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The Moment of Marcel Broodthaers? A Conversation

It will come as no surprise that *October* is publishing a special tribute to Marcel Broodthaers on the occasion of his first American exhibition in twenty-five years. The first retrospective in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art, coincides with what would have been the artist's ninety-second birthday on January 28, which was also the day of his premature departure in 1976 at the age of fifty-two.

Beyond paying homage to a great human being and an enigmatic giant among artists of the second half of the twentieth century (for many of his admirers, Broodthaers is simply the other Marcel), we were motivated by a gesture of gratitude toward the curators of the exhibition: Christophe Cherix, the Robert Lehman Foundation Chief Curator of Drawings and Prints at the Museum of Modern Art, and Manuel Borja-Villel, director of the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, have by now become outstanding scholars of the subject. The former, not just because of his enthusiastic knowledge but also thanks to his commitment to bringing the collection of Herman Daled and Nicole Daled-Verstraeten to MoMA in 2011, which now gives us access to the largest holdings of Broodthaers's oeuvre in the United States. Among European curators, Manuel (along with Catherine David in Paris) has curated some of the most comprehensive exhibitions and edited the best catalogues on Broodthaers over the past twenty years.

But *October* has, of course, its own history of commitment to an oeuvre that has remained notoriously difficult for an American reception, beginning with three essays I wrote on the artist in 1980–83 and culminating in a special issue of *October* entirely devoted to Broodthaers that I edited in 1988. The following year, Douglas Crimp, then the managing editor of the magazine, wrote an essay for the first catalogue of an exhibition of Broodthaers's work, curated by Marge Goldwater at the Walker Art Center. Ten years later, a major study by Rosalind Krauss, borrowing the Broodthaers title *A Voyage on the North Sea* and first delivered as the Neurath Lectures in London, set out to develop a major theoretical argument identifying Broodthaers's immense impact on dislodging modernist theories and practices of medium specificity, in a comparison to some of his American peers. And finally, Rachel Haidu, who worked with Rosalind and me at Columbia, wrote what remains to this day the most comprehensive and complex study of the subject.

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The exhibition itself could not be more timely, demarcating a moment in the present where the opposition between European concepts of cultural critique, originating in the post-Surrealist theorizations of spectacle, seems to have been decisively displaced from the horizon of American artistic practices originating in positivism and pragmatism as modernist epistemes. That opposition had been one of the centers of Broodthaers's reflections, while perpetually confronting his own artistic production with the challenges provided by structuralist and post-structuralist thought on language and literature, on institutions and the museum, on nation-state culture and globalization, on the market and the commodity and the fetish status of artistic objects.

October would like to thank Christophe Cherix and Manuel Borja-Villel in particular for this exhibition, and all of the participants for their contributions to this conversation. Trevor Stark has not only contributed new insights to our understanding of Broodthaers but has also generously assisted me in the annotations and footnotes. And we gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Maria Gilissen Broodthaers and Marie-Puck Broodthaers in giving permission to reproduce a few precious images.

—Benjamin H. D. Buchloh

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*Marcel Broodthaers. Pense-Bête. 1964.
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Benjamin Buchloh: I thought it would be good for Manuel and Christophe to give us a sense of the exhibition project, what you anticipate and how the show will position itself. But we can start anywhere you want.

Manuel Borja-Villel: Marcel Broodthaers's work presents a difficulty for any curator. That's where its interest lies. How to exhibit an oeuvre whose space is situated between the various options, with no search for a synthesis? How to display pieces whose very support, pedestals, catalogues, posters, and reproductions form part of them, with nothing serving as an explanation for anything else? How to organize an oeuvre where the roles of the curator, artist, and collector are blurred? How to curate an exhibition of an art that rests upon the failure of modernism in institutions that house modernist collections? These difficulties are increased by the fact that over half a century has gone by since these works were seen for the first time. And although his work still appears mysterious to us, we all know the capacity of the system to absorb everything and turn any critique into a rhetorical gesture. I'd say that some of his postulates have been reprised by contemporary art: a certain way of making cinema, of using exhibition devices, of fictionalizing, and so on. It's just that a critical posture is not always maintained.

