

Jef Geys / Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian:  
The World as seen through a Pelican in Plexi

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Preface: Dirk Snauwaert

Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's prodigious career spans over 60 years, but she remains relatively unknown to the wider Western public. Jef Geys invited her for a double-exhibition entitled *The World as Seen Through a Pelican in Plexi* at WIELS, in Brussels, starting in June 2013, that orchestrates a meeting between his work and works he selected from Monir's oeuvre. The origin of this exhibition project can be traced back to WIELS' foundation years; at that time, five artists were invited to develop projects that would foreshadow and sketch out the orientation an art centre would have to follow if it was to keep pace with the art practices and ambitions of the future. Geys suggested several projects, all of them unrealizable due to delays in renovation of the building and to other factors. This double-exhibition project is to be seen as a belated conclusion to that original series of commissions.

Monir, who is known mostly for the meticulously cut mirror and glass pieces she started making in the 1970s, in Iran and the US, is long overdue for rehabilitation by the art world, which has been slow in recognizing the unique bridge her work forms between New York high modernism – of which she was a part for many years – and the singular language Mesopotamian and Middle-Eastern artists developed in and through the emancipation process. Both Monir and Geys can be regarded as artists who have promoted the recognition of vernacular imagery and techniques in art, which they combine with an affinity for clear and complex geometric forms, mathematical numbers and dimensions and the meanings these have in their respective cultures.

The question everyone cannot but ask is: how and when did Geys get to know her and her work? Geys is known to be a frenetic researcher and curious reader; he spends hours in libraries and scouring the Internet, looking out for and into everything and anything that might touch upon his interests and affinities. Monir's friendships with artistic and countercultural personalities, like Andy Warhol and members of his factory-studio, might explain how he came to know her work, since in the 1960s Geys himself worked at an unconventional studio, the Bar 900.

Most likely, though, it was her variations on basic geometric figures and her grid-like structures that caught his eye, since his work also betrays a similar preoccupation with the signifying and symbolic potentials of basic geometric figures (dot, line, circle, triangle, square, etc...)

And so, while the respective contexts the artists herald from and work with couldn't be more different, both have played a hand in rehabilitating local traditions and practices and imagery in the periphery of the dominant centres. Both also share a fascination with the visual play of illusion and appearance, as well as with the simple beauty and complexity of nature.

Monir's art takes traditional Iranian architecture and visual culture as its point of departure. Her work has been described as 'spiritual Pop art', and Monir herself has been connected to the Iranian Saqqakhaneh movement. But she is equally fluent with structuralist seriality, op-arts visual artifice and repetitive or organic patterning – all of which she has known since their initial formulations through her friendships with many abstract-expressionist artists in the 1950s and 1960s. Islamic decorative arts, gardens and architecture are her sources of inspiration and her means to create complex geometric forms that reflect the symbolic meaning of shapes. Circles, pentagons, hexagons interact in manifold and variable configurations as instantiations of the highly complex yet structured universe that surrounds everyone and everything. Due to the fragmentary spatial patterns, the play of light on these complex shapes can only be perceived and experienced directly, for the shimmering material and the illusory effects of its surfaces lead to constantly changing perspectives and experiences in which the viewer seems to overcome the solidity of the forms.

The choice of works by both artists – the presentations will be quite extensive – will yield fresh and precise insights into their artistic projects. This is the first time, for example, that Monir presents one of her 'families' so extensively in one art space. This will be combined with several new mirror-reliefs, twelve of her concise geometric construction drawings, and several relocated works from the 1960s and 1970s: a repetitive patterned panel and several disco balls. Jef Geys, working around the video projection *A day and a night and a day...*, which collects a large number of the photographs he took in the course of his life,

constructs a dialogue with Monir that takes the form of older 'reliefs', which play on decorative patterns and mimicry, as well as cut outs of clear forms, ranging from the everyday to the highly sophisticated, made from transparent and reflective surfaces.

Monir and Geys were decisive forces in revalidating vernacular imagery in culture and in widening the realm of modernist aesthetics and its quest for emancipation. It is an enormous pleasure for a young art institution to be able to stage the encounter of these two personalities and their work.

Interview: Hans Ulrich Obrist - Monir Sharoudy Farmanfarmaian

These extracts are taken from three interviews with Monir Sharoudy Farmanfarmaian, conducted by Hans Ulrich Obrist between 2008 and 2010; Iranian poet Etel Adman is present for one of them. The interviews, merged into one, were published in *Monir Sharoudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist (Bologna: Damiani, 2011).

MSF: I was born in Qazvin, and our house was full of paintings and nightingales and birds. In the Safavid period, houses were decorated in Islamic design, with beautiful paintings on the wood and plaster work on the wall. In the room that I was supposed to take a nap in every afternoon, the whole ceiling was painted in wood, nightingales, flowers and a border with a centrepiece for a chandelier, and all the windows were stained glass. So, rather than sleep, I used to count the birds and the flowers. Then at the age of seven we moved to Tehran; my father had a government position in the Parliament. We rented a house full of plaster and portraits of all the old kings and great poets. They made us take a nap every day, but again I never slept as I was always looking at the ceiling.

When I finished school, I went to the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University for six months, and then decided that I had to study art outside Tehran. It was during the War, and I wanted to go to Paris, but the ambassadors and whatnot wouldn't let me. In 1944, I decided to go to America instead. I had a friend who was working with the archaeologist Donald Wilber, doing architecture research in Iran, and he managed to get me a visa. I was on the road for three months, from Tehran to Los Angeles and at last to New York. When I finally arrived in Manhattan, I was very disappointed. I said, 'Whatever I have seen in the movies, this is not it!' But I had high expectations. First they sent me to high school to learn English, which I never did unfortunately. Then I went to Cornell University for a brief while. In the end I went to study at Parsons. I learned fashion design and restoration; I started working, and I lived in New York for twelve years.

MSF: I was doing freelance fashion drawings, and I drew some flowers – we call them Iranian violets – and sold them for \$150 to an agency. Later it became the design for the Bonwit Teller department store. It was all over the shopping bags,

the negligees, the shoes; that violet of mine was everywhere. Then I got a full-time job at Bonwit Teller doing layouts, and Andy [Warhol] was one of the artists that I used to make layouts for. He was very good at drawing shoes.

MSF: ... he [Milton Avery] taught me how to do monotypes, to paint on a piece of linoleum and then put the canvas on it and press the painting onto it. My first exhibition, in Tehran in 1963, was monotype flowers made using that technique.

MSF: We had a Volvo, and I would take a sleeping bag and some food boxes and travel all over Iran. I went to old cities and ruins. I discovered the tribal peoples, the Qashqai, the Turkomans, the Lurs, the Yamuts and the Kurds – they were wonderful people. I used to sleep in their tents or in the café by the side of the road; there weren't many hotels at that time. I travelled a great deal. I saw the Sassanian palaces and the ruins in Persepolis, all the mosques in Isfahan and in the small towns. I became passionately interested in the architecture. I read books and talked to people, and I met the workers on the sites. I loved it. My inspiration has always been the public art, from the tribes. I suppose I try and transfer it to my own art.

