

JEF GEYS**You don't see what you think you see****02.02.2024 – 19.05.2024****WIELS, Brussels**

From 2 February to 19 May 2024, WIELS presents an ambitious large-scale survey exhibition of the work of Jef Geys, titled 'You don't see what you think you see' in Brussels. With this presentation of over 200 objects and documents, accompanied by the first survey publication of the artist's work, WIELS wants to contribute to art historical research on Jef Geys, as well as to the understanding and appreciation of the artist and his multifaceted practice for local and international audiences.

Art critics commonly describe Jef Geys' work as "unruly, and impossible to categorize in conventional art-historical categories." Despite Geys' subversive and critical attitude towards the art world, the exhibition at WIELS shows that his work is not only deeply engaged and socially critical, but also funny and sensory.

As Geys writes in 1991, "Is what one sees really what one thinks one sees? And what can one do with what one sees?" Our perception of things is shaped by assumptions, beliefs and habits, which in turn are influenced by education, mainstream media and advertising. Always critical of image and language, Geys aims to expose "the hidden, what one thinks one sees," and encourages self-reflection and scepticism. This aim is the starting point of this survey of Geys' heterogeneous work, enriched by previously unpublished and exceptional documents from the artist's archives.

From the early 1960s, Jef Geys compiled an archive, with the titles of everything he considered part of his artistic practice on his List of Works as its index. With a total of 844 entries, the List of Works opens with photographs and drawings from Geys' school days at the Brothers of Charity, followed by a wide range of creative projects spanning six decades of artistic practice. Avant-garde drawings and paintings, lacquered puppets, sensual fruit reliefs, performances and actions, conceptual photography, 'open' texts, and instructional films all make the list. But so do Geys' observations of a first-time cyclist, his botanical studies for self-medication, his novel methods of teaching his students, as well as the local community meetings for direct democracy he helped to organise. Jef Geys' List of Works clearly demonstrates his versatility and broader interests as an artist, and as a precursor of interdisciplinary practice by integrating other disciplines such as biology, architecture, sociology, and anthropology within visual arts.

“For me, the main thing is to express my problems as clearly as possible, in a form and in a manner that feels obvious. Whether it’s an object, a project, or a painting, it doesn’t matter. I try to gain insight into things, and sometimes, to gain insight, I have to make something, and sometimes I have to write it down, and sometimes I have to blow up the museum to do it. To gain insight into things for myself. This is the self-study I’m working on.”

— Jef Geys

Jef Geys’ work can be considered a lifelong learning experience. Between entry 1 and 844, he accumulated knowledge and sought answers to the questions and problems he faced. In doing so, he involved many groups of people, including students, village residents, museum visitors, family members, and bar managers, not just within but especially from outside the traditional academic art environments.

Curators: Dirk Snauwaert & Charlotte Friling

Assisted by Liska Brams, Oriana Lemmens & Kaat Obbels

In close collaboration with the Jef Geys Estate/Kazini

SURVEY EXHIBITION

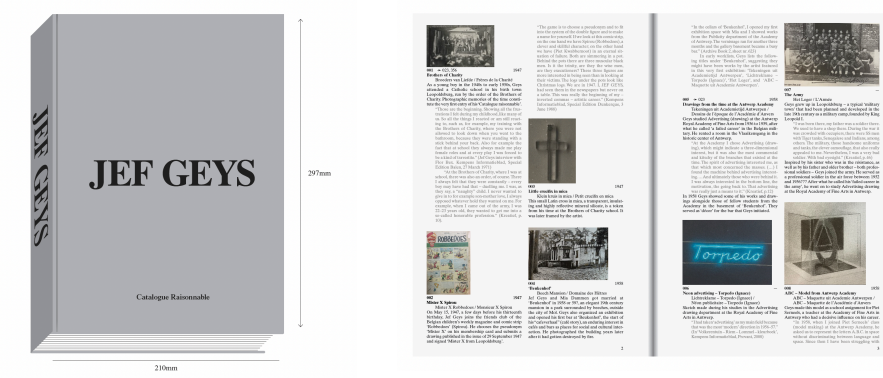
Globally renowned Belgian artists Marcel Broodthaers, Panamarenko and Jef Geys are often cited as the leading Belgian artists of their generation, but only Geys' work has not yet been properly assessed, despite three major international exhibitions during his lifetime (2005-2007-2009), and two international surveys since his death (Bergen, Bern).

