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Chalet is an exhibition by Jef Geys that spans over forty years of his work and – as has frequently been his method in past exhibitions – merges vivid and comprehensive displays of selected works alongside smaller fragments from a multitude of other projects.

The exhibition's title is taken from his work *Chalet*, made in 1977, where Geys designed and constructed a Summerhouse, entirely with his own labour and with repurposed materials, close to his long-time home in Flanders. The building itself is modelled upon the wooden-slatted exterior walls and overhanging eaves that are typical of the 18th Century farmsteads across Northern Europe. *Chalet*'s construction is modest in scale (Geys once mentioned using "the body as a unit"¹) and its bucolic style seems belligerently misaligned with utopian and more avant-garde architectural approaches that were celebrated by the art world in the late 1970s. There is something foundational about the methods of Jef Geys in this work: his insistence that vernacular cultural forms that might usually overlooked because of their ubiquity, or lack of taste, should be interrogated by exactly the same terms as any building, artwork or piece of literature that has been appointed as aesthetically or socially valuable by critical opinion in its specialist field. It is noteworthy that upon a request sent to Geys to submit his entry for the Oosthoek Encyclopaedia 1981, he selected *Chalet* and it was rejected on the grounds that it could not be recognised as being an artwork. Photographs are all that are left of *Chalet*, as the land it stood upon was sold (along with the building, which was later demolished) by Geys in later years.

Geys is a lifelong sceptic, bristling at art's remorseless facility for self-satisfaction with wit and dedication, but his determined anti-authoritarianism is far from nihilistic. Instead we find an artist who has attempted over and over again to juxtapose the contexts of cosmopolitan intellectual and aesthetic movements with the one in which he is happiest and most knowledgeable: Balen. Geys' work is frequently driven by an enthusiastic engagement with a range of artistic and philosophical positions, which are not addressed merely to tease out their inadequacy but instead to raise their stakes beyond the orthodox structures of the art world, which translate so regularly into thin variations of elitism, both cultural and economic.

La Loge's building, of course, is directly implicated in one of the most egregious forms of elitism, that of freemasonry, and the building's eccentric internal layout, with its geometric

patterns and rooms within rooms, has become a fertile arena for Geys to situate his own work. Many of the works in *Chalet* address the binary between design and control through a broader discussion of abstraction², in particular those structures invented to produce greater freedom or empowerment on the part of their users, who are usually conceived of entirely externally to the authorial process. The construction of *Chalet* became the precursor for one of Geys' most famous and complex artistic projects, made for the 1991 São Paulo Biennial, which included a number of architectural models that were installed at different scales within São Paulo and also in the administrative offices of different football leagues throughout Latin America and Europe. The subtitle of that work was "Architecture as Limitation", a phrase that speaks directly to the problem of how social design, however ethical or inventive in spirit, will inevitably instigate a system of control and authority.

Faint traces of that sprawling São Paulo project are on view here, including a text written by Geys on Nikolai Ladovsky, the influential Soviet architect and educator, from whom he took great inspiration due to Ladovsky's interest in the "physiological effects... and spatial properties of form"³. Buckminster Fuller, a similarly avant-garde and sociologically-minded architect, is also indexed by the presence of a photograph from the *Buckyball* series, in which Fuller's signature geodesic form becomes a head piece for a nude female figure (the complete series includes male figures too). The grand idealism of figures such as Ladovsky and Fuller is bound into dialogue with architectures that are indigenous to Geys and to Flanders: the construction of *Chalet*, for example, or the late night bars (within which the film of singer Zwarte Lola was shot) near Balen that Geys co-managed in the 1960s⁴. There is a reluctance on Geys' part to establish a hierarchy between a house built literally from the ground-up and modelled on mimicry of other common dwelling structures in the same locale, or a structure whose design is formulated with more objective ideological intentions.

Geys' willingness to blur and overlay contrasting forms and approaches can also be found in the decisions he takes to present his own work in this exhibition, in which ephemera, photocopies, criticism, and original works come into contact without any clear distinction between their status and function within the space. Some materials on view are minute indexical markers of much larger projects and these fragmentary elements function much like an architectural model, containing something elemental about their design but sitting apart from the implications of a full-sized rendition. Geys is fascinated, as expressed by Piet Coussens in his curatorial essay for the São Paulo project, with "the mechanisms of exhibitions"⁵ and as the themes of the work emerge in this exhibition, we are also compelled to consider the building in which these works

are hung, whose features seem amplified by the asymmetrical installation of works in each space. The permanent aesthetic conditions of the building, defined as they are by highly symbolic patterns and divisions, are highlighted as a further layer of abstraction, one that underpins our experience of the subjects and effects of Geys' own works.

