

Following the records of recent art history, an essential part of the artistic revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s took place between Antwerp and Düsseldorf, back and forth on the motorway, in the process of creating new formats in exhibition centres, galleries and apartments. The protagonists were on the move, to break the canon, which ultimately they became themselves. Now and again historiography turned off to stop in Balen in the Kempen region, the home of Jef Geys (*1934), almost halfway between Düsseldorf and Antwerp. It wasn't easy to incorporate this artist into the canon, since the radical nature of his practice wasn't just about staying at home – a fundamental part of Geys' oeuvre originated in his garden or its proximity – but also about a rigorous form of contemporaneity, which persistently sought to evade institutional historization. Jef Geys prefers the periphery, not only as a symbolic act in the context of art, but in life, which may also become a symbolic act if it is understood in form of an oeuvre.

Indeed, Geys himself marks the beginning of his artistic practice with his graduation from the art academy in 1958, which eventually led him, almost in a parody of a rulebook “career”, down a long list of art works and exhibitions (almost inseparable entities in Geys' case), to the Belgian Pavilion, where he represented his country at the Venice Biennial in 2009. Titled with *Quadra Medicinale*, his project was devoted to a juxtaposition of geographical and sociological realities, to the analysis of the flora of four identically shaped areas in New York, Villeurbanne, Moscow, and Brussels – places, which at some point in Geys' life were the subject or setting of his work, and therefore surfaced in his archive. With its subjective functions he steadily blends and contrasts the world's allegedly objective archive of forms and symbols. His research focused on those local plants which are regularly destroyed as they are considered “weeds” in a semantic and therefore cultural sense; whereas they could actually be useful to people with low income, for example due to their medicinal and nutritional qualities. Geys' idea of a territory devoid of moral, ethical or any other possible form of culture – with its anarchistic, levelling vitality – also seems to be shimmering in the background here.

The Biennial itself ran its ritual course, with just over 600,000 visitors coming to see the exhibition and possibly Geys' Belgian presentation. The artist himself wasn't there for the opening (which is often the case, but not the rule, since his work is not subject to rules or theories). It seems his focus had already moved on to a fifth quadrant, so to speak, to the cemetery island San Michele, a more or less rectangular plot of land in the north of the lagoon, only two kilometres from the Giardini. According to the census of 2001, eleven male inhabitants live on this neighbouring island, where space for the dead soon became so limited that corpses were stacked vertically. Geys incorporated the city's burial ground and therefore integral part of Venetian life into his research. From the material compiled by his collaborators, botanist Katia Godelaine and photographer Etienne Kitenge,

he selected the names of twelve people from the partially overgrown gravestones. Photographs of these gravestones are framed in the twelve panels that constitute the exhibition, together with different dried grasses and plants from the cemetery as well as a photograph of them growing in the vicinity of the grave: object, reproduction, location, basic formats of information. The names, among them Franco Fresia, Don Vigilio Ugoccioni and Natale Tarantino, are largely unfamiliar to a wider public, however, Ezra Pound, Luigi Nono or Igor Stravinsky might come to mind, who are buried in the cemetery but do not appear in the exhibition. In Geys' project the centre and periphery of this quadrant end up in a relationship where all hierarchy is levelled out, and therefore all that has been chiselled into fact is opened up for re-evaluation.

Generating work from existing material, which inevitably leaves behind an empty space, is integral to Jef Geys' practice, which escapes any form of totality and therefore always remains an open, agile and adaptable fragment. The Venice Biennial edition of his *Kempens Informatieblad*, a gazette he compiles and prints to accompany most of his presentations, is contained as a diagonally folded supplement between the pages of this edition, published for the current exhibition, in the sense of a complementary format recycling the leftovers of already accomplished work. This stands as a paradigm for a method that perpetually drags its own history along with itself, while subjecting it to a permanent update. At the end of the day, Geys' work doesn't call for many descriptive words. It can rather be understood as a continuous self-conveying practice, which persistently mirrors art and reality through all kinds of media from drawing, painting, sculpture, language, photography and film all the way to the Internet blog, and back. The function of the mirror itself remains Geys' secret, just like the unexplainable yet essential "paradox" in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. Driving in the car on the way to one of his collaborators, a specialist with whom he has been working for years, for example on the panels for this exhibition, Jef Geys mentioned how much he admires Rubens drawings.

Martin Germann

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