Geys’ work inspires many, through its deliberate 'off the grid' peripheral existence in small town Balen rather than a trend-setting metropolis. This aspect of Geys' 'rural' and critical attitude and work has appealed to both public opinion and specialists since the 1960s. Geys had a great aversion to the retrospective as an art-historical institutional format, and he refused to submit to academic timelines and stylistic categorisation. His infamous proposal, *'Blowing up the Museum'*, was his response in 1970 to an invitation to a first retrospective exhibition at KMSKA. It is a decisive argument of Geys', and of many artists-since-Dada, to break with the institution of 'art' and its need to historicise. Geys also sought to dissolve the boundaries between disciplines and any hierarchies in art and society. He stretched the idea and definition of what a work of art could be, redefining artistry not as a career or as a skill but as a way of life, a practice, a 'life project'. An overview of Geys' work is therefore closer to mapping a continent than to classifying and selecting within a classical oeuvre. Geys also explored and entered a number of environments other than those usually associated with art institutions: the school, cafés, the strike committee and neighbourhood committees, the *Kempens Informatieblad*, and his own archive, among others. He does this from a personal, singular, rebellious and

unconventional attitude that tirelessly pursues as its foundation a searching, experimental practice.

This larger survey, bringing together over 200 works, aims to provide much-needed information, and offer better insights in Geys' work.

THE PUBLICATION



The WIELS

exhibition goes hand in hand with **the first survey publication** of Jef Geys' work, which will be released in June 2024. This monograph, edited by Charlotte Friling assisted by Oriana Lemmens and Kaat Obbels, was created in collaboration with MER and Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, and designed by Joris Kritis. The title, *Catalogue Raisonné*, is from a publication project found in Geys' archive, structured like the 844 numbers and titles found in his famous List of Works. Geys used this List as a way to weave together his practice, production and autobiography. His *Catalogue Raisonné* is both a personal, mnemonic, cumulative listing and an alternative to the standard academic 'catalogue raisonné'. Besides this List, Geys left many clues and explanations about his practice in editions of his *Kempens Informatieblad*, on his blog and in publications. WIELS brings all these written aspects together, along with the results of new research into the artist's archives, a large number of new translations of Geys's original texts, and hundreds of illustrations of key unpublished works and documents.

Through access to the artist's archive, close cooperation with his Estate, and thorough art-historical research, this publication offers a rare opportunity to discover, understand and study the entire career of Jef Geys' remarkable, multifaceted practice.

368 pages (texts and illustrations), 112 pages (image sections)

Four-colour print, A4, hardcover

Release date: June 2024, a press pre-release will be available on request

In English with original texts in Dutch

Editor: Charlotte Friling, assisted by Oriana Lemmens & Kaat Obbels

Published by: MER and Borgerhoff & Lamberigts

Graphic design: Joris Kritis

PARTNERS**With the generous support of:**

Exhibition Circle Jef Geys

Publication Circle Jef Geys

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Galerie Greta Meert

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In collaboration with: Air de Paris, Maxwell Graham Gallery, Galerie Max Mayer, Micheline Szwajcer