Chalet is an exhibition that turns its own discussion inside out: a series of individual projects by Geys that intervene in the gaps between aesthetic positions and their enactment, and an exhibition that creates as many gaps as possible, placing the work, at times, beyond linear comprehension and into a somewhat abstract meta-narrative of his own archive. One further complicating element is the presence of another artist, Meret Oppenheim, a generation older than Geys and closely associated with the Surrealist movement. Following the invitation for this exhibition, Geys suggested that he would display his 1977 work *Chalet* alongside a documentary on Oppenheim which he had recently viewed on a Dutch television station. This triangulation of his self-built construction, alongside a readymade television program transmitted to his living room in Balen⁶, both set within the ornate spaces of La Loge, is the basis upon which this exhibition is built. Two works of Oppenheim are on view, loaned from the collection of S.M.A.K., Ghent, an institution that is publicly owned and which Geys draws upon to stage an unlikely artistic dialogue⁷.

The assertion of Geys that Oppenheim's work should be presented alongside his own relates to another clear through-line among the different projects in *Chalet*: that of sexual power and gender. The presence of Oppenheim could indicate a riposte to the history of the building, formerly committed to its masonic 'fraternity'⁸. Despite her vocal disdain for the patriarchal art world, Oppenheim expressed distrust about art that claimed to carry a political message⁹ and her work, undoubtedly informed by political conviction and sexist conditions, is sensual and humorous in its exploration of the subconscious. Geys, on the other hand, has embraced a number of strategies and treatments over the years with regards to how and where political issues are articulated within a given project. One pronounced example of political 'content' among his works in *Chalet* is *!Women's Questions?*, a series that began in 1964, when the list of questions were hung on the wall of his school classroom as prompts for discussions with his (female) students. *!Women's Questions?* hold an almost talismanic quality in exhibitions by Geys, used to complement bodies of work from different eras and various fields of interest. His authority as a teacher is placed in relief by the practice of addressing questions that belong to a feminist context and a patriarchal world. The questions appear as an ingredient in exhibitions whose critical terrains are very different from one another and Geys seems unafraid to test whether particular projects of his can

be judged as progressive or otherwise in proximity to such direct questioning.

In *Fruitlingerie*, a series from which many works are presented here, the simple dressing up of fruit in women's underwear can mobilize a number of distinct connotations: the objectification of women in mass media, the absurd ways in which basic human sustenance is marketed to us, and the latent erotics of organic forms. A link can also be drawn to the strategies of Oppenheim and her peers within the surrealist movement, with *Fruitlingerie* making manifest unconscious or unwanted libidinal attachments through a process of playful juxtaposition with quotidian objects. Lingerie, a material also used in the floor sculpture *Lingerie Geo & Lis*, is another structure that contains and conditions its users, constructing erotic readings that are dislocated from the physical properties of the human body.

San Michele, shown here alongside vitrines of *Fruitlingerie* photographs, also presents an organic structure in order to examine societal behaviors and attitudes. The panels on view display photographs of flora and fauna native to a plot of land (incorporating a burial ground) in Venice, listing their nutritional and medicinal properties. These are displayed alongside photographs from the gravestones by which each specimen was taken, a reminder of how organic structures already account for their expiry and renewal in a process of environmental adaptation. What could be recognized as a 'weed' is instead framed as a resource, one that is easily accessible and hidden in plain sight. This process of localized analysis seems diametrically opposed to the self-perpetuating pharmaceutical industry, which has become so remote from the field of public healthcare. The violence of this kind of abstraction, driven by profits and removed from any mechanisms of community and place, is installed alongside more formal exercises in abstraction within art and architecture, with Geys insisting we must consider their implications together.

One consistent characteristic of the works and exhibitions of Jef Geys is a powerful sense of contradiction. His life as an artist has been always been primary but is often integrated with other important roles and responsibilities, especially his work as a schoolteacher in Balen. When managing bars, he brought snake handlers between the domains of countercultural nightlife and his classroom. *!Women's Questions?* would introduce his young students to feminism and the women's liberation movement, while in the same period he booked striptease performers who expressly courted the sexual attention of men. To establish a conclusive intellectual position has never been the goal of Geys' methods or exhibitions. Instead we are asked to carry the questions provoked by *Chalet* into our own contingent experiences: what do these abstractions

actually do? Who are they serving? How do formal practices transmute, either by design or unconsciously, into social structures that influence the experiences of others? These enquiries are introduced by a deliberately unresolved and speculative constellation of materials, and are sustained by those restless structures, both spatial and psychic, to which Geys has dedicated himself.

Jamie Stevens

October 2017

1 From *STORY* in Jef Geys, *Architecture as Limitation*, exh. cat., São Paulo Biennial, 1991

2 Similar themes emerged in his 1965 painting *Sterrendoek*, whose serial abstractions of colourful shapes is derived from identification icons worn by concentration camp prisoners in World War II.

