



LE TOUR DE FRANCE 1969 D'EDDY MERCKX

JEF GEYS

Coproduction : cneai, Chatou ; CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux ; Les BainsDouches, Alençon, Passages, Troyes ; IAC, Villeurbanne, Vog, Fontaine

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In the summer of 1969 Jef Geys decided to follow the Tour de France. Passionate about cycling like many of his compatriots, the Belgian artist photographed the stages of what was to be Eddy Merckx's first victory. He then produces a series of photographs that juxtapose plural realities: sociological, urbanistic, ethnographic or artistic. The images treat the runners in equal measure with the fans and onlookers. The logos and advertisements in the stage cities constitute the symbolic literature of the event. The points of view are those of the amateur, the true amateur, the one who, in a repetitive and rarely satisfied gesture, with no aesthetic project whatsoever, embodying the purest critical position, is a voyeur.

The 67 photographs are in black & white. Exhibited for the first time, almost fifty years after their creations, they could be marked by a documentary or nostalgic value. This is counting without the sharpness of Jef Geys' work, which creates "bolted" frames for the occasion.

If July 20, 1969 is the day of Eddy Merckx's first victory, it is also the day of man's first step on the moon. On the one hand a planetary and universal victory, on the other hand a national sporting victory, to be put on the same level if we consider the emotional impact of a people passionate about cycling, for whom the Tour de France represents the consecration. A two-page montage of Belgian newspapers from July 21 and 22, 1969 punctuates the exhibition where the first step on the moon and the first victory of Eddy Merckx are announced on an equal footing.

From his beginnings in 1958, Jef Geys has given a prominent place to photography. Followed in Belgium by Jacques Charlier and Marcel Broodthaers in the 1960s, this early choice of photography made Jef Geys a pioneer in the world of Belgian art and also joined the great names of the international conceptual art scene such as Ed Ruscha, Robert Smithson, John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler.

The exhibition presented at the Bains-Douches reactivates a series of photographs contained in an artist's book entitled *Al de zwart-wit foto's tot 1998* (All black and white photos up to 1998) - a book containing five hundred pages of photographs (1958-1998) randomly arranged in the form of contact sheets - of which he proposes an "exploded" version. At Jef Geys, photographic practice and archival practice are inseparable. The art archive and the art of the archive merge into one and the same practice as soon as the artist gives himself the freedom to define his own notion of the work. For Jef Geys, there is no single work, no multiple work, no archive, there are only versions; translations of personal events into artistic form. *Kome* is the name he gives to a large part of his work; it means "work in several copies". This is why the value of a newspaper, a



photograph or a film is for him equivalent to that of painting, sculpture or their notices.

This questioning of the standards of the work of art can lead him to photograph his paintings in order to list them on binder sheets which take on the status of a work; the list of works itself being exhibited.

Jef Geys invests without ever prioritizing all the realities that make up his daily environment, whether personal, cultural or universal. As a result, he walks very naturally through all possible media forms: drawing, painting, sculpture, language, photography, film or big data. This acuity to produce an artistic language in all its forms on a daily basis, leads him, as a teacher, to translate the educational program into an artistic program, and, as a graphic designer, to invest his own work in the newspaper in which he works until he takes it over on his own. Thus KEMPENS Informatieblad, the local newspaper in his region, becomes the artistic medium for his own research and commentary on his work, as well as the press organ for his exhibitions instead of catalogs.

Recently a scientist defined the principle of will as the act of the arm that rises at the very second one wants to lift it. Jef Geys' work is a voluntary act and his works are necessary objects. Here lies, without a doubt, the secret of a work that is at once radical and supports only the necessary forms - and exists only when it reveals the set of frequencies common to the various realities of life. The work of Jef Geys is, moreover, light and modest, a consequence of the existential lucidity that animates its author. Perceive, recognize, capture: a trilogy of consciousness, commitment and transmission, undoubtedly at work in the artist's work and life.

How then to read or comment on a work of direct action, which, in contrast to distanced commentary, draws its source from the daily act and more concretely, from his garden, from the school where he taught, the newspaper where he collaborated, the bar he ran... and, ends in a territory resolutely foreign to art criticism or aesthetic theory: that of the revival, which, as in music, confirms and increases the reference?

Integrity has this peculiarity that it can be inhaled and tasted; one can recognize its roundness, its fullness, but it is difficult to comment on it without dispersing it. Just remember then, when you visit Eddy Merckx's 1969 Le Tour de France exhibition, the freedom that you yourself have experienced in practicing a sport or a leisure activity, in appropriating the life of your star, in bathing in the crowds of races or matches, when the heads of the supporters are as much a part of the show as the advertising literature, the clothes or hairstyles of the participants.

As for the fascination that the work of Jef Geys generates in all those who look at it, it is undoubtedly due to the reflective power of the artist. Artists, according to Marcel Proust's formula, are those who have the power, suddenly ceasing to live for themselves, to make their



personality like a mirror, so that their life is reflected in it; “the genius consisting in the reflective power and not in the intrinsic quality of the reflected spectacle”.

In the summer of 1969 Jef Geys decided to follow the Tour of France. A cycling enthusiast like so many of his countrymen, the Belgian artist photographed the stages of what was to be Eddy Merckx's first victory of the Tour.

On this occasion he produced a series of photographs that juxtapose multiple i.e. sociological, geographical and artistic – realities.

The photographs put the riders on an equal footing with fans and onlookers. The logos and advertisements in the cities hosting a stage of the race constitute the symbolic literature of the event. The points of view are those of the amateur- the true amateur who, through repetitive and rarely contented gestures, lacking the slightest aesthetic project and embodying the purest possible critical position, is a voyeur.

Exhibited for the first time nearly fifty years after they were taken, these sixty-seven black and white photographs hold a documentary and nostalgic value-without even taking into account the sharpness of Jef Geys's work, who created « botled » framing on the occasion.