

In the spirit of Jef Geys, in this exhibition the S.M.A.K. would like to encourage the visitor to make up his/her own story, in the same way as the artist wrote his story by means of his work. Geys avoids as much as possible any explanation of his work. The S.M.A.K. usually starts each exhibition with a short introductory text on the wall. But not this time. To replace it, the artist has compiled information on the wall together with documents that provide an associative context for the exhibition. The visitor's guide does not take the usual form either. It provides background information but avoids interpretation.

## **THE ARCHIVE AS A FORM OF ART**

Jef Geys (1934, Leopoldsborg) breaks away decisively from the notion of art as an autonomous phenomenon. He sees art as being intertwined with everyday life. Both the village of Balen where he lives and works and the wider world act as points of reference for his oeuvre. Since 1958 he has been saving traces of what was going on in his personal life and in his immediate surroundings. These traces are crucial to him and by setting them in the context of art he commands attention for what is commonly considered trivial.

Geys has opted resolutely for the anti-elitist side of art. It seems one could hardly think of any simpler basic material for his oeuvre than the ordinary things from his daily life. Yet this does not mean that his work is easy to fathom. His work assumes an extraordinary form. As an archive of the ordinary, it has expanded into a many-branched tangle of associations that will continue to grow as long as the artist lives. The archive is the medium in which Geys works. This makes him a unique artist.

Geys deliberately does not commit himself on the coherence and meaning of his archive. At regular intervals he distils new syntheses from it, thereby questioning clear-cut ways of thinking about art and life. In addition, Geys not only critically examines the value of art and its status as something original, the museum as an institution and the aura of the artist, but also broaches broader topical subjects in, among other things, his drawings on small paper doilies.

## **CONTEMPORARY ART HERITAGE FLANDERS**

In the right wing of this exhibition, the artist responds to the government's recent request for greater cooperation between the four leading museums of contemporary art in Flanders: the Middelheim Museum and M HKA (Antwerp), Mu.ZEE (Ostend) and S.M.A.K. (Ghent). In order to meet this demand, the CAHF (Contemporary Art Heritage Flanders) was set up in 2009 to enhance the international visibility of the contemporary art collections and to organize more cooperation between the four museums involved. Since 2012, the CAHF has acted as a platform for the sharing of knowledge that facilitates, stimulates and expands the international network for reflection on and working with contemporary art collections in the partner museums.

Jef Geys questions the significance of this task. Does a cooperative venture such as CAHF genuinely give the four museums more international clout? And how can this cooperation be given concrete form without ignoring the specific prior history, background and individuality of the four museums? In his search for answers, the artist takes over the task of the CAHF in his own way. In the first room, Geys combines four works of art. One from the collection of each of the museums named. In four adjoining rooms, Jef Geys shows a presentation of the four museums for which CAHF is the promotional umbrella. He designed a room for each museum and chose a colour for each: red for M HKA, blue for Mu.ZEE, yellow for the Middelheim Museum and purple for the S.M.A.K.

## **ARCHIVE FOLDERS AND PAPER DOILY DIARY**

In the middle rooms of this exhibition, it would seem that the closed 'Archive' (2001) that is part of the S.M.A.K. collection is opening up. In two rooms you can view no less than 800 items in plastic sheet protectors from Jef Geys' archive. Their content is extremely varied, like life itself.

This is the very first occasion on which Jef Geys will also be presenting his paper doily drawings in a museum. Almost every morning the artist visits a local café for a coffee and to read the day's papers. More or less every morning for the last few years he has been copying newspaper headlines that attract his attention onto the paper doilies on which the cups of coffee are served. He also adds comments or drawings.

Since 1969, Geys has compiled a 'Kempens Informatieblad' and/or a 'Kempens Informatieboek', a more extensive version, to accompany each of his exhibitions. The 'Kempens Informatieblad' was originally a local publication containing regional news. Since Jef Geys took it over, it has also had

an artistic function. For this exhibition a two-part 'Kempens Informatieboek' will be published in association with the Masereelfonds, containing the 800 archive items in sheet protectors included in this exhibition. Geys is also publishing a second 'Kempens Informatieboek' showing the 80 doily drawings in this exhibition.

## **JEF GEYS AND S.M.A.K.**

In several of the rooms behind the wall Jef Geys refers to a solo exhibition he prepared at Jan Hoet's invitation shortly after 'Chambres d'Amis', but which was never held. On the floor you can see, marked with tape, the floor-plan of the space that was intended for the exhibition at the time: the semi-circular room in the Museum of Fine Art in Ghent. Before the S.M.A.K. opened in 1999, its forerunner – the Museum of Contemporary Art – was housed in the Museum of Fine Art. Although Geys had prepared his plan for the exhibition in quite concrete terms, Jan Hoet ultimately abandoned the project.

The whole of Geys' oeuvre is clearly rooted in local elements. Jef Geys shows us Balen, which is more or less the world. People and events from his immediate surroundings crop up in his archive. The local paper, the 'Kempens Informatieblad', is the most important means by which he communicates about his work. And for a long time the artist only spoke the local dialect. All this may explain why it was only in the early 1990s that Jef Geys achieved any international recognition. He was one of just four Belgian artists at Documenta XI in 2002. In 2009 he represented Belgium on his own at the Venice Biennale.

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