3 From *STORY* in Jef Geys, *Architecture as Limitation*, exh. cat., São Paulo Biennial, 1991

4 *VZW Club 900*, a bar-cum-studio organisation which Geys oversaw throughout the 1960s, consisted of seven venues situated throughout Flanders: 'Bar 900', 'La Mecca', 'Bonaparte', 'Benelux', 'Negresco', 'The Whip', and 'Zwaneven'. During the 1960s in Flanders, it was compulsory for venues applying for late-night licenses to prove their cultural value. Geys embraced this demand and devised a high quality artistic programme that included presentations by figures such as James Lee Byars, Günther Uecker and Bernd Lohaus, whilst also incorporating artworks (including a detailed fabrication of elements from Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box*) into the permanent interiors of the bars.

5 From Jef Geys, *Architecture as Limitation*, exh. cat., São Paulo Biennial, 1991

6 Geys has used the context of domestic space and home-viewing before, in his 1993 project *What are we having for dinner tonight?*, in which he organised a number of live broadcasts on a local television station of different households eating their evening meal. The project was commissioned for the Fifth Architecture Biennale of Rotterdam, whose theme was the postwar residential areas built in Rotterdam's Alexanderpolder neighborhood and Geys worked with residents, in contrast to the curatorial emphasis on urban planning.

7 Four years earlier, Geys made a similar gesture at WIELS, inviting Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian to show her geometric works, opening up his invitation for a solo presentation to instead place his work in conversation with an artist he had admired from afar.

8 Women were, in fact, granted membership to the lodge that

once occupied this building, an exception in its time.
9 Interview with Valie Export. VE: "Can art be used to refer to the problems of women in society and the problems of the self?" MO: "I don't believe in that kind of art, used in that sense, meaning, I think it is ineffective." From *Feminismus*, exh. cat., Galerie Nachst St Stephen, Vienna, 1995

Works and documents in the exhibition

Ground floor

Central Hallway

Untitled, 2009

Painting on canvas; framed between a Plexiglas panel and fibreboard

140 x 140 cm

Mu.ZEE, Ostend

Lingerie Geo & Lis, 1998

Lingerie, stone, glass

100 x 100 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Side Hallway

Mother – Madonna in Red, 2017

Oil on canvas, bubble wrap, tape, paper, wire, wooden shelf

42 x 32 x 6 cm

Private Collection, New York

Mondriaan kip, (exact date unknown)

Metal chicken with Mondrian signs, cardboard box

32 x 32 x 20 cm

39 x 25 x 25 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Corridor

Meret Oppenheim

Sommergestirn, 1963

Oil on canvas

66 x 55 cm

SMAK Collection, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent

Meret Oppenheim

Blauer Aschenbecher und ein Päckchen Parisiennes, 1928–1929

Gouache on paper

22 x 28 cm

SMAK Collection, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent

Meret Oppenheim – Icoon van het Surrealisme, 2014

Documentary broadcasted on VPO – Close Up

Colour, sound

52 min.

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Temple

Fruitlingerie , 1998

3 prints on canvas

66,5 x 100 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Zwarte Lola, (exact date unknown - circa mid 1960)

Black and white film, sound, 31 min. 48 sec.(loop)

Courtesy of the artist

Original soundtrack plays every 15 min. for 2 min.

Buckyball, 1992

Black and white photograph on aluminium

66 x 100 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Basement

Corridor

Chalet, 1977

11 framed black & white prints

A3 format

Courtesy of the artist

Main space

Fruitlingerie, 1998

Vitrine with 76 analogue photographs

123 x 8 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Kunst Tonen, 2017

Vitrine with colour print outs

Various dimensions

Courtesy of the artist

Untitled, 2017

Vitrine with various documents

Various dimensions

Courtesy of the artist

San Michele 2009, 2016
Leon Gischia, +1991
Don Vigilio Ugoccioni, +1981
Linda Moretti, +2000
Francesco Benedetti, +1993
E.H. Douwes Dekker, + 1874
Franco Dresia, + 1998
Anna Monetti, + 1997
Anna Maria Giuletti, + 2006
Princess Diaa Rockwood Eristavi, 2016
Clelia Incelli, + 1946
Ashley Clarke, 2016
Natale Tarantino, + 1945

12 panels - Analogue photos, dried plant, paper, MDF,
Plexiglas

132,5 x 42 cm

Courtesy of Max Mayer, Dusseldorf

Basic, 2016

framed notebook, paper

51 x 41 cm

Courtesy of Max Mayer, Dusseldorf

First Floor

Corridor

!vrouenvragen?, 1964-2007

Ink on mm paper

(13x) 122 x 30 cm

Courtesy of the artist

* Except when noted, all works are by Jef Geys

Kempens Informatieblad – speciale editie La Loge Brussel is
available at the lobby counter.

Price: €2.00

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Opening hours

Thursday - Friday - Saturday

12:00 to 18:00

Free entrance

Visit our website for more details about our programme and
events.

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