

EVENTS

Please register via: info@kunsthalle-bern.ch
The number of participants is limited.

SUNDAY, 30 MAY 2021, 02 pm
Tour of the Jef Geys-exhibition with Valérie Knoll
(director, Kunsthalle Bern)

TUESDAY, 1 JUNE 2021, 06 pm
Introduction for teachers

THURSDAY, 10 JUNE 2021, 06 pm
Tour of the Jef Geys-exhibition with Julia Jost
(art education, Kunsthalle Bern)

TUESDAY, 29 JUNE 2021, 07 pm
Étude 23

SUNDAY, 4 JULY 2021, 02 pm
Short Cut | 30-minute tour of the Jef Geys-
exhibition

Special thanks to:

Nina Geys and Kai Ohara
Max Mayer, Florence Bonnefous, Maxwell
Graham, all lenders to the exhibition

Together with Bergen Kunsthall, Norway, which
presented an exhibition on Jef Geys in 2020,
we are currently working on a joint book project,
which is scheduled for publication in autumn 2021.

KUNSTHALLE BERN

JEF GEYS
29 May – 25 July 2021

I see richly painted half-round, sculptures, opulently camouflaged cows and life-sized figurines between Oskar Schlemmer and table football. What we have here is recognisable, nameable. Yet the objects radiate something peculiar. Despite their directness, they remain secretive. Beholding it, I wonder: Am I confronted with riddles? The works seem to be referring to something real, they appear self-evident and yet in some way strangely constructed and reserved. Also, one can sense that each of Geys' individual works remains an open fragment, part of a process. Nothing here is only what it seems.

This is the first exhibition devoted to Jef Geys in Switzerland. Born in Belgium in 1934, Geys died three years ago. Without the generous cooperation of his family, Nina Geys and Kai Ohara, the show would not have been possible. The overview spans from the 1960s to the folding screens created shortly before his death, places the emphasis on Geys' serial approach. The end of the Bern exhibition divides its beginning – the folding screens: They show photographs that were taken already in 1998, during a trip to Lisbon. The melancholic shots of shadow plays, which the Lisbon light threw on sidewalks and walls, leave location and time in the dark. First magnified on wallpapers for an exhibition in Lisbon in 2012, a selection of those photographs was transferred to screens six years later. At Kunsthalle, the folding screens also mark the beginning because they throw a light on Geys' enquiry into the ways in which objects become appealing to people due to their form and their play with visibility and camouflage.

One of the realities to which Geys referred repeatedly throughout his works are the languages of art of his time. He did so from a distance, playing with their possibilities in order to understand their methods and forms, to see how they function, what they create, where they fail. What Geys addressed was, essentially, the self-conception of the artist. He routinely undermined the idea of the unique artist. While he produced things, he did not conceive of himself as someone who constantly creates the unmistakably new or who satisfies expectations. He himself, too, was many, giving himself different names: Betty, Lola, Jef van Dijk, Marc Callewaert, Jef Sleenckx. Distinct voices traverse Geys, and come together in a specific attitude. This attitude is of interest again today considering the question of how artists decide on one particular path among an infinite range of possibilities. Geys decides by not deciding. But this does not prevent him from acting very decidedly. Geys' works are down-to-earth, almost raw at times, even when they follow artistic rules of refinement. Their formal vocabulary appears now direct and light-footed, now charged and introspective. It seems impossible to capture them and his practice in one single standpoint. Too different are the languages that his works speak. He lays down rules so as to change them. His is an art that throws oneself back onto oneself in a special way. It does not help me, it challenges me.

Geys hailed from the provinces. Born in 1934 in the garrison village of Leopoldsborg, he grew up surrounded by military troops and barracks. During the Second World War, the Waffen SS drilled on the military training grounds. Like his father and brother, Geys himself would later join the military. This personal background provides a recurring theme in his images, in the shape of soldierly figurines, his fascination with camouflage, war symbolism, and geometrical formations.

As a young man, he helped his father-in-law, a cattle trader, registering cows for auctions, a familial activity that he extended into an artwork, the *Cow Passports*, dated to 1965. Perplexed by the fact that man issues passports even to cows, and even noting their vaccinations, Geys took pleasure in mixing up the camouflage drawings of the particularly forgery-prone cow identities – Lola turned Bernadette. This horse-trade paid for his studies at the Academy of Fines Arts in Antwerp, which he completed in 1958. The *Cow Passports* raise the questions that keep resurfacing in Geys: what is it that turns an image into an artwork, how can hierarchies be dissolved, conventions contaminated, and schematisations exposed. Geys does not offer answers in any conventional sense, his artworks describe a specific reality. The questions flutter overhead.