MSF: I found my first coffeehouse, or *qahveh khaneh*, painting when I was travelling in the northern part of Iran in 1958. I spotted it through a second floor balcony, a beautiful painting, very primitive, of a man sitting on a horse with lots of beautiful landscape. In those days coffeehouses were only for men, but it was ten in the morning and there were no men inside, so I went up and asked if I could buy it, but the man said no. I asked, 'Why not?' He said, 'Because my customers like it'. I said, 'Where can I get another painting like this?' He said, 'The other coffeehouse; they might sell theirs'. So I went to that coffeehouse to inquire. The paintings used to be part of a performance of storytelling at these coffeehouses, but radio had come along by then, and people would sit and listen to the radio, instead of sitting around talking about paintings. I went to different cities and collected coffeehouse paintings. I ended up with about a hundred pieces, and they're very large. It was a very surrealistic time. I said Salvador Dalí should come and learn how they make all the different subjects, so many beautiful scenes.

MSF: Someone needed to save these pieces of our culture before they were lost. Once I discovered a painting in an antique shop, a very cheap painting behind glass from the south of Iran. It was so beautiful, like a Matisse. I travelled to the middle of nowhere to meet the artist. He lived in a tent, and he was blind. I ended up with hundreds of paintings. All of that is gone now; everything was confiscated when the Revolution happened.

MSF: In my travels all over Iran, I saw a lot of old palaces and shrines with mirror work on the ceiling and on walls, and paintings behind glass on the plaster architecture. In Shiraz and Esfahan it was really magnificent. In 1966 I went with Robert [Morris] and Marcia [Hafif] to the 14<sup>th</sup> Shrine of Shah Cheragh, the 'King of Light'. It has high ceilings, domes and mirror mosaics with fantastic reflections. We sat there for half an hour, and it was like a living theatre: people came in all their different outfits and wailed and begged to the shrine, and all the crying was reflected all over the ceiling and everywhere, and I cried too because of all the beautiful reflections. I said to myself, I must do something like that, something that people can hang in their homes. And from then on I went to see all the mirror work in the different shrines.

MSF: ... Mirrors would get broken along the Silk Road, and rather than waste them, craftsman architects used the shards, as they used tile and plaster, in their geometric design. They used very small pieces, sometimes half an inch by half an inch, triangular, square, hexagonal, all different shapes. They put them all together, and it makes a beautiful reflection. (...) When I discovered the mirror mosaics, I realized that nothing is done spontaneously; it is all a calculation of geometry and design. If you divide a circle at three points, it will be a triangle. In Islamic design the triangle is the intelligent human being. If you divide the circle at four points, it will be a square, and it can be North, South, West and East. Each element has a meaning in Islamic design. The five sides of the pentagon are the five senses. The six sides of the hexagon are the directions, forward, backward, right, left, up, down. The hexagon also reflects the six virtues: generosity, self-discipline, patience, determination, insight and compassion. All the mosques in Iran, with all the flowers and the leaves and curves and so on, are based on hexagons. Even Islamic rugs are based on hexagons.

Sol LeWitt had his square, and it was wonderful how far he went with the square. For me everything connects with the hexagon. And the hexagon has the most potential for three-dimensional sculpture and architectural forms. I have made some small maquettes of possibilities for making hexagon sculptures. They can be either very large in the landscape or small in the house. Quite a few books were published in the 1970s on the meaning of geometric design. (...) I really studied them and then created a lot of new works.

MSF: Frank Stella is one of my heroes. De Kooning as well. And Rauschenberg too – and he even worked with glass. I'll always remember when I first saw his work in 1958, at the Venice Biennial. I saw them again in Stockholm – the work with the goat in the middle of the tire, his Combine work. These pieces moved me so much. I said, my God where is art going? Look at how much possibility there is! But for me inspiration always comes from Iran, from my history, from my childhood, for better or for worse. I always go with the feeling of my eyes, and with my heart, and that is my main inspiration.

MSF: The mirror is a symbol for water in Iran. Water is bright and reflects light, so it is a sign of light and life. If somebody dies young – a male, not a female – a monument with mirrors, electric light, feathers and flowers is made and placed on a street corner. I love these so much that I put one in front of the gallery when I had the first exhibition of my geometric mirror works at the Iran-America Society in 1973. After two or three days the director asked if I could take it down because everyone was asking if the American ambassador or the head of the cultural centre had died. The monument is a form of public art, and the people who make them are very talented and spontaneous.

MSF: The ceiling [of her NYC apartment, ed.] must have been eighteen feet high, domed, with gold leaf. The terrace was seventy-five feet long, overlooking Central Park, and you could look down and see the reservoir with a surrounding cloud of cherry blossoms. I made a hanging garden there, with a fountain, wrought-iron gating and so many plants. I bought a pergola, and I made it like a forest, almost. That terrace was important because it led to my first big collage [*Untitled*, Commissioned Mural, Royal Reception Room, King Abdulaziz International Airport, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia]. That was 1979, maybe 1980. One

day workmen were doing some waterproofing on the terrace and they had a net to cover the tar, and I asked them for a piece of this net, and since I had nothing to do but sit at home and watch these people work, I made a small collage or two with newspaper and fabric. (This net was important; later I would put net over all my collages. It was something mystic for me again: that I'm in prison, something is covering me up.) Then somebody called from Boston and said that Saudi Arabia wanted to do a big commission, and I said I have nothing to show, my work is in storage. But she insisted on coming to see me, and when she came, she saw this little collage and she said she wanted me to make one that was three meters long. But I didn't have a studio to make something like that. I told my friend Lucas Samaras that I had this commission but didn't know how I would be able to make it, and he said, 'Don't be silly; you have a dining room in your apartment, don't you?' So I ordered some lumber and made a table, and I ordered the stretchers, and I started making the collage in my dining room. I found velvet, sequins, and glitter at the bridal shop, and beautiful objects that they had made for brides. I went on to make a lot of collages in that 'studio'.

MSF: The Iranian garden is very classically beautiful. Cypress trees and water were the symbol of the Iranian garden.

HUO: Are they symmetrical?

MSF: Yes, they are based on the form of the square, as is all mosque architecture—everything is square. The piece you saw that day is the Shazdeh Garden, the Prince's Garden, which was built for Abdolhamid Mirza Naserodolleh about 130 years ago in the middle of the desert in Kerman. Actually, there is a very good book about Iranian gardens, *Gardens of Iran: Ancient Wisdom, New Vision*, which I used as research. This work is one of a series of four pieces that I created based on the garden, each featuring a central fountain and layers of trees, streams, paths, geometric patterns and floral elements; they are unlike any other works in glass I have ever created [*Persian Garden* (1, 2, 3, 4), 2009]. Three have a fountain of geometric forms – octagon, hexagon, pentagon, square, rotated around a triangle.