The exhibition will be a retrospective in the literal sense of the word. It aims to present the work historically—and a great effort has been made to correct errors and misunderstandings in this respect—from the viewpoint of the present. Here it is important to bear in mind that the artist himself gave us keys to his own historicization. One strategy might be to juxtapose different exhibitions (or fragments of them, his *ambientes*, to use a word that was quite fashionable in the mid-1960s, and is certainly counterposed to both the modernist autonomy of the '50s and '60s and the post-medium installations that came after the '80s) and establish changes of scale with singular works. A component of transversality relating apparently disparate elements is important in order to recreate that “in-between” space he referred to again and again. For instance, we plan to present the literary paintings without frames, so that they have something of the painting but also aspects of the poem and the cinema screen.

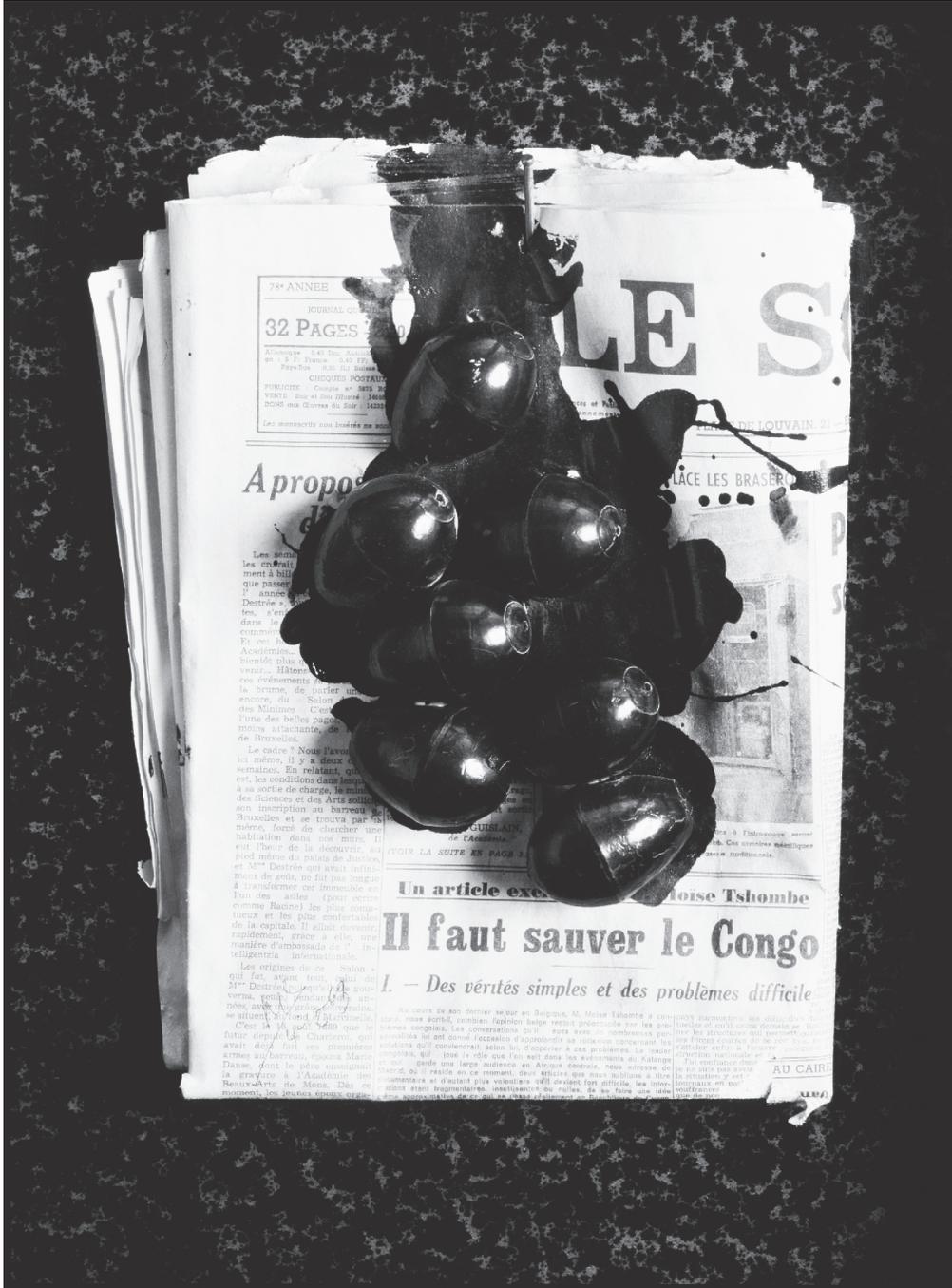
Christophe Cherix: Manuel and I, assisted by Francesca Wilmott, decided not to do an overspecialized exhibition. A lot of research projects on Broodthaers with a specific focus—language, film, exhibition critique—have been presented in the past twenty years, and we felt that it was time for a more comprehensive exhibition. This also will be the first retrospective to take place in New York—so we started our project with the understanding that people are not necessarily familiar with the work. The show begins in the 1940s, then moves to late 1963–64, and goes up to 1974–75. We want to intertwine the threads explored over the past two decades into one exhibition.