Geys decided to keep the centre of his life in the provinces and henceforth lived in a farmhouse in Balen, a small village in the Flemish region of de Kempen. Despite exhibiting internationally, he would remain there, on the periphery. Geys played with the conventions of the operating system, he moved within it, yet without adapting



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to fit in. He resisted that part of the art world that wallowed in self-satisfaction. In the seventies, he refused for many years to participate in exhibitions that, in his view, exclusively addressed an art audience. He preferred to stay in Balen instead, and to put up another picture on a wall of the village pub. If his control centre was a sleepy hollow, he did not withdraw into seclusion but kept pace with the times, travelled, and remained a contemporary to the artworld.

In Balen, Geys was not only an artist but also a teacher, and he practiced both in unexpected ways. From 1960 to 1989, he taught at the local primary school. He called the subject that was created specifically for him ‘Positive Aesthetics’, which sounds more like an academic basic course than a class for children. And this is what it was all about. Geys had a lot of confidence in children and followed an approach based on equality, which consisted of learning together and from each another. This democratic learning paralleled pedagogic approaches of the time, which in many places destabilised authoritarian structures. How exactly this teaching looked like is a matter of recurring and often similar anecdotes, but what really happened remains a matter of speculation. His artworks do however offer a glimpse on what was discussed and what was done. It may be assumed that practicing viewing and independent thinking was crucial. Contemporary art played a leading role in this. He took the children to visit Marcel Broodthaers in his studio in Brussels, borrowed works by artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Gilbert and George from museum collections and brought them into the classroom. But they also discussed ‘women’s questions’ – what is that supposed to be, female identity? This produced a catalogue of questions that would later be translated into many world languages. They debated the differences between a happening and an environment, and, when American appropriation art began to emerge, reworked exhibits from modernity. What was central was the invitation to do it by oneself. Geys debunked bourgeois ideas that distinguish between amateur and artist, right and wrong, adequate and inadequate, and opposed to this an approach of non-discrimination, which probably occurred much more natural within his cosmos than reflecting on it would suggest.

Nonetheless, his teaching was not so much punk as still an alternative way of education that experimented with libertarian pedagogic forms. The fact that Geys was a teacher, and that his practice sometimes seems to point the finger, can leave one with the impression of having to solve a task one is not sure to have properly understood.

But if education to liberty is necessarily a contradictory approach, Geys went down that path pretty far. For him, education implied the possibility of free research, wild thinking and the contemplation of grid patterns and regulations. Military order patterns preoccupied him throughout his life. He understood rules as institutionalised frameworks that have to be recognised as such if one is to move and position oneself within them.

But while he asked fundamental questions about art, at times with sociological fervour, he did not care about explanations or even ultimate answers. The ultimate was of no interest to Geys. The rules of an artwork did indeed remain a mysterious reality for him, nothing is given, but even as a sceptic he still believed in the potentialities of art.

Geys’ approach, which lived and debated contemporary art as something self-evident from the periphery, also found expression in the newspaper *Kempens Informatieblad*, which he published from 1971 to 2018. Already in the early 1960s, Geys worked for the editorial of the advertising paper *Kempisch Reklamblad*. At some point, he started inserting texts and images between the ads, and when the paper went bankrupt, he took it over and turned it into the *Kempens Informatieblad*. The newspaper reflects Geys’ will to connect different social spheres. His endeavour was not to remain a charismatic utopia but to be realised practically and unpretentiously. Rather than fancying himself as improving the world, Geys set out from minor peripheral points – and this is precisely what allowed him to successfully translate his ideas into action. The local paper kept his village environment up to date about art, but also, whenever he published it at exhibitions, spoke to the international art audience.

Geys’ social utopia sought to connect the realities and languages proper to art with social-political ideas. Contrary to other artists with similar motivations, he did not mould his own self as a myth. He preferred to withdraw and to focus on minor stories, those that he knew himself, rather than on the problems of the world: ‘What do I have to do with this?’. This is not to say that he revoked himself as a subject. He regularly implemented himself and scrutinised his role in his practice. But there were no flamboyant appearances, he did not present himself as a messiah who knows the right way. For everything to remain open-ended, a trial, he forbade himself such forms of self-certitude. He wanted to be able to rethink everything again tomorrow. Therefore, the archive, in which the artist deposited the traces of his activities since 1947, certainly is a logfile; but beyond that and primarily it is a tool box, the parts of which could be brought to life again and again, in changing constellations.