HUO: You have said that the piece you're proudest of in your life is *Lightning for Neda* (2009), the installation at the Queensland Art Gallery, composed of six panel elements. It was too large for you to have more than two panels in your studio at one time, and I've heard you talk about how moved you were when you saw it installed in its entirety for the first time.

MSF: Suhanya Raffel, the lead curator for APT6, called me from Australia after she heard our talk at Art Dubai in March 2008 to tell me how much she had liked it and to say that APT6 wanted to give me a commission. We went back and forth about the size and the budget –the materials and craftsmen needed to make something so large are expensive. In the end I said: if you promise me, on the memory of my husband, that it will stay there forever, I could even do it for free. I really worked very hard on this piece for nine months.

HUO: The installation, which is twelve meters long, it's like architecture. In the piece, you used the same form but you repeat it differently. The way you use the mirror and paint behind the glass seems almost to liquefy these very hard materials.

MSF: And, with the reflections, it seems also to liquefy you, for you're a part of the art piece. Your own picture, your own face, your own clothing – if you move, it is a part of the art. You're the connection: it is the mix of human being and reflection and artwork.

MSF: A small publishing house in New York asked me to do a book on Rumi, the Sufi poet, and I wanted to do something nobody else had done. I bought a few sheets of steel, and worked on it with salt and acid. I thought I should do the circle, the dot, the triangle, the hexagon, a square and a cone, like that, until I had done the cosmos. And there's a map in there as well. The idea was my hope that one day they will prohibit guns and stop all the killing that is going on all around the universe. The rich man makes guns and sends them to Palestine or South America or South Africa, and it has to stop. The book came out all right, but they said that it is very expensive to make an edition of steel and we should do etchings instead and make silk-covered books. So I went to New Hampshire and learned

how to do etchings. It will be an edition of fifty, but I have only made one book so far. It's not perfect. I did the Persian one and now I will do the English one.

Etel Adnan: I have a question for you, about why you chose to work with mirrors. In Islamic Sufism, the soul is the mirror of the divine. I see that in your work, because you have mystical, and not just flat, geometry. It's fascinating – there's a secret behind every one of your works.

MSF: Absolutely. The pentagon represents the five senses of the body, and the hexagon represents the body's powers of motion—

EA: And the circle?

MSF: The circle is the universe; its number is twelve, which is also the months of the year, and the zodiac. The numerical symbolism goes very deep: from creator, 1, all the way up to the solar days, 360.

Extracts from 'Shape': Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar

The beauty observed in a snow crystal depends as much on its geometrical order as on its ability to reflect a higher and more profound order. It follows that all shapes, surfaces, and lines are arranged in conformity with the proportions inherent in nature and reflect ideal systems of beauty. Resting on an objective foundation, independent of man and his subjective tastes, a beauty is attained that is general, universal, and eternal.

The science of number stands above nature as a way of comprehending Unity. Numbers are the principle of beings and the root of all sciences, the first effusion of Spirit upon Soul. The concept of number in Islam is similar to the Pythagorean system where numbers, being qualitative as well as quantitative entities, are not identified simply with addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. The outer expression or form of a number does not exhaust its possibilities. It contains a *batin*, or an essence, which distinguishes it from another. This *batin* is a projection of Unity which continuously links the number to its source. Number understood in its Pythagorean sense, identified with certain shapes in the sensible world, integrates those shapes through their essence into Unity.

Geometry as the expression of the 'personality' of numbers permits traditional man a further exploration into the processes of nature. The number 1 generates the point, 2 the line, and 3 the triangle. These concepts of forms, the static aspect of geometry, lead the contemplative mind from the sensible to the intelligible, from the *zahir* to the *batin* of a form. There are essential differences between a triangle and a square which measurement alone will not reveal, just as the essential difference between red and blue cannot be discovered through quantitative means alone. Expanded consciousness leads traditional man to 'seek knowledge unto China', to copy the world of 'nature in her mode of operation', not in her manifested form. The triangle, the square, and the circle are not merely shapes: essentially, they incorporate a reality the understanding of which through *ta'wil* leads man to the world of similitudes and ultimately to the truth.

The square as 4, or the cube as 6, is the most arrested and inactive of shapes. It represents the most externalized and fixed aspect of creation. The cube is therefore regarded as the symbol of earth in the macroscale and man in the microscale. The 'cube of man' is a symbolic representation of his manifested characteristics – the coordinate system of the six directions – which he shares with the heavens. The hexadron then symbolizes the last manifestation – in the planets, earth, and among matter, man. It is the supreme temporal symbol of Islam, as *Ka'bah* means cube.

Extracts from 'Ways of Seeing: A Life in Fragments': Negar Azimi

The artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian prepares neatly cut mirror and glass works that take traditional Iranian visual culture as their cue and point of departure. You could say she is an artist-ethnographer, an inspired doyenne of Eastern bric-a-brac, a champion of the vernacular as modern.

She has seen three regimes, each of dramatically different hue and tenor, rule her native Iran, and enjoyed renown as a designer, patron, and artist – all this through cultural epochs as diverse as Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop, and even the current contemporary moment.

She took a job with the Point Four program, a Marshall Plan-era technical assistance program; her job would be to think about how to best adapt Persian handicrafts to foreign commercial markets.

She collected countless objects: antique paintings on glass, Turkoman jewelry, rugs, textiles, and much more. She especially hoarded Iranian coffeehouse paintings – glass tableaus marked by a mostly naïve visual style and painted from behind. In a small way, she played a role in raising the status of these traditional art forms, even organizing an exhibition of coffeehouse paintings – mostly viewed as folksy and found in working-class cafes, gymnasiums, and public baths – in Paris, at the Maison de l'Iran in 1970. It was these traditional art forms that would soon become the foundation of her own practice.

She started painting on glass, and soon thereafter began working with an exceptional traditional mirror-maker and artisan named Haji Ostad Navid. He helped her start making what would come to be her trademark work, the elaborate glass and mirror pieces that she is associated with to this day.

She visited shrines and palace interiors throughout Iran that had within them mirror mosaics, or *ayeneh-kari* – itself a practice that goes as far back as the seventeenth century in Iran. She studied Sufi cosmology, geometry, and the

arcane symbolism of shapes. Eventually, she mixed mirrors with painted glass and stainless steel to create new forms that took decorative arts as their inspiration, but were firmly modern in their belief in the essence of shapes and material. Circles, pentagons, hexagons evolved from their standard flat existences to shifting metaphysical accumulations of lines, forming kaleidoscope visions that mimicked the workings of the universe.