We also want to bring the films into the exhibition itself rather than through separate programs, which will allow us to review the work in its totality

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Broodthaers. Le Problème noir en Belgique.
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and to better understand how Broodthaers worked from one thing to the next and how all those things are deeply connected. We decided against a medium-specific show, in which objects would be separated from books or films, for instance. Broodthaers's writings absolutely go against such an approach. He was actually trying to bring film into the same space as poetry, books, and objects.

If you look at his first solo exhibition in 1964, a number of works are closely associated with each other already, some sharing strategies with *Pense-Bête*.¹ *Pense-Bête* is basically copies of a poetry book encased, somewhat trapped, in plaster, and exposed. *Le Problème noir en Belgique*, which was shown not far from it, amounts to a form of public shaming of Belgium's colonial past. And there is *Pour un haut devenir du comportement artistique*, the work that you would have first encountered when you entered the exhibition, on which is screwed the cover of a pamphlet by Michel Tapié in which Tapié condemns Pop art and Nouveau Réalisme.² These three works signal different forms of failure: that of Broodthaers's himself not making a living from poetry, that of the artist's own country's not dealing with its colonial past, and that of an art critic's not understanding the art of the present. We feel that reading these works in direct relation to their original display makes them much stronger statements.

Rachel Haidu: But this is also a problem, since all of what we consider as “modernism” in a way is anchored in the idea of failure. Yet Broodthaers is smart and savvy enough not to identify the really critical political failures that he brings up in that 1964 exhibition, like *Le Problème noir en Belgique*, with the glorious failures of modernism.³ And that is the sweet spot: that he can't simply rely on failure because he is too smart for that. In 1964 in Europe, you can't still hold on to that. Maybe before the war it would have been possible, but you cannot recuperate the innocence of failure after the war.

Cherix: There is also Broodthaers's “manifesto of insincerity,” which announces his first exhibition.⁴ It is not just an invitation; taped on the windows of the Galerie Saint Laurent, it really does serve as a manifesto. You have to read it

1. *Pense-Bête* (Memory aid, or “Think animal”) is the title of the last volume of poetry published by Marcel Broodthaers in 1964, a bestiary, which the poet transformed into a sculpture on the occasion of his first exhibition at the Galerie Saint Laurent in Brussels in 1964. Declaring his transition from poetry to the fine arts, Broodthaers stated that by “burying” his poetical past in plaster, he would hope to begin a presence in the arena of sculpture.

