

ARTNEWS

Jef Geys, Influential Belgian Conceptualist, Dies at 83

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Jef Geys, 11. *Bruegel*, 2017, oil on canvas in frame, bubble wrap, tape, paper, marker, and paint, 41½" x 46" x 4¾". Essex Street. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ESSEX STREET, NEW YORK

In 1970, Jef Geys was asked to do an exhibition at the Royal Academy of the Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium. He responded with a letter, sent to museum officials as well as the city's Ministry of Culture, Defense, and Justice, in which he threatened to blow up the institution. Then he acquiesced, and the exhibition was held the following year. If, indeed, this can be called an artwork, perhaps no piece was more emblematic of Geys, who has died at age 83 of an unspecified illness.

Geys's work has long been known to Belgians. He had worked in the small Belgian village of Balen for much of his career, since the 1960s, and had built up a cult following around his sly practice, which included photography- and performance-related works, as well as an experimental form of art education that he administered for almost three decades at a local school. But in the final decade of his career, Geys's fascinating, funny work reached a larger audience.

In 2009, Geys's work appeared at the Venice Biennale, where he represented Belgium. He showed a project called *Quadra Medicinale*, for which he exhibited photographs of weeds along with documentation about them and where they were found. The photographs had been sourced from his colleagues. He had instructed to take pictures of plants that "definitely grow on the street"; they produced banal images of street signs and corners. Geys then arranged them in a grid-like format and added information like their Latin taxonomic names and whether or not they are edible. Doing so was an absurdist gesture, and this was the point—Geys was interested in systems of classification and their uselessness.

That interest extended beyond his art practice. At the Balen school where Geys taught between 1960 and 1989, his art classes had an experimental air. For two years, each class began with immigrants teaching his students foreign words, and his classroom often doubled as a studio and, in a few cases, an exhibition space. (He was able to show works by Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, and others there, and one class trip involved visiting Marcel Broodthaers's studio.) And for many of his solo exhibitions, Geys produced his own newspaper, *Kempens Informatieblad*.



Jef Geys, *Gleichheit, Fraternité, Vrijheid*, 1964, lacquer on door.
COURTESY GALERIE MAX MAYER, DUSSELDORF

Issues of *Kempens Informatieblad* recently accompanied two exhibitions of Geys's work last year at the New York gallery Essex Street, where the artist showed his past work covered in bubble wrap, as though it were being shipped off to a collector. The works, which included copies of Bruegel paintings and kitschy images of windmills, bore signs of their past travels—marks made from when they were shipped around Europe, stamps from when they were entered and then released from museum and gallery storage. The only thing new or original about these works was the custom-made wood stands upon which they were shown.



Installation view of "Jef Geys: Le Tour de France 1969 d'Eddy Merckx," 2018, at Air de Paris, Paris.

COURTESY AIR DE PARIS

Geys was born in 1934 in Leopoldsburg, Belgium. Like many European artists of his generation, he experienced the horrors of World War II firsthand—Belgium had been occupied by the Nazis. Some critics have noted that Geys's interest in systems and power structures may have derived from his childhood experiences. His first works involved experiments with deliberately banal imagery, like snapping black-and-white photos of victories at the Tour de France, and quotidian phrases, like ongoing attempts to write down questions supposedly facing women. (The Tour de France works, part of a project called *Le Tour de France 1969 d'Eddy Merckx*, are currently on view at Air de Paris gallery in Paris.)

Geys's cryptic art has won its admirers outside Belgium in the past few years, thanks in part to its appearance in notable exhibitions around the world. In 2008, Geys's work was included in the Okwui Enwezor-curated exhibition "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" at the International Center of Photography in New York, where he showed a 36-hour-long slide show of black-and-white photographs, of such subjects as bridges stretching into the distance, taken over the course of his career. In his review for the *New York Times*, Holland Cotter wrote, "Whether they provide evidence of aesthetic development, though, or insight into the artist's maturing mind and soul, will be known only to the most devoted of viewers."