In a way, Monir had cultivated a unique space in which modernity could address, and even come to terms with, its deep-rooted anxieties about the ornament. These creations had the markings of tradition, and even craft – from flowers to birds to other icons of Qajar-era decorative arts – but were inscribed on fine Islamic geometries that, in their own way, channeled abstraction’s infinite dance of shapes, not to mention its rigid refusal to tell a single story about the world. The experience of engaging Monir’s works, too, was deeply immersive; the mirrors allow viewers to recognize a piece of themselves – however fractured – within their remarkable pastiche of materials, perspectives, and traditions. Not unlike the Iranian Saqqakhaneh School, a movement of the 1960s sometimes blithely referred to as a form of ‘Spiritual Pop art’ that took religious folk art as its inspiration, Monir’s work also took tradition as its raw material and, in subtle and remarkable ways, turned that tradition on its head.

From his debut in 1958 onwards, Jef Geys worked with photography. This makes him an absolute pioneer within the Belgian art world – immediately followed by Jacques Charlier and Marcel Broodthaers, who from their debut in the early 1960s also made photo-based art. Throughout Geys's multimedia practice photography takes a prominent place: not only in the number of works that involve photographs but also in the establishment of his archive, which is a fundamental component of his work. Converging with the (Belgian as well as international) history of photography becoming an autonomous medium within contemporary art, his oeuvre starts with a conceptual use of photography and later develops into a more pictorial, large-scale application of the medium that would become the dominant model in the 1980s and 1990s. This article provides a selective overview of Geys's photo-based work and shows how his specific use of the medium corresponds with the basic principles on which his entire oeuvre is built.

### ***Geys's Archival Practice***

The book entitled, *Jef Geys. Al de zwart-wit foto's tot 1998 (Jef Geys: All the Black-and-White Photographs until 1998)* demonstrates the prominent position the medium photography occupies within Jef Geys's oeuvre. In 1998, Geys published this five-centimetre thick book that contains 500 pages of photographs that are reproduced in a random order in the form of contact prints. According to the artist, he made roughly 40,000 photographs between approximately 1958 (from his time at the Academy) and 1998. Between pages 1 and 500, a wide range of subjects are presented, including family members, friends, animals (horses, cows, cats, dogs), a bodybuilder, 'classical' as well as pornographic nudes, old (family) pictures, magazine covers, students, flowers, wood-paths, seed-bags, castles, churches, farms, row houses, domestic, museum and class interiors, buildings under construction, shadows of architectural elements or human figures, election posters, art works made by Geys as well as by other artists, catalogues and magazines in which his work is published, musicians playing a concert, cars, record covers, close-ups of body parts, a harbour, kermis races, trucks and television screens.

This publication was conceived as an artist's book: apart from the title, there is neither text explaining the aim of the book nor interpretations of the pictures. Also lacking are the captions, customary in photobooks. In the end, it simply forms a

[1] This text is a slightly adapted version of the article published in *Depth of Field*, volume 3, no 1 (December 2012): <http://journal.depthoffield.eu/volo3/nro1/a02/en>.

huge collection of miscellaneous photographs that have an amateurish look; the photos are often over-exposed or under-exposed, and the subjects are often extremely banal. The photographs, taken all together, could be considered as one (still ongoing) inventory of the artist's life. Four years after the publication of *Jef Geys. Al de zwart-wit foto's tot 1998*, Geys presented the film *Dag en Nacht en Dag en...* (*Day and Night and Day and...*) at *Documenta 11* in Kassel. The 'film' includes a 36 hours projection of a compilation of thousands of photographs from his archive. As retrospective works the book and the film show in general terms what photography does, what photography is: a means to inventory (one's life), to grasp the now and to preserve, to record, to collect, to document (the past; everything he can or wants, seemingly without selection). At the same time they illustrate the importance of photography – the ultimate medium to represent the vernacular (banal or sentimental subjects; ordinary people and their ordinary habits and activities) as well as the ultimate vernacular medium (*the* medium of the amateur picture maker) – in Geys's artistic practice, which concentrates on the connection between art and everyday life. The vernacular quality of photography actually goes to the heart of Geys's oeuvre.

Geys's archival practice is evident not only in his gigantic photo archive but also in his inventory of all the works he has created since his debut in 1958. The inventory, arranged chronologically, lists of the following information for each work: 'subject' (the title of the work), 'nature' (the material(s), plus sometimes the dimensions of the work), 'year' and 'number' (the number of copies, varying from 1 to 'unlimited'). Geys's inventory was published, for example, in the catalogue of the group exhibition *Aktuele Kunst in België, Inzicht/Overzicht, Overzicht/Inzicht* (Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, 1979). The inventory replaced the classical short bio of the artist at the end of the catalogue and shows how many works up to 1979 Geys had realized entirely or partly by means of the photographic medium. In no less than seventy-five of the 180 works in the list, photography – and photocopy, which Geys also considers as a form of photography – is mentioned as a material used, next to other materials including painting, drawing, fibreboard, wood, steel, stickers, fabric, and paste.<sup>1</sup> Special emphasis is laid on the period 1966 to 1972 – a time frame that contains sixty-five

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<sup>1</sup> Jef Geys considers the photocopy as a form of photography based on its capacity to make 'images' through the reproduction of texts or pictures. (Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.)

photographic works. Geys, therefore, is one of the first artists in Belgium who intensively used photography.

In conjunction with the inventory, Geys created a true 'documentation centre' in which he files all kinds of information in the form of press cuttings, pictures, notes, letters, documents, books, catalogues and videos. These files function as 'raw material' on which he had already based an artwork or in which he could draw from in the future to initiate a work of art. Items from the archive are thus used and reused to create new works. Through his exploitation of the archival function of photography since the 1960s, Geys's practice aligns with that of other, more internationally known artists of his generation, such as Robert Smithson, Hans Haacke, Gerhard Richter, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and the Belgian Marcel Broodthaers.

Since 1969, the so-called *Kempens Informatieblad* – a regional newspaper taken over by the artist – has accompanied every one of Geys's exhibitions. To the present day, the use of the *Kempens Informatieblad* is a substitute for an exhibition catalogue and is offered (almost) for free – it serves as a reaction against the undemocratic prices of art books.<sup>2</sup> Each issue of the *Kempens Informatieblad* includes various data (often photographs) drawn from his archive, which give the visitor supplementary information about the exhibited works of art and their origins. Since the *Kempens Informatieblad* is directly related to the exhibition for which it was conceived, but does not necessarily include the exhibited works, it can also be considered as an important element *within* the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> The conception of a catalogue that functions as the exhibition evokes the pioneering initiatives of the New York curator and art dealer Seth Siegelaub. Famous examples are the *Xeroxbook* from 1968, which was an exhibition in the form of a book, and *January 5-31, 1969*, the 1969 group exhibition of the work of Robert

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010. As early as the early 1960s, before owning the *Kempens Informatieblad*, Geys published items in it. According to the artist's testimony, he started to accompany his exhibitions with the *Kempens Informatieblad* from 1969 onwards. These early issues, however, are lost. The oldest, still existing, dates from 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Dirk Deblauwe, 'Jef Geys. Vragen uit Balen,' *Rekto:Verso*, 2, November-December 2003. ([www.rektoverso.be](http://www.rektoverso.be), consulted October 6, 2011)

Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner in which ‘the exhibition was the guide to the catalog’ and not the other way around.<sup>4</sup>

Geys’s didactic sensitivity, which the *Kempens Informatieblad* demonstrates, followed from his daily activity as a teacher of visual arts at a primary school in Balen, a job he practiced from 1960 until 1989. This professional activity intertwined completely with his activities as an artist. Through his connections with the art world, for example, he was able to bring real art works from the collection of the museum of contemporary art in Ghent into the classroom. Conversely, pictures of his pupils, for instance, formed the basic material for his work *Lapin Rose Robe Bleu* (see below). The close connection between Geys’s teaching, his documentation centre, his artistic oeuvre and the *Kempens Informatieblad* is crucial to understand his artistic practice, for these elements indicate the close relationship he wanted to establish between art and everyday reality. Through his multifaceted activities – as a ‘multimedia artist’ and as a teacher – he attempted to blur the boundaries between the social, the political and the aesthetic. He essentially wanted – and still wants – the difference between high and low art to be indistinct.<sup>5</sup> And, as the following examples will show, the medium of photography proves to be an ideal ‘conductor’ to realize this.

### ***The First Photo-based Works***

The involvement of photography in Geys’s works began toward the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Inventory numbers 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, dating from 1958-1962, mention ‘photo + story on tape.’ This combination of materials is also found in inventory numbers 29, 30, 31, 33, 34 and 35, which report ‘tape, drawing + photo.’ The photographs in the earliest works are pictures from his youth, to which he added a story, recorded on tape. According to the artist, the

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Seth Siegelau: Exhibitions, Catalogues, Books & Projects, Interviews, Articles & Reviews,’ *Stichting Egress Foundation*,

[http://egressfoundation.net/egress/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=310](http://egressfoundation.net/egress/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=310)  
(Consulted March 23, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Marie-Ange Brayer, ‘De kleine identiteiten,’ *Jef Geys. Paleis voor Schone Kunsten Brussel. Palais des Beaux-Arts Bruxelles*, Visie, vol. XI, Zedelgem: Stichting Kunst & Projecten vzw, 1992, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> According to Geys’s inventory, the very first work even dates from 1947, when Geys was only 13 years old. However, the artist only made his actual artistic debut in 1958, at the age of 24.

story tells his (traumatic) memory related to what is seen in the picture.<sup>7</sup> These very early works involve already the main features of Geys's oeuvre: the blurring between his private life and his activities as an artist, the use of archival material such as family pictures, and the combination of different media, including photography and text, which are in relation to each other.

The mingling of life and art and of artistic media – as seen in the first works – is also present in one of the artist's best known projects, entitled *Seed-bags*. Every year since 1963 to the present, Geys artistically renders a seed-bag of flowers or vegetables. He realizes them on two formats – a small format (approx. 18 x 24 cm) on canvas and a larger format (90 x 135 cm) with enamel paint on panel – and presents them with the Dutch and Latin names of the plant and the year the painting was made.<sup>8</sup> He started this project because of the frustration he felt when he realized that the picture of the flowers or vegetables pictured on the cover of the bag did not resemble the plants that had grown from the seeds of the bag; there was a disconnection between the represented and the real.<sup>9</sup> The hyperrealist paintings, based on photographs, allude to the gap between reality and representation. Here, Geys aimed to expose the 'make-believe world,' with which photography always has been involved.<sup>10</sup>

Geys's interest in the relationship between nature and the human being also comes to the fore in other works. Around 1967, he wanted to capture the entire process from plowing the ground and sowing, to fertilizing and harvesting. In an interview conducted by Herman De Coninck for the magazine *Humo*, Geys explained his intentions as follows: 'I thought [that] it should be finished with Minimal art and that only one thing of sense was left: to work in your garden, to turn over the ground, to cultivate your own cabbages without DDT and so on: that is important.'<sup>11</sup> He thus started to experiment in his garden and documented it – by means of photography – as an artistic project. During the whole process, he added 'sentimental acts' in order to connect the artistic/natural with a human element.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 14 June 2010; Bex, Florent, 'Uit een vraagggesprak – Florent Bex – Jef Geys,' *Kempens Informatieblad. Speciale editie Balen*, March 27, 1971, z.p.

<sup>8</sup> From 2007 onwards Geys also created the large format paintings on canvas.

<sup>9</sup> Bex (1971), z.p.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.

<sup>11</sup> De Coninck, Herman, 'Humo sprak met Jef Geys,' *Humo*, 1972, p. 30.

For instance, he wept as he burnt old letters and memories from his youth and then used the ashes as fertilizer. With the products he harvested, he made his so-called 'edible art.' With the corn, for example, he baked bread in the shape of a heart. The breads, together with homegrown cabbages and sprouts, were 'exhibited' in 1968 in Galerie Kontakt in Antwerp. For the occasion, the gallery was transformed into a shop that offered Geys's edible art for sale. After the exhibition, Geys placed the sprouts in the backseat of his Citroën 2CV 'with the intention of letting them see the "hinterland"' during a road trip through Belgium. After the 'tour,' he planted them in an open landscape and then watched the reactions of the people living in the neighbourhood. For example, most of the people came to collect the cabbages that had been grown in the ground, but left the ones that had been grown in a refuse dump. Shortly thereafter, on the occasion of a sculpture exhibition organized by Karel Geirlandt, Geys planted cabbages in the Ghent Zuidpark.<sup>12</sup>

During the making of this work photography played a rather secondary role: as a means to merely document each step of the project. Through the photographs, however, the work could enter his archive and, as such, his oeuvre. In addition, when Geys showed the pictures later in exhibitions and recorded them in his *Kempens Informatieblad*, it is clear that he considered the photographs of the project to be art. Photography increasingly proved to be the suitable medium for Geys to realize work that is related to daily life and his immediate surroundings.

### ***The Vernacular***

The first major work in which photography played a prominent role from the start, is a work about a young cyclist, created in 1968-1969. It consists of a sequence of framed documents (typed letters, cuttings and an address book) and black-and-white photographs that were glued onto fibreboard and cardboard. The story goes as follows: War Jonckers, a bartender at 'Bar 900' and a friend of Geys, had a 15-year-old son, Roger, who appeared to be good at cycling. It was also during this same time that the famous cyclist, Eddy Merckx, was a rising star and served as an example for many young Belgian boys such as Roger. Geys became the guardian of Roger and coached him by his partaking in kermis races. In return, he asked Roger to describe his experiences that Geys would write down. Geys then

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<sup>12</sup> Bex (1971), z.p; Jef Geys, *Kempens Informatieblad. Speciale editie Biennale Venetië*, 2009, pp. 7, 9-12.