2. Michel Tapié, *Pour un haut devenir du comportement artistique* (Paris: Stadler, 1964).

3. A crucial work in the first exhibition, *Le Problème noir en Belgique* is a montage of Moïse Tshombés “Il faut sauver le Congo,” a front-page article in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* on the fate of the former Belgian colony. Tshombé had initiated the secession of the province of Katanga from the recently founded Democratic Republic of Congo, brought about by the postcolonial, pan-African revolutionary Patrice Lumumba. In collaboration with the Belgian government and the CIA, Tshombé organized the murder of Lumumba in 1961. See David van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

4. Broodthaers's manifesto-style announcement of his first exhibition, *Moi aussi je me suis demandé . . .*, had promised that he would exhibit something “insincere,” namely, objects.

to get the sense that he is not actually telling the truth. You have to take his sincerities as his *insincerity*.

Trevor Stark: Regarding the status of failure in art, Broodthaers famously defined the work of art under capitalist modernity as a “special instance” of the “phenomenon of reification,” and he noted that the one constant in any definition of art would have to be the “transformation of art into merchandise.”⁵ There is a whole spectrum of artistic practices contemporaneous with Broodthaers’s that take the commodity-form as the current horizon of the aesthetic, ranging from Fluxus to Andy Warhol to the Situationists. How would we differentiate him from these models? A certain stream within Fluxus inhabited the lowest rung of commodity production and distribution, adopting the form of the trinket in George Maciunas’s *Flux Kit*, for example. With Warhol, you have an aesthetic of total contemporaneity, reflecting or mimicking the image culture at large. And for the Situationists, art’s complicity with reification is considered to be total, requiring an exit from the aesthetic and the discovery and production of new forms of sociability and praxis. If Broodthaers’s work cannot be reconciled with any of these models, then how does the art-as-commodity thesis function in his art?

Haidu: I think what you are saying is interesting, because I would counter that the commodity as such was not so interesting to him. I just don’t see his argument as being fundamentally engaged with the commodity. If Broodthaers works with something like the commodity, then he works with the pipe, the eagle, the bottle—objects that often become shapes that are always identified simultaneously with the commodity and a kind of Ur-form.

Buchloh: That would be corroborated by the mere fact that when he engages in a polarizing dialogue with Nouveau Réalisme and Pop art, he draws on seemingly natural resources: mussels, eggshells, coal. They are not exactly commodified, packaged, industrially branded objects; they are at best the detritus of consumption. He initiates an artificial process of a naturalization of materials prior to commodity production, almost prefiguring strategies of *arte povera*. Coal is not really commodified . . .

Haidu: Oh, it is hyper-commodified. Are you kidding?

Buchloh: But not in the way that he is presenting it as a pure raw material and resource.

Haidu: What’s interesting about coal is that it is just like a shell. It is the burned excess of the thing. It is partly a sarcastic statement about being a poor Belgian, where you don’t have access to the commodity as such. And of course the mussels have the same symbolic weight as a lion might have for the British, but they have no wealth at all. They are nothing but the refuse of the sea.

Buchloh: They are like Campbell’s soup in Belgium.

5. Marcel Broodthaers, “To be *bien-pensant*,” *October* 42 (Fall 1987), p. 35.

Haidw: But that is the point: The Belgian commodity self-image is not a commodity but the lowest animal in the sea. That is what is so intelligent about his response to this question of commodity production: He steers us outside of its terms. Of course, we come back into it, but we cannot go into it on the terms of the Americans and the French.

Buchloh: And further, how do mussels and eggshells compare to a Fluxus object? I agree that Fluxus artists also prided themselves on delivering the most banal, the most basic, the basest objects as counter-commodities (from Alison Knowles's *Beans* to George Maciunas's *Elephant Dung*). But Broodthaers's mussels and the eggshells are not of that kind. In the same way that Manzoni's bread rolls are not that type of Fluxus object or that type of anti-readymade object. I think it is crucial to see how Broodthaers learns from Manzoni⁶ in that context: How do you conceive of an object and a space anterior to commodification?

Haidw: But it's not the natural, it's the symbolic!

