

Press Release - February 2009



Jef Geys

Belgian Pavilion

**53rd International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia**

Commissioned by: the Flemish Ministry of Culture

Artist: Jef Geys

Curator: Dirk Snauwaert

Assistant Curator: Angelique Campens

Production coordination by Wiels Contemporary Art Centre Brussels

For La Biennale di Venezia, Jef Geys presents an entirely new project entitled “*Quadra Medicinale*”. The project is an interdisciplinary research documented with plans, inventories, descriptions, photos and drawings. A special edition of the *Kempens Information Journal* complements the research. Geys chooses to apply this international platform, offered to him by La Biennale di Venezia, to realise an ambitious cooperative research project and to show it publicly.

As a point of departure, Jef Geys adopts the term ‘terroir’, a term that relates more to the notion of biotope than with the idea of territory. With regards to motifs and structures, Geys develops elements that have featured in his work since the last four decades and which are documented in the accompanying newspaper. ‘*Quadra Medicinale*’ begins with a basic research the artist asked four acquaintances who live or work in a large city – Villeurbanne, New York, Moscow and Brussels - to carry out. Each of them delineated one square kilometre and, within that surface, searched for twelve wild plants that grow in the streets, in order to explore the basic components of their immediate surroundings. The result of this research is

an inventory of ordinary plants, so-called 'weeds', which are very often edible or medicinal plants with special properties.

The presentation in the pavilion consists of photographs of the plants and a list of their characteristics; a herbarium of dried plants, alongside their scientific descriptions and analyses. Maps of the four cities indicate the places where the plants can be found. Finally, Jef Geys presents large drawings, which are graphical/artistic interpretations of the plants' appearance. The entire project is a demonstration, by means of these usually overlooked natural phenomena, which happen to be latent sources of knowledge as well as of aesthetic delight. The presentation is also a guide for every person in need who tries to survive in a metropolis.

The project is accompanied by a special edition of the "*Kempens Informatieblad*" (Kempens Information Journal), which gives an overview of 53 of Jef Geys' projects dating from the late 1950s on. He documents his long-held interest in the relationships between 'low' forms of nature and complex and refined disciplines such as science and art. The newspaper also includes extensive documentation of the new project, together with the artist's statement and a text by the curator of the Pavilion, Dirk Snauwaert

In 1971, Geys took charge of the house-to-house journal, the *Kempens Informatieblad*. Since then, he has made a special edition for each of his exhibition. In Venice, he distributes a massive stock of 150,000 newspapers. The original intention was to make an edible news paper in order to literally fulfil the paradigm of human sciences according to which 'knowledge is food' while testing the cradle-to-cradle slogan 'rubbish is food', but new technologies don't yet enable this kind of publication.

**Jef Geys** (born 1934 in Leopoldsborg, BE) has summed up his entire oeuvre as an ongoing project that combines conceptual attitudes, educational activities and formal experiments. From the start, his work was set against the art market and the institutional authorities. In his practice, Geys affirms a radical independent position and develops an unprecedented approach to collective creativity, frequently generated by the participation of his immediate community.

In the 1960s, Jef Geys was appointed Teacher of Positive Aesthetics at a school in Balen (until 1989) and started to map out the possibilities of the learning process. Both on an educational as artistic level, the Balen school was a kind of laboratory of different activities, which linked social, political and aesthetic concerns. Much of his work has to do with the term 'terroir' in the sense of biotope, using typical representations of everyday life. One of his most well known works is 'zaadzakjes': each year, he paints copies of the beautiful flowers that are pictured on seed packages with their common and scientific name. Among other projects, the artist has also converted an art gallery into a grocery store. He has and planted Brussels sprouts in rubbish dumps. In 1988, he wrote a letter to Jaques Chirac asking for the transformation of a park in Paris into an vegetable garden. For La Biennale di Venezia , he thus continues his research with the themes present in his work over the last decades.

Jef Geys' work has been widely exhibited worldwide at venues including: International Center of Photography, New York, USA (2008); "*Deep Comedy*", Marfa, Texas (2007); Orchard Gallery, New York, NY, USA (2007); IAC, Villeurbanne, France (2007); Pori Art Museum, Pori, Finland (2005); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2004); Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany (2002); Kunstverein, Munich, Germany (2001); Le Collège – Frac, Champagne-Ardenne, France (1995); Witte de With, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (1993); Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium (1992); São Paulo Biennial, Brazil (1991).

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