GROUND FLOOR

ROOM 1

- 1
Paravent #1–#7, 1998–2012–2018
7 folded screens, black-and-white photographs mounted on wood, images Courtesy Jef Geys Estate and Air de Paris, Romainville
- 2
Cherries, 1990
Wood with sand texture

ROOM 2

- 3
20 x Passeport de vache, 1965–2014
Black-and-white c-print mounted on offset print, ink and color pencil, frame Courtesy Jef Geys Estate and Air de Paris, Romainville
- 11
Prunes, 1990
Polyester, car paint Courtesy Galerie Jamar, Antwerpen

ROOM 3

- 4
Middleheim works, 1999
20 × drawings in acrylic frames / 20 × dried plants in wooden frames
- 5
Large cow photograph, 2017
Photo on aluminum
- 6
Army Puppet, 1966
Wooden figure, car paint

ROOM 4

- 7
Pop Marmier – vroeger bloemen, 1976
Wooden sculpture, 2 panels
Courtesy Galerie Jamar, Antwerpen
- 8
Pink Banana, 1990
Polyester, car paint
- 9
Grapes, 1990
Polyester
Courtesy Galerie Jamar, Antwerpen
- 10
Banaan, 1966–1990
Polyester, car paint
Courtesy Galerie Greta Meert
- 11
Prunes, 1990
Polyester, car paint
Courtesy Galerie Jamar, Antwerpen
- 12
Marble Prune, 1990
Polyester, car paint
- 13
Brigitte Bardot, 1966
Wooden figure, car paint
- 14
The Ghost, 1967
Wooden figure, car paint
- 15
Yellow Puppet, 1967
Wooden figure, car paint
- 16
Jesus, 1980
Mixed media, installation
- 17
Stabas, 1976
Mixed media, installation
- 18
Red Puppet, 1967
Wooden figure, car paint
- 19
Berkenboom, 2017
Mixed media, bubble painting (21)

ROOM 5

- 20
Logitech, 2017
Mixed media, bubble painting (32)
- 21
I (Jef) with snake, 2017
Mixed media, bubble painting (25)
- 22
Dikke Boom, 2017
Mixed media, bubble painting (29)
- 23
Gucci, 2017
Mixed media, bubble painting (17)
- 24
Bubble Oldenburg, 2017
Mixed media
Courtesy Galerie Max Mayer & KAZINI
- 25
Kai, 2017
Mixed media, bubble painting (37)
- 26
Toyota 3E5 Red, from C-series, 1960s–2017
Colored resin (Toyota 3E5 red)
Courtesy Jef Geys Estate and Air de Paris, Romainville

ROOM 5

- 27
Chevrolet Bel Air 1987 Blue, from C-series, 1960s–2017
Colored resin (Chevrolet Bel Air 1987 blue)
Courtesy Jef Geys Estate and Air de Paris, Romainville
- 28
BMW M4 Yellow, from C-series, 1960s–2017
Colored resin (BMW M4 yellow)
Courtesy Jef Geys Estate and Air de Paris, Romainville
- 29
Fruit Lingerie, 2002
Black-and-white photograph, framed
Courtesy Jef Geys Estate and Air de Paris, Romainville
- 30
Oldenburg 3/14, 2017
Oil and acrylic on canvas, wooden frame, acrylic on chair
Courtesy Galerie Max Mayer & KAZINI
- 31
Oldenburg 7/14, 2017
Oil and acrylic on canvas, wooden frame, acrylic on chair
Courtesy Galerie Max Mayer & KAZINI
- 32
Oldenburg 6/14, 2017
Oil and acrylic on canvas, wooden frame, acrylic on chair
Courtesy Galerie Max Mayer & KAZINI

ROOM 2

- 33
Classroom with Lili Dujourie, 1984
Partly colored black-and-white photograph, framed
Private Collection, Belgium
- 34
Archief 101-200, 1961–2015
Drawings and map
- 35
Groepsfoto School, 1960’s
Black-and-white photograph, framed
- 36
Meisje tekent (girl drawing in school), 1966
Black-and-white photograph, framed
- 37
Gevoelsspeeldoos 1/3, 1967
Wooden suitcase containing 80 elements of wood, stone, glass, composites
- 38
Foto met slang, 1966
Photograph, framed
- 39
Maquette: Bril, 1976
3D glasses, small board
Courtesy Galerie Jamar, Antwerpen
- All other works
Courtesy KAZINI & Jef Geys Estate