Under the auspices of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2024

BIOGRAPHIES

‘Born in Leopoldsburg, lives in Balen’ is how **Jef Geys** (1934-2018) liked to introduce himself in catalogues. After an “unsuccessful army career” and Publicity studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, he became a Positive Aesthetics teacher at the State Secondary School in Balen. Teaching, learning, emancipation and self-realisation became significant themes in his art practice, and of his ‘protest’ generation. From the late 1950s onwards, he steered towards artistic disruption, such as amateurish technical finishing and the depersonalisation of authorship, in contrast to the spontaneous subjectivity of previous generations. Through repetition and serialising of the multiple, he disrupted the notion of the ‘original’ and set up networks and collaborations to support cultural influence and exchange with ‘other’ modernities. Strongly rooted in his region, the Kempen and Balen, Jef Geys took an unconventional approach that often veered away from prevailing trends. His Cultuurcentrale, for instance, delivered artworks on demand and challenged conventional ideas about popular art. He also received international appreciation, with invitations to the global São Paulo and Venice Biennales, documenta 11 or Skulpturprojekte Münster 97.

Geys defied tradition, deconstructed language, and championed open cultural exchange, establishing him in many ways as a true pioneer.

Dirk Snauwaert lives and works in Brussels. He is the founding director of WIELS. In 2009-10, he curated Jef Geys' presentation for the Belgian pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale. Before joining WIELS, Dirk Snauwaert was Co-Director of the Institut d'Art Contemporain Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes, in France, where he was in charge of the exhibition programme and of the development of the FRAC Rhône-Alpes collection. He was Director of the Munich Kunstverein from 1996 to 2001, and, from 1989 to 1995, he was in charge of the contemporary art programme of the

Société des Expositions of the Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels. For WIELS, he has curated exhibitions by Anne Mie Van Kerckhoven, Bruno Serralongue, Luc Tuymans, Andro Wekua, Francis Alÿs, David Claerbout, Sven Augustijnen, Rosemarie Trockel, Joëlle Tuerlinckx, Walter Swennen, Jef Geys et Monir Farmanfarmanian, Ana Torfs, Edith Dekyndt, Evelyne Axell, Rossella Biscotti, Akram Zaatari, Duncan Campbell, Stan Douglas, Wolfgang Tillmans and Rebecca Quaytman co-curated with Devrim Bayar ; co-curated with Charlotte Friling *Atopolis* for Mons Capitale Culturelle 2015, *Convex Concave*, Tank Museum Shanghai 2019, Marcel Broodthaers' *Industrial Poems Open Letters* in 2021, Francis Alÿs Childrens Games with Hilde Teerlinck, Thea Djordjadze with Pauline Hatzigeorgiou and thematic exhibitions such as *Expats-Clandestines* (2007), *Rehabilitation* (2010), *Residue* (co Agata Jastrzabek), the anniversary exhibition *The Absent Museum* (2017), which included works of some 45 artists, *Unexchangeable* (2018), artworks from Belgian private collections and *Risquons Tout* (2020), co-curated by Zoë Gray, Helena Kritis and Sofia Dati.

Charlotte Friling joined WIELS in 2013 after studies in art history and art criticism at Central Saint Martins in London, the University of Oxford and Columbia University in New York. She has coordinated a number of publications, worked as assistant curator on the exhibitions of Franz Erhard Walther and Mark Leckey, and as co-curator on the group exhibitions *Atopolis* (2015), *The Absent Museum* (2017) and *Convex / Concave* (TANK, Shanghai, 2019). She co-curated the exhibition and co-edited the publication *Industrial poems, Open Letters*, focused on Marcel Broodthaers' plastic plaques (WIELS, 2021 & MASI Lugano, 2022).

EVENTS

Late openings with guided tours (NL/FR/EN)

Every 1st Wednesday of the month, 11:00-21:00

Public Opening

Thursday, 1 February, 18:00

Symposium Jef Geys

Nico Dockx & Johan Pas

Date à confirmer

PRACTICAL INFORMATION FOR PRESS

Press conference: Wednesday 31 January, 11:00

Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 11:00 to 18:00
Open every first Wednesday of the month until 21:00

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WIELS

As one of the leading institutions for contemporary art in Europe WIELS presents temporary exhibitions by national and international artists, both emerging and more established. WIELS is a site of creation and dialogue, in which art and architecture form the basis for a discussion about current events and issues, not only through its exhibitions, but also through an international artist-in-residency, an education and community-oriented programme and complementary activities.

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