Buchloh: Well, "natural" in quotes.

Haidw: Natural in quotes, but the fact that it is pre-commodity or that it is pre-anything in a sense is only important in that it is part of a makeup of identity. The symbolic is everything in this moment.

Stark: Broodthaers also seems to be performing a knowingly ineffectual critique of the commodity. Oldenburg has the store; Broodthaers has the museum. Warhol has Marilyn; Broodthaers has Mallarmé. These are totally outmoded forms of resistance to current commodity culture.

Haidw: But that is also his artistic culture. Because art insists on being contemporary, and his answer to Minimalism is Mallarmé, he insists that there is never—and this is another trite thing, but true in Broodthaers—the possibil-

6. Broodthaers met Manzoni on February 23, 1962, in Brussels on the occasion of Manzoni's exhibition at the Galerie d'Aujourd'hui. There Manzoni gave Broodthaers *Certificate of Authenticity* #71, which declared, "This is to certify that Marcel Broodthaers has been signed by my hand and therefore has to be considered as an authentic work of art for all intents and purposes as of the date below. Bruxelles, 23-2-62 Piero Manzoni."

Broodthaers would later comment on the encounter as follows: "We encountered each other as though we were comedians. This encounter with Manzoni, on the 23 of February '62, the date of the certificate according to which I have been declared to be a work of art, allowed me to appreciate the distance that separates a poem from a material work which will put the space of *'fine art'* into question. In other words, the value of a message in which even the concept of the commodity is totally identified with the commodity itself." See *Piero Manzoni* (Brussels: Galerie des Beaux Arts, 1987); reprinted in French in Catherine David, ed., *Marcel Broodthaers* (Paris: Musée national du Jeu de Paume, 1991), p. 47. In his crucial text, "Gare au Défi! Le Pop Art, Jim Dine et l'influence de René Magritte," published in *Journal des Beaux Arts* 1029 (November 1963), Broodthaers wrote a moving eulogy on the recently deceased Manzoni:

Manzoni is dead. Physically dead. He was young. Is there a link between his early death and the attitude he had adopted on an artistic level? It is certain that his chosen humour does not make for a comfortable position. And if this turns out to be the cause, we will have serious questions about the artistic events, about all the events. Of course Manzoni will be in the terrible book of the twentieth century." See Gloria Moure, ed., *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 2012), p. 145.

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ity that you are moving toward progress. Would it be possible to finally say that the commodity structure matters in Broodthaers only insofar as it's a symbolic register that produces something like a national identity, or something like a subject at the moment of 1968? Could we finally leave commodity critique out?

Buchloh: He talks about it too often.

Stark: It is a constant. At least in his statements and interviews, he says that the transformation of art into merchandise is one of the constants in his definition of art. Although the objects he produces are not commodities themselves in any unambiguous sort of way.

Haidu: But what he says is something like this: It is the transformation of the object into merchandise and the merchandise into object, the object into the eagle, and the eagle into the object. What he is interested in is the tautology, not critique as critique but the way that the moment you raise critique is the moment you start a tautology. I don't want to say it is a complete red herring, but I cannot see it as the key. Otherwise even the *Museum* would not make sense in the incredibly varied forms that it had. Maybe we could finally talk about the *Museum*?

Borja-Villel: Broodthaers talks about the commodity all the time. He is aware that marketing infiltrates every aspect of our lives in contemporary society, including, of course, culture and also the way national identities are formed. The mussels, fries, and coal of his works have a great deal to do with it, and it's significant that in the film which accompanies *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*, Napoleon goes from being a historical figure to a brand of cognac. Museums have traditionally been the institutions that were meant to preserve that national identity. Logically, therefore, Broodthaers extends his critique of the commodity to the museum. It is also this interest in the phenomenon of fetishization that leads him to *Décor*, "returning," as he says, painting and the object to their original function as bourgeois decoration, but alienating them and creating a space of negativity that somehow makes it impossible for them to live as commodities. For Broodthaers, the artist's political commitment is nearly always manifested in the space of the adversary. And this is a space of conquest. Hence his insistence on not wanting to introduce more objects into the world that might be turned into commodities. Hence, too, that negativity, and the fact that his work wavers between institutional critique and melancholy, which he sometimes calls narcissism and sometimes insincerity.