sent these descriptions to certain people he knew in the art world who were listed in the address book included in the work. During the summer, Geys travelled to the south of France to follow Merckx in the Tour de France. He then reported back to Roger by means of letters and photographs about Merckx's cycling techniques and day-to-day living habits. Strikingly, Geys began his letters to Roger with the salutation 'Dear Jef,' as if it had been Roger who wrote the letters to him.<sup>13</sup> The identities of Geys and the boy gradually intermingled. According to Geys, the aim of the project was 'to come as close as possible to the boy, trying to capture the phenomenon as accurate and complete as possible.'<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he carefully wrote down his and the boy's experiences. 'I was not interested in the background, the corruption within cycling,' he said, 'I was interested in what happens with the little one, where it all begins, how and when you could proceed to shoot, for, at a certain moment, we all shoot, so to speak.'<sup>15</sup> In the 1971 interview conducted by Flor Bex, Geys said: 'I wanted to examine what was going on in the mind of that boy, what the influences from his family circle meant, etc. So, day after day I followed him. Every Sunday we drove to a race. I regularly sent messages about the boy to a number of randomly chosen addresses. The aim was to fully infiltrate myself into a situation in order to understand it and then communicate about the whole purpose to an audience.'<sup>16</sup>

In one of the documents of the work, Roger (alias Geys) indeed introduces himself, talks about cycling and promises the reader he will report about his performances. The content of the letter also implies the great expectations regarding Roger's career as a cyclist, especially by his father. In addition, Roger's membership card of the Belgian cycling federation is shown, next to a whole set of reportage photographs in which we see the following images: the boy training in the kitchen; the father and his friends at a cycling race; a discussion of cycling strategies at the kitchen table; a mayor speaking to the riders at the start of a race; the Mercedes of the boy's father; the boy taking his bike; and Geys massaging him. As a sort of grand finale, a photo in poster format is added, which was taken

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010. Since 2000, the letters to Roger are kept in the collection of SMAK, Ghent.

<sup>14</sup> De Coninck (1972), p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Bex (1971), z.p.

by Geys at the Vélodrome de Vincennes at the moment that Eddy Merckx won the Tour de France in 1969; yet, neither the famous Belgian cyclist, nor any other cyclists are seen in the picture. The backs of three cycling fans actually obstruct the view of the winning moment. The viewer then realizes that the boy is also never actually depicted in the other photographs as a participant in a race. Moreover, the press cuttings reveal that Roger never won a race but always ended as one of the latest. The cycling adventure of Roger Jonckers, who had to deal with a lot of pressure, particularly by his father, seems to have ended in a failure. By means of photographs and written documents, Geys ultimately offered an account of a young man who was talked into starting a career as an amateur cyclist, which ended in a personal fiasco.<sup>17</sup>

The cyclist work shows Geys's distinct interest in the human condition and illustrates once more his particular attention to the relation between art and everyday life. He carefully approached his subject with a sense of philanthropy and irony at the same time. He elevated the common and gave value to the banal by bringing it into the museum; the common world and the art world intermingled. In this work the notion of the vernacular – as regards subject matter (the popular realm of amateur cycling) as well as the execution of the work in rather 'poor' materials – is clearly present. Therefore, the work completely aligns with what Jeff Wall called the 'amateurization' within conceptual photography.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the work can be interpreted as a parody of photojournalism – another characteristic of photoconceptualism as described by Wall.<sup>19</sup> Geys used the classical elements of photojournalism – photographs and text – for a topic – cycle racing – that certainly in Belgium is a common subject in the papers. At the same

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<sup>17</sup> As a sequel to this work, Geys sent a box to the Biennial of Madrid in 1969, an art event in which the theme was sports for that year. In the box, the artist laid out a variety of forms in Dutch and Spanish with information about his cyclist, Roger. The box was placed next to two vessels, in which people could then deposit their opinion. The artist also expressed his wish that an inhabitant from Madrid would correspond regularly with his cyclist. These letters and photos would then be displayed on-site. However, the box was never opened and instead was sent back to the artist, its content having not been exhibited. Since then, the box is part of the installation. (Bex (1971), n.p.; De Coninck (1972), p. 30; Braet, Jan, 'Het zaad van Balen,' *Knack*, June 22, 1989, p. 130.)

<sup>18</sup> Wall, Jeff, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in: Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds.), *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art/Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995, p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> Wall (1995), p. 254.

time, however, he parodied the genre by introducing vernacular elements, such as amateurish, 'bad' photographs in which the subject is often obscured, and highly subjective texts, such as letters in which he also plays with authorship. Just like other conceptual artists, including Robert Smithson (the example Wall gives), Geys adopts this strategy to raise social issues – in this case, the pressure that is exerted on young people and the social being in general to come up to parental/societal expectations.

### ***A Photographic Retrospective at the KMSKA***

Proceeding from his preoccupation with the connection of art and everyday life, Jef Geys always had an ambiguous relationship towards the art institute. A striking example of this is his proposal to blow up the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp (KMSKA) at the end of his solo exhibition held there in 1971. In a letter to the Minister of Culture from November 1970, which was published later in the catalog *Ooidonk 78*, Geys described his plans about the explosion of the KMSKA as follows: 'Departing from the idea that every society, authority, institution, organization, person, etc. includes the seeds of its own destruction, the first and most important task of every society, authority, etc. in my opinion is to recognize, isolate and neutralize these seeds. The most efficient way to achieve all this then seems to me to systematically, scientifically and deliberately set about the problem. [...] So I would like to start a project, which, if executed, would result in the destruction of the Museum voor Schone Kunsten.'<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, he asked for the Minister of Culture's cooperation to get the approval of the management and staff of the KMSKA as well as the participation of the fire brigade, the Engineering Corps and the *Poudreries Réunies* (a gunpowder factory) of Balen.

Of course, Geys's request was not granted. Instead, the museum decided to send four hundred and fifty letters to Belgian artists asking their opinion about the project; their reactions would then be displayed in Geys's exhibition. In the museum galleries, Geys exhibited a selection of items from his archive, including pictures from his youth and a number of documents about the recent miners' strike

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<sup>20</sup> Jef Geys, Letter to the Minister of Dutch Culture (November 11, 1970), in: *Ooidonk 78*, exh. cat., 1978: 101.

at Vieille Montagne in Balen.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the show was a photo exhibition, since Geys exclusively showed his work by means of photographic documents. According to Geys ‘although [he] then had been making art for about twelve years, [he] did not feel it to be the right moment to show finished products, but [he] did want to show *images* of the works he had made so far.’<sup>22</sup> Through this decision of only displaying reproductions of his works instead of real works, Geys distracted the viewer’s attention from the original, and – according to Walter Benjamin’s argument – stripped the works from their aura.<sup>23</sup> As will be explored later in this text, the reproducibility of photography will be one of the main reasons for Geys to use the medium. Next to the photographs that represent earlier works, the exhibition also included interior shots of the museum, which were made during the preparation of his plan to blow up the museum, and showed details of the glass roof, buckets with sand for fire safety, and other ‘weak spots’ of the museum infrastructure.<sup>24</sup>

Geys also focused on the human figure in that environment. For instance, there were pictures of attendants chatting at a sales stand with postcards, and an image of the security officer of the ICC who was permitted to uncork a champagne bottle at 4 pm every day and serve it to the visitors of the museum. In the accompanying *Kempens Informatieblad*, a list of all the exhibited works, illustrated by photographs, was included, next to the text of an interview with the artist conducted by Flor Bex. In this interview, Geys described his exhibition as a ‘manifestation,’ and explained that he continuously supplemented the exhibition with new works, in order to demonstrate that he did not consider the museum, art and reality as three separate, static domains.

