



## **THE BOOK AS ARCHIVE, THE ARCHIVE AS BOOK** **About the archive books of Jef Geys**

Archives are ambiguous. On the one hand, they evoke the world of the past, a barren place for dowdy historians where piles of paper turn to dust. On the other, they symbolise the uninterrupted accumulation of proliferating information and the attempt to manage it, in one word: power (incidentally, also the meaning of the Greek word 'arkheion'). It is exactly this ambiguity that makes archives so interesting for artists.\* Moreover, the form of the archive, with its physical volume of materialised information, appeals to the imagination, certainly in an era in which information, by definition, is digital and thus transient.

The ethical and aesthetic aspects of the archive already enjoyed considerable interest from visual artists in the sixties and seventies. Dieter Roth, Christian Boltanski, Hanne Darboven, On Kawara, Art & Language and others made use of 'archival' methods to conceive and present their work. For Belgium, we can refer to the projects, installations and publications by people such as Marcel Broodthaers, Johan Van Geluwe, Guy Bleus and Denmark. But none of these artists were as obsessed with the archives as Jef Geys.

When in 1971 Jef Geys proposed dynamiting the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, he documented this disruptive project using the correspondence he had had about it with the relevant authorities. At the presentation, the usual catalogue was replaced by a newspaper, the *Kempens Informatieblad*, which Geys had appropriated for the occasion and converted into a personal information channel. A large part of the newspaper was filled with photos from Geys's archive, and offered insight into the diversity of his work. Like a periodic and portable archive, the *Kempens Informatieblad* documents the most diverse aspects of Geys's critical artistic practice to date.

In addition to the periodic publication, Geys also makes use of other forms of 'kome' (**k**unstwerken **o**p **m**eerdere **e**xemplaren - artworks in multiple copies) to disseminate and preserve his ideas. In 1972, Geys and gallery owner-publisher Roland Patteeuw compiled a themed edition of the 'literary and art criticism magazine' *Kreatief*, renamed for the occasion as *Jef Geys, a 'novel'*. It contained, in addition to photos from Geys's archive, correspondence concerning his participation in exhibitions. The book therefore offers a glimpse behind the scenes of the artist and the art world.

Twenty years later, Patteeuw issued another archive publication by Geys, *Pro Justitia* (1992). This consists of a manual transcription of a legal case about Geys and his wife. In this and other archive books, Geys uses quantity as an artistic quality. The large quantity and equivalence of the material offered, more than people are expected to process, thus form an essential aspect of the work. This tactic was also applied in Geys's impressive archive book *Al de zwart-wit foto's tot 1998* [All the black-and-white photos up to 1998] (1998): the bulky volume contains Geys's entire black-and-white photo archive in the

form of contact sheets. The 500 pages, with a total of around 20,000 images, presents the photo archive in a rough, unpolished form. Ordering and interpreting the endless series of images is a job for the reader/viewer.

In 2015, the Frans Masereel Centre started a collaboration with Geys to publish parts of his archive. The first archive publication, *Archief 1* and *Archief 2*, consists of two thick volumes in A4 format with more than 800 scanned archive documents, and appeared on the occasion of Geys's solo exhibition in the SMAK in 2015. The material was presented as it was, without any explanation or hierarchy. *Archief 3* (2016), on the other hand, contains more textual material and is related to the Kempense Informatiebladen. This book additionally contains a conversation between Jef Geys and curator Dirk Snauwaert and a text contribution by art historian Luke Cohen, who is currently working on a doctoral thesis about Geys. *Archief 4* (2017) begins with a detailed index of Geys' archive, a complete station novel with annotations by Geys, and continues with documents relating to cultural subsidies and correspondence concerning the foundation of an association for visual artists who fought in the early seventies for a social status for visual artists. *Archief 5* appeared on the occasion of Geys' archive installation about the role of the media in the Gulf War in the M HKA, and was preceded by a brief pre-publication of documents relating to the execution process of the installation and an introduction by Bart De Baere.

It seems that these five volumes, despite their physical weight, are only the tip of the iceberg. Archives, after all, have the tendency to grow and expand. And so do archive books. In these times of compressed digital information, Geys's archive books are a subversive statement about memory, history and biography. Their weight and the space they demand on the bookshelf turn them into inert disruptors in the digital network of flashing information highways. Or, how the *old school* artist's book here again fulfils its role as disruptive medium.

Johan Pas  
(Ekeren, July 2017)

\* Note: For more detailed views on the artistic use of archives, see my essay 'Tearing the tissue of the present. Archives, Amnesia, Addiction, Anarchy, Aesthetics, Art & Academia', Nico Dockx (ed.), 'Avec une paire de ciseaux, Track Report 13/01', KASKA, Antwerp, 2013, 179-190.