Buchloh: The shift which I think is very interesting from the objects that we just discussed, the counter-commodity objects, step by step by step to the museum has always fascinated me. Because I don't think that there is a dimension in *Pense-Bête* that would necessarily point to the reflection on the museum as an institution. And when he does the mussel paintings, there is no evidence either of an imminent shift to a reflection on the institutional structure. It's a

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very sudden transformation. It is not clear at that moment that in four years time he will initiate the museum fictions, which is quite extraordinary.

Cherix: It really starts, however, through a reflection on his own work. In between, you have *Court-Circuit*, which I think is a very important show.⁷ It includes for the first time a number of canvases featuring his own work, such as a mussel pot or a jar.

Buchloh: But that is after his encounter with Warhol. The very technique is taken from Warhol.

Cherix: They are very different. The technique has little to do with Warhol.

Buchloh: To my knowledge, nobody does photographic screening other than Warhol?

Cherix: But they are not screenprinted. They are photographs on photosensitive canvas, not screenprints. With that show, Broodthaers opens up a discussion that is neither about making more work nor about distributing or reproducing works, but about art itself. You see this happening very clearly from 1964 to '68 simply by following the sequence of his exhibitions. And film, of course, played a key role in that matter, adding yet another layer. For Broodthaers, film represented another way to distance himself from the physicality of the objects he had produced.

Borja-Villek: It's true there isn't much in *Pense-Bête* that presages the appearance of the museum. Nevertheless, the manifesto in the catalogue-invitation for the Galerie Saint Laurent shows an artist who's interested in the production conditions his work is displayed in. Like Christophe, I think *Court-Circuit* is an important exhibition that has perhaps received less attention than it deserves. In it, Broodthaers moves from the object to its representation. This is evident from the fact that the photographic canvas prints are now very important, but also from the prominent role played by film in the exhibition. At the end of the show, when it was being dismantled, Broodthaers filmed the works displayed at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. The film is not a straightforward documentary, since in it he modifies the presentation of a number of pieces. In some cases, Broodthaers had covered the floor and walls with newspaper and replaced the works that had previously been removed. Other works were positioned on the shelf that he would later use to film *Le Corbeau et le Renard*. Placing the objects, the canvas-printed photographs of those same objects, and then both together against a background of newspaper, or on the shelf with the text of *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, reflects an interest in representation and the exhibition device. There is something of *Décor* in the *Museum*. In *Court-Circuit*, there is already a visible need to spatialize the artistic event and understand the museum as a place of activity. It is only a short step from the action at the close of the show to the inaugural discussion, perhaps propelled by the more combative atmosphere of the spring of '68. As

7. *Court-Circuit* was the title of Broodthaers's first mock "retrospective" exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1967, lasting only two weeks (April 13–25) and accompanied by a small

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we all know, the *Museum* appears in September 1968, after Broodthaers himself had mediated in the occupation of the rooms of the Palais des Beaux-Arts by a group of artists and had ended up rather disappointed by the reduction of the whole discussion to the artists' demand to have their work shown in the galleries of the Palais.

Stark: I'd like to return to Rachel's earlier point about Broodthaers's skepticism regarding the heroic failures of modernism. In a 1966 issue of the postwar Belgian Surrealist journal *Phantomas*⁸ devoted to Broodthaers, he includes a handwritten note about Rimbaud's legendary abandonment of poetry and his escape to Ethiopia. Broodthaers writes that Rimbaud's model of refusal is no longer accessible, that even his exit from poetry is a failure.

Haidu: He actually says, "What is still dear to my heart is the respect for certain values. Rimbaud. Specifically Arthur Rimbaud. The model of revolt. The model of poetic intensity. I would like, as he did, to take care of business in Africa. The Congo."⁹

Borja-Villel: In 1964, Broodthaers clearly decides to take a step forward and question the sincerity of the artwork at a time when any artistic proposal seems to be absorbed from the very outset. Broodthaers understands that in the new historical context the notion of an avant-garde located outside society has ceased to make any sense. Society is not changed from outside, from a supposedly natural place uncontaminated by civilization, but from within, from the reality of the commodification of our experiences. Having assumed the melancholy of the Romantic poet, of the Rimbaud who flees from the impossibility of solving the conflict, Broodthaers returns to the heart of the beast, so to speak, which he tries to disarm with his own weapons. This is seen in *Un film de Charles Baudelaire*, which was the result of his participation in the seminar directed by Lucien Goldmann in the winter of 1969–70. In the film Broodthaers counterposes allusions to the essentialism of primary structures with a political map of the world, thereby marking the absence of any geopolitical or historical reference by the Minimalists to the place occupied in society by their works. It's significant that the film was at some point given the subtitle *Carte politique du monde*. And it is no coincidence that Broodthaers presented this film as a parallel activity to the exhibition that was being shown at the same time at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, *Un Jardin d'Hiver*. Also present in this film is the idea of escape and return, since it

8. *Phantomas* was a Belgian artists' review, founded in 1953 by the writers Marcel Havrenne, Joseph Noiret, and Théodore Koenig and often articulating the Belgian post-WWII critiques of Surrealism. Broodthaers published images of his work and texts in several issues of the magazine. *Phantomas* 62 (February 1966) is a special issue devoted entirely to, and designed by, Marcel Broodthaers.

9. Broodthaers states: "Ce qui me tient encore au coeur, c'est le respect pour certaines valeurs. Rimbaud. Particulièrement Arthur Rimbaud. Le modèle de révolte. Le modèle poétique intense. J'aimerais, comme lui, m'occuper d'affaires en Afrique. Le Congo." See Broodthaers, "Special Issue by Marcel Broodthaers," *Phantomas* 62, p. 9.

refers to the journey taken by Baudelaire between 1841 and 1842 at his parents' insistence in order to get him away from the bohemian life of Paris.

Buchloh: Can I delay the pursuit of the chronology a bit by asking, what are Broodthaers's strategies of counter-plasticity at the very beginning? After all, when he starts out with *Pense-Bête*, the work in many ways performs a violent assault on plasticity. And he delivers a subversive travesty of anything that is being done at that time within the parameters of sculpture or painting in Paris. His responses to what arrives from New York as Pop art, be it George Segal or Andy Warhol, only get more and more acerbic with time. We can see that in his works, and we can read it in his writings at that time, his ambiguity with regard to the reception of Nouveau Réalisme and the reception of Pop steadily increases.

But this subversion of the principles of plasticity has also delayed the comprehension of Broodthaers's own oeuvre in a major way. When people saw those objects for the first time, the mussel-accumulations, for example, or the panels with eggshells, they could neither read these as variations of Nouveau Réalisme nor as Pop art because these hybrid reliefs were simultaneously sabotaging both positions.

Cherix: We have been looking very carefully at *Le Problème noir en Belgique*, a work that MoMA just acquired. I never thought of it as really emerging out of the context of what was happening in Europe at that time but more as an extremely singular work. I believe now, however, that it has very much to do with the emergence of Pop art and, rather than an isolated work, is a foundational work in Broodthaers's practice.

It appeared in his first solo exhibition, so there is the temptation not to necessarily relate it to other artists being shown at that time. But three months before the opening of Broodthaers's first exhibition, in January–February 1964, Andy Warhol had his first solo show in Europe, at Sonnabend Gallery in Paris. And what does he show for the first time there, among other things? His *Race Riots* paintings. I don't know whether Broodthaers actually saw this exhibition in Paris, but he was fairly close to Ileana and Michael Sonnabend.¹⁰ He occasionally did even small jobs for the Paris gallery. The Belgian collector Hubert