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<sup>21</sup> Luk Lambrecht, ‘Een wereldkunstenaar uit Balen,’ *De Morgen*, April 8, 2004, p. 20; Johan Pas, *Beeldenstorm in een spiegelzaal. Het ICC en de actuele kunst 1970-1990*, Leuven: Uitgeverij LannooCampus, 2005, pp. 96-97.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’ (1936) - ‘Little History of Photography’ (1931), in: Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Cambridge, Mass./London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 19-55 - pp. 274-298.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.

There is something paradoxical about the fact that Geys exhibited his works in the museum that he had earlier proposed to blow up. Geys argued that protest could only be concretized from inside the system.<sup>25</sup> In the end, the artist remarked that his proposal was taken too literally. In the conversation with Bex in 1971, he stated: ‘People cling to the word “blow up.” That is wrong. It is an attack on the structures, on the fact that, for example, the budget for culture of 1970 has only been voted now, that the Belgian museums have been in a sacred isolation for such a long time, that organizing exhibitions still is a system within a system, etc. Denouncing all of this is “blowing up the museum,” I felt the necessity to put my finger on the sore spot, on these obsolete structures, on the wretchedness of the current state and the entire socio-cultural order. [...] To me it was a reaction to everything that was thwarting me in the present society and keeping me from what I actually wanted to be.’<sup>26</sup>

Geys’s perception of the museum and the way in which he makes that visible within his work, shows an affinity to the work of Broodthaers, who installed his *Musée d’Art Moderne: Département des Aigles* in the wake of May 1968 and the subsequent occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Both artists intended that their near-contemporary ‘manifestations’ – Broodthaers founded a fictive museum outside the official art institutions in 1968, while Geys proposed the explosion of the museum in 1970 – would create a better sociological structure of the museum as an institution. Both works originated in a time when Belgium lacked serious platforms for contemporary art. Unlike Broodthaers, however, Geys stated that his proposal to blow up the museum was a strictly personal reaction against the abuses in the museum world, which had nothing to do with the contestations from 1968.<sup>27</sup>

When asked about his relationship to Broodthaers, Geys responded that he is ‘a country-boy from Balen,’ and, by contrast, sees Broodthaers as ‘someone from the city, directed towards Paris.’ He added that, contrary to his own intentions,

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<sup>25</sup> Bex (1971), n.p.; Franz W. Kaizer, ‘Jef Geys: n° 250,’ *L’art en Belgique. Flandre et Wallonie au XXe siècle. Un point de vue*, exh. cat., Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1990: 456.

<sup>26</sup> Bex (1971), n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 14 June 2010.

‘Broodthaers’ *Musée d’Art Moderne* was purely meant as an artistic intervention.’<sup>28</sup> By this statement, Geys pointed to a fundamental difference that he sees between his approach and that of Broodthaers. According to him, Broodthaers exclusively circulated in the art world, whereas he tries to unify the art world and real life, to consider it as one world. In this way, his position is similar to that of Jacques Charlier, who also combined his artistic activities with a regular job (at the Service Technique Provincial in Liège), and also operated from the periphery – Liège in the 1960s was quite remote from the avant-garde scene.

### ***Photography’s Reproducibility***

Only one year after causing a stir by proposing to explode the museum of Antwerp, Geys created another ‘museological’ sensation when the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven refused to exhibit his work entitled *Juridisch aspect van emoties (Juridical Aspect of Emotions)*. Geys created the work for the exhibition *Derde Triënnale der Zuidelijke Nederlanden* in 1972. It consisted of two collages, the one with pornographic photos, the other with want ads from Dutch sex magazines. Through this material, Geys questioned the general supposition that in the Netherlands after the Provo movement ‘everything’ was accepted whereas in Belgium ‘nothing’ was allowed. The artist wanted to examine the emotional reactions and the limits of tolerance for both Dutchmen and Belgians, respectively, with regard to offensive images. In the catalogue, Geys explained that the aim of the work was an awakening of the spectator to the shifting of societal norms, through which images were experienced and judged.<sup>29</sup> Jean Leering, director of Van Abbe, was forbidden to show Geys’s work by the mayor of Eindhoven, who argued that the project had more to do with psychology, sociology and sex than with art.<sup>30</sup>

Another place to show the work was the Antwerp ICC – then one of the few forums for contemporary art in Belgium. Like Leering, ICC curator Flor Bex backed the project of Geys. Nevertheless, the Belgian policymaker also believed that showing the offensive material was problematic. In response, Geys decided to create a new version of the controversial photo collages. This new work consisted

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.

<sup>29</sup> *Derde Triënnale der Zuidelijke Nederlanden* (1972), n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Pas (2005), p. 116. Also see this publication by Johan Pas for a more extensive account of the matter.

of seven prints of the same image. The prints reflected the process of printing, in which the first prints show a clear, unambiguous image, while the last prints present an almost illegible, blank image. The last six prints were hung in reverse order, exposing the viewer to a series of increasingly legible images. The visitor then had to go to the info desk, at which point a signature was required by the viewer in order for him to obtain the seventh, most explicit image (for this purpose, Geys printed 300 copies). Next to the prints the ICC exhibition also included the correspondence and newspaper articles about the issues that surrounded the project in Eindhoven.

Geys's point of departure for the works for Van Abbe and ICC was not to smuggle *pornography* by any means into and out of the museum. The artist's objective was to reveal the function of *images* in society and to explore the transformation of meaning in which images are subjected through time.<sup>31</sup> To achieve that aim, he wanted to elicit a reaction from as many people as possible about the meaning of the images on display at a given moment. Therefore, the images had to fulfill three conditions. First, they had to be able to evoke an emotional or at least powerful reaction from the viewer. Second, the photos needed a subject matter that was general enough to be meaningful for as many people as possible. Third, the images required a subject that was vulnerable to not only individual opinion but also to collective judgment.<sup>32</sup> To meet these requirements, Geys chose explicit images from porn magazines. This work shows once again Jef Geys's distinct orientation towards vernacular (photographic) genres, in which he finds tools to affect the viewer. The work is an examination of the impact of photographic images; the medium used for this is vernacular photography; and the method to carry out the examination is photography's reproducibility. For, it is through the multiple photographic reproduction that the viewer is exposed first to a fairly abstract, and therefore innocent (version of the) image, and eventually to a sharp, detailed, and therefore offensive (version of the) image.

Another work in which Geys experimented with photography's capacity to easily reproduce, is *Geel, rood, blauw enz...* (*Yellow, Red, Blue etc...*), created in 1979.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Letter written by Jef Geys, dated 13 October 1972, published on the occasion of Geys's second exhibition in the Van Abbe Museum in 2005: *Kempens Informatieblad, Speciale editie Eindhoven* (2005).

