

In 1980, René Heyvaert sent his friends Juliette Rousseff and Guy Vandeloise a two-sided rectangular card. On the addressee side, two triangles in black and white cuff the left side of the card stock. On the back side, the same triangles, this time in white and indigo blue. Pasted across the diagonal of the card is a message: “a work of art is not a finished product. it must always be recreated by the spectator (and the artist). thus it does not really exist.” An artwork is rooted in lived experience, its meaning rendered fluid by the context in which it is encountered as much as it is made.

Indeed, René Heyvaert’s work is often seen in close relation to his biography. He was by most accounts neither an easy man, nor did he live an easy life: Following his studies in architecture, Heyvaert won an architectural prize to work in the Congo where he contracted tuberculosis of the kidney. The illness would come to plague him physically and emotionally for the rest of his life. Upon returning to Belgium and setting up an architectural office, he met his future wife Jacqueline Naspleze. In the 1950s, Heyvaert studied social architecture practices, researching the work of Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier in pursuit of affordable modular architecture. His defining work during this period would be a modular home for his brother Gilbert, with integrated cabinetry and a unique exterior staircase, designed in 1958. The couple traveled to the United States where they gave birth to two daughters, Anne and Alice, while Heyvaert worked for the architect duo Joseph and Louise Marlow. But their marriage was fraught, and Naspleze left Heyvaert not long after returning to Belgium, taking their two daughters with her back to France. Thereafter followed periods of immense physical and psychological struggle for Heyvaert, respite from which he only seemed able to find through a constant drawing practice, which focused primarily on geometric shapes in primary colours. As his architectural practice waned, he found himself increasingly drawn to artistic practice, and began to meet and regularly correspond with artistic contemporaries – among them Roland Jooris, Raoul de Keyser, Dan Van Severen, Werner Cuvelier, Peter Beyls, Willy de Sauter, and Joseph Willaert – in many cases creating lasting friendships that he would maintain for the rest of his life. By 1966, after moving to Ghent, Heyvaert was deemed partially unfit by the Belgian state for work, and by 1970, as the gulf between himself and the outside world grew wider, his dedication to his artistic practice was strengthened. He further withdrew into a set of pursuits that would, in essence, become his artistic legacy, taking the form of drawing, sculpture, photography and Mail Art (initially to his two daughters whom he missed deeply). Furthermore he took part in performances and published regularly.

Heyvaert’s work has been frequently aligned to Arte Povera, Fluxus, and Minimalism, but it expands and escapes these categories in its heterogeneity: The overarching thread of Heyvaert’s enigmatic practice is perhaps bound to his fixation on spatial adaptation – of expanding on material

scarcity, of seeking solutions to physical and emotional isolation, of movement between the organic and the geometric – and of realizing that these forces are deeply intertwined. All the while, the romance of superfluity is eschewed. Solutions are iterate. An artwork must confront its infinitude.

This exhibition, the first collaboration between the estate of René Heyvaert's and C L E A R I N G, focuses on a brief but crucial period of his creative production from 1975-1978. Heyvaert's prolific Mail Art practice grew into new forms during this time, and can be viewed as a small scale testimony of his experimentations all through his career. A large selection of these works are shown in frames designed by Koenraad Dedobbeleer.

His drawing practice, meanwhile, began to take on more organic forms, a response to his approach to drawing as a form of meditation as well as his increasingly profound relationship to the natural world. Finally and perhaps most crucially, his sculptural practice became intimately linked with his natural surroundings: branches and sawn-off tree trunks from his garden are manipulated with minimal interventions: Branches are stripped, carved into, given lacerations painted red, and bound by rope to form bundles or bows, their form, weight, and sense of gravity subtly manipulated by Heyvaert's logic, very much informed by his own isolation. Forty years on, these sculptural works become a haunting parable of the human relationship to the natural world: Caught in stasis, they are robbed or imbued of function at the hands of human culture, as if Heyvaert is asking us to consider the truths that lie in altering the natural order of things through individual intervention in the name of a larger system.

Once again, we are left to question the finitude of René Heyvaert's works: how an artwork is perhaps never finished, only activated and re-activated through the experience of its shifting context, it's meaning inextricable from its lifespan. In his own words, "Art feeds on Art. and still it is always something else. because Art is created from the drive to experiment. experiment consists of : experiences had and experiences to-be-had. Art is only beautiful as a result and is never intended as beautiful. because Art is there to get Art out of a jam. Art is a means of speaking to one another. and the language has to be renewed continually. if not, we will no longer understand each other, and as a result we will no longer understand ourselves. for Man is a Cultural Phenomenon. without Culture Man would eat raw roots and crawl on all fours. it is quite urgent to state all this clearly for once in these very anxious times..."¹

¹ René Heyvaert, *Kunst is een tweesnijdend zwaard*, E. Drieghe, Wetteren, 1976.

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