

Handbook / Instruction manual / Guidebook

Jef Geys's presentation and publication for the Venice Biennale are to be read like a handbook for the pavilion positioned in a city that was once one of the most densely populated and cosmopolitan cities of the modern age. It was the intention from the beginning to make a publication that was edible and digestible, but the eco-technological revolution of industrial production processes that are executed under the slogan 'cradle to cradle', have still not been able to reform the printing process so radically that this can be realised today.

The location and context – two crucial ideas in Geys's practice – in which the first presentation of Quadra Medicinale take place is the Venice Giardini. Venice stands as a model for a form of organic urbanisation: shaped not in accordance with a plan and rational principles but by the physical characteristics of the terrain and the whimsical form of urban organisation evolved over time; as such, more similar to a fabric than a plan. With the massive urbanisation of the planet during the past decades and the problems that this has brought along with it in regard to the macro-economic, political and, above all, ecological organisation and procurement of space, the question of urban planning has been pushed to the background. Meanwhile, in pole position, came the logic that was applied to the exploited urban spaces in terms of logistics, with the issues of housing, mobility, over-production, maintenance, healthcare, multiculturalism, ...

Thus here Venice stands as a symbol not only for an alternative urban planning model – with its efficient organisation and high density – but also as one of the 'economic' motors of Europe, by way of the intensive transportation of goods and people that for centuries have made it into a centre. In the political domain too it has been an exceptional model; for a long time Venice was the only example of the liberties that the civil republic offered, the only alternative form of leadership for the absolutist monarchies over the centuries. These factors made it into a model of cosmopolitanism that fascinated the 20th century avant-garde. As international dial and gauge for the comparison of large modern urban societies, Venice is in no sense the symbolic exception of a historical and anachronistic city, as it is sometimes viewed. The city itself postulates that very debate between rigorous systematics and apparent disorder, between methodical evolution and archaic tradition.

It is well known that in his projects Jef Geys scarcely seeks legitimacy in the elements of 'historical context' or 'site specificity' in order to inject those projects with meaning. If he would ever use symbolism or metaphor, then it would only be to make his projects more readable and intelligible. The new research project that forms the basis of the Quadra Medicinale presentation has already been carried-out in four cities, but the names of many other cities also appear on the plans and drawings. In the central space are to be found the first four results of the method Jef Geys developed for the research. The names of the other cities indicate that this is an 'open' operation following a precise method that is structured so as to be able to serve as a valid general guide that is transferrable and applicable to each city, for whoever would like to implement it in their immediate surroundings. The international platform of the Venice Biennale, situated in a bizarre park containing nation-pavilions, offers itself as an ideal platform for the demonstration of that method, and the historical city of Venice is at one and the same time an ideal sounding-board because it sharpens and highly contrasts the contradictions in options between modern visions on forms of urban societies.

The point of departure is formulated in an ambiguous way. In the first place there is Jef Geys's text, 'Quadra Medicinale', in which the artist defines and situates his project within his

biography. The text is translated into 12 languages, all of which appear in the pavilion. In every one of the texts Geys has applied in handwriting certain keywords and basic ideas that he often uses, as an exercise for himself and others in which to learn these keywords in multiple languages. And in addition, an extensive series of outline drawings made on 'kraft' wrapping paper with the presentation of plants, academic model drawings, plant names, street names, 'keywords', and illustrations out of military manuals.

The second point of departure is elaborated through collective research with a scientific character; it contains documentation, ranging from topographical coordinates, descriptions of discovery points and discoverers, a description of the milieu and distinct plant characteristics, to a herbarium of dried plants with both their Latin and common names, and a photographic image comprising of an enlargement converted into a picture. These four results of the method, applied by four people in each residential environment, hardly create an image of the urban space; rather, they direct attention to the 'diverse' vegetable cultures that occur therein. This also poses the question as to the reason for the discovery of the plants, and why specifically in that area. Why does a plant grow in a certain place in the city, apparently accidentally, given that it cannot so easily take root there as in open nature? This fatal instinct for self-cultivation in whichever situation, can be seen either as an effect of an excessive growth instinct or as the deregulation of a system and a threat to the plan.

Here of course, it does not concern the private or public garden plants that in a neatly organised manner define and make green the city territory. Their place is fixed beforehand, in individual private gardens as well as in the hills, green zones and parks of the urban zones. These are also 'cultivated' plants. In this project the attention is directed toward the places in which so-called 'weeds' occur. These useless and wild organisms are usually carelessly overlooked because they are neither aesthetical nor productive. But those undervalued characteristics and qualities actually define an untapped potential, also within the urban space. With this method the fundamental difference between the romantic notion of an unspoiled wilderness and that which seeks an association with the discovered 'milieu' in order to learn a lesson from it, becomes sharp. This difference forms not only the basis of another idea about nature and ecology but also, by extension, about the fundamental relationships between people and things, and the relationships in-between.

If the first step was the drawing of a grid on a city map, then this not only points to an aesthetic conflict between rectilinear, rational forms – from urbanisation, from methodical thinking, from observation and analysis – and the organic, accidental and fluent, that can be divulged in the fabric-like archipelago and the plants. In *Quadra Medicinale* both are echoed in the tension between the sharp-edged grid and the changeable form of the plants, but also in the smooth lines of the drawings and in the graphic indications on the translated texts. Jef Geys does not call attention to the symbolic or poetic imagery that is so often associated with plants and flowers. As in all of his works the images of nature and plants have, firstly, the function of being readable forms and ideas: signs, shapes, names, and characteristics. He overrides the usual cultural interpretation of plants as lyrical pieces of evidence that serve as substitutes for a poetic or ecological content, and concentrates on the precise terminology and description.

The definition of the 'pragmatic aesthetic' can be shoved to the fore for the manner in which very diverse elements that function within different 'knowledge and use systems' from art and other sophisticated customs culled from the everyday (forms, signs, names, images, relationships,...) are tested in a sober and rigid manner on their benefits and qualities, through

a slight shifting and conversion. This, by mutually contrasting and comparing them visually and, in addition, looking at how they function within other disciplines and contexts.

The method that Geys follows is coordination and serial repetition, obviating and clarifying the relationships between items, both the differences and the similarities. This 'deconstructive' method is devised to shake-off the ballast, the imaginary and fabricated alternative meanings that traditions, conventions, prejudices and myths spin around signs and images, and to once again be able to achieve the level of abstraction whereby the items and ideas can be evaluated on their specificity. There on the grid he places indications that become set formulas or schematics, appearing as a canon of refinement.

Jef Geys has been working imperturbably since the late 1950s on his individual variant on structuralist methods. At the same time, as much in his manner of work as in the subject matter, Geys introduces themes and people with whom he has worked, and data and methods from other disciplines that lay outside of artistic and aesthetic spheres, coming from the exact or social sciences, such as sociology, psychology, economy, biology, urbanism, ecology, politics, ... This makes his collaborations and group projects into a truly interdisciplinary research project, as is also the case with *Quadra Medicinale*.

Geys' predilection for aesthetic experiment is not in the seeking of new techniques or forms, but in the combining and criticising of different disciplines and in the less conscious aspects of human activity, the highly refined as much as the trivial. In this *Quadra Medicinale* series, the combination of the ethno-botanic, the ecological transformation of technological processes, and the social-economic-urbanistic question of self-help and precariousness, are but three of the distinctions that come together. One goal, in reference to what he did all those years for his students in the progressive aesthetics lessons at the local high school in Balen, is to create teaching methods for self-study and self-development, and together to workout concepts whose logic can unfold in the debate on aesthetics as well as in a social environment.

With this way of working Jef Geys defines a wilful position inside the art world, within which he confronts his artistic exhibitions and ideas with concepts from other disciplines, while simultaneously examining those concepts. A permanent scepticism in regard to orthodoxies on knowledge and the development and delivery thereof, as concern aesthetic canons as well as notions and ideologies, are a constant. But Geys's *imaginary* is also not biologized by the artists' search for neutral and objective languages or knowledge systems, rather, by a persistent interest and acquaintanceship with the complexity of the sophisticated, along with the popular and informal practices that escape the tendency to be encapsulated in customs, rules and regulations.

Geys's collective guide is not destined for an academic-rational study of matter, but stands for a non-alloof association, for an expedition into unknown qualities in organisms that exist within the urban space. The intention to print all of his preceding projects and the *Quadra Medicinale* as an edible newspaper also goes a step further. The striving for teaching methods for self-development finds in this idea a literal translation of the human longing to receive 'deeper insight' into something, to grasp it. This longing can find expression in the wilful 'recording of', the assimilating of matter, and the effective eating-up of complex ideas down to a cellular level. *Quadra Medicinale* is a demonstration of the functions, the identity, and the relationships between a whole array of items and values, and their conversion into artistic interpretation and into language. It can be read as a handbook for the acquiring of an

acquaintanceship with unknown, disregarded characteristics that, as Geys has declared, present the homeless with basic medical treatment they can learn themselves.

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