It includes a large format poster with the portrait of a young woman and a baby. The work also involves twenty smaller pictures, presented in a frame. They are printed alternately in a more clear or vague way. The pictures that are the clearest represent the same mother-and-child portrait as in the poster; the others, that are printed more vaguely, show other images of women. The whole sequence is illuminated by three spotlights: one yellow, one red and one blue spot, referring to Barnett Newman's famous *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*<sup>33</sup> Geys deliberately used coloured light from spotlights instead of paint since a light projection is more fleeting than paint. The artist wanted to create an 'anti-painting,' in which the materials are less physically present than in a real painting such as Newman's work.

In the catalogue of the *Inzicht/Overzicht* exhibition (1979), Geys wrote about the work: 'The intention is to produce a work that has a purely aesthetical appearance with a symbolic content and which is in opposition to fashion. [...] It is a story about death and being born. It is bullshit, presumptuous and literary. It is gradually freeing slyness out of a picture and replacing it in a series with a mother-in-law and a child. It is about women, children, mothers, daughters, girlfriends, friends and feelings.'<sup>34</sup> The large picture is in fact a found image, made by Douven—a 'factory', situated in Leopoldsborg, Geys's hometown, which from right after World War II until the 1970s mass-produced oil paintings next to framed photographs and reproductions.<sup>35</sup> To the world-wide distributed image Geys added photographs, made by himself. Pictures of women he knew (his mother, girlfriends) alternate with further reproductions of the poster image and thus become equally universal.

Geys again played with the affective impact of one of the archetypes of vernacular photography: the picture of a mother with her baby. He explained in an interview that the pictures represent 'emotional traps.'<sup>36</sup> According to the artist, the biggest 'trap' into which you can fall, is the mother and child. This is the reason why this

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 15 February 2010.

<sup>34</sup> *Inzicht / Overzicht. Overzicht / Inzicht. Aktuele Kunst in België*, exh. cat., Ghent: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, 1979, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Griet Wynants, 'Exhibition', in: Press file of the exhibition *Martin Douven, Leopoldsborg, Jef Geys*, Antwerp: MUHKA, 2011, pp. 3-5.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Jef Geys, Balen, 14 June 2010.

motif is printed clearly and presented in a larger format than the other images in *Geel, rood, blauw enz....*

Although Geys wanted to create an 'anti-painting,' through the classic theme of mother and child, the use of frames, hung on the wall at eye level, and the red, yellow and blue spots, the installation holds pictorial references. This moves the work away from the conceptual art of the 1970s and orients it toward the art of the 1980s that has more theatrical, sometimes kitschy characteristics and in which the photographic tableau form breaks through.

Unlike many artists who worked with photography in the 1960s and 1970s, Geys, in the 1980s, would not exchange his photographic practice for an exclusive focus on painting or sculpture but continued to use photography within his multimedia art. One example is the work, *Lapin Rose Robe Bleu* (1986). It consists of collages of black-and-white pictures of children that are printed on several sheets of paper. The sheets of paper are glued to the wall like wallpaper, as was seen, for example, at the 1987 exhibition, *Leo Copers, Thierry De Cordier, Jef Geys, Bernd Lohaus, Danny Matthys, Philip Van Isacker, Marthe Wéry* at ELAC in Lyon. The pictures are baby portraits of Geys's former students, which Geys had kept in a box. On the back of the photographs he had written the name of the person in the picture. One of the photographs, however, did not bear a name but instead showed the inscription 'lapin rose robe bleu [sic].' A photographer, who had to colour the black-and-white picture, must have written the indicative inscription as a mnemonic.

Jef Geys censored the photographs by crossing out the eyes of the portrayed children with a permanent marker. This way, he transferred a technique normally used in judicial journalism and porn to the realm of the "innocent" child, as if to protect the children from public exposure and identification.<sup>37</sup> Through the censorship, the children are unrecognizable and without identity. Moreover, the monumentality of the wall, covered by countless small pictures, enhances the effect of anonymity. When the artist sold the work to Frac Nord-Pas de Calais, he did so on condition that when the work was to be shown somewhere, at least

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<sup>37</sup> Bart Janssen, 'Lapin rose robe bleu(e): een geschiedenis', *Kempens Informatieblad. Speciale editie/Edition spéciale Leuven-Wavrin*, March 1992, z.p.

twenty pictures of local children had to be sent to the artist, who would make a collage of it, make the portrayed children unrecognizable, and then provide Frac Nord-Pas de Calais with additional prints including these new pictures. Through this method, Geys connects his artwork, which originated from pictures of his own environment, with the environment of the place where it is exhibited, and as such he creates a link between the art world and the everyday reality.

In *Juridisch aspect van emoties, Geel, rood, blauw, enz...* and *Lapin Rose Robe Bleu* Geys examines the impact of images through photography's reproducibility. Universal images – of sex, of a mother and her child, and of schoolchildren, respectively – are shown in a repetitive way, through which their impact seems to increase and reduce at the same time. On the one hand, repetition has an indoctrinating, strengthening effect, but on the other, it also weakens (the impact/content of) the image. Correspondent with what Walter Benjamin in his classical essays, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1936) and 'Little History of Photography' (1931), initiated on the topic of reproducibility versus notions such as originality, authenticity and aura, the use of photographic reproductions is also a method for Geys to avoid the creation of 'auratic' unique artworks – a strategy that fits within his attempt to clear away the distinction between the art world and everyday life.<sup>38</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of Geys's photo-based work shows that his use of photography is based on three main features of the medium: its function as archival material, its vernacular qualities, and its reproducibility. In some of the works one of these characteristics might be manifestly present – as is suggested by the three sections within this article – but in fact they are all intertwined in each of the works discussed. The collection of images in each work is drawn from the artist's archive or forms a new 'subarchive' in his oeuvre; the archival use of photography almost implies the application of photographic reproductions; the notion of the vernacular is present on a technical level (through the use of 'poor' materials and amateur pictures) as well as on a thematic level (subjects such as the amateur cyclist, the museum attendant, porn, family pictures of mothers and children).

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin (2008 [1936]), pp. 19-55; Benjamin (2008 [1931]), pp. 274-298.

Geys's work is clearly embedded in the local: local people are often his subjects, a local newspaper is the primary medium to communicate about his work, and for a long time the local language, Dutch, was the only language he used. This might be an explanation for the fact that only from the early 1990s Geys received definite international recognition. Nevertheless, through the notion of the vernacular, the archival use of photography and the concept of reproduction – which can all be understood as strategies to reconnect art with everyday reality – Geys aligns with the use of photography within the international (post-)conceptual art scene, with reference figures such as Ed Ruscha, Robert Smithson, John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler. Let this case study of a body of works that is created in the periphery of the art world thus be a meaningful addition to the canonical history of art.