as a privileged ‘otherness’ capable of questioning and challenging the status quo.¹⁴ And it is this privileged space, at the very heart of the everyday, wherein Geys continually challenges himself, and whoever encounters his work, to take as little for granted as possible.¹⁵

13 J. Geys, ‘Woodward Avenue’, *Kempens Informatieblad*, Specialie Editie Detroit, *op. cit.*, p.20.

14 See Herbert Marcuse, ‘Art as Form of Reality’, *New Left Review*, no.74, 1972, pp.51—58.

15 Disclaimer: this text of course comes nowhere near describing the complexity of Geys’s work. If I have neglected to discuss such key points and factors as his interdisciplinary approach toward art making, I have done so in the hope of unpacking some of the formal and conceptual anomalies which attend his practice, and ideally rendering it a bit more accessible. For a more traditional appraisal of the stakes of Geys’s work, I urge the diligent reader to consult Dirk Snauwaert’s concise and incisive ‘Handbook/Instruction manual/Guidebook’ (2009) that accompanied *Quadra Medicinale*; the full version can be downloaded here in English: http://www.wiels.org/site2/event.php?event_id=182&lng=en (last accessed on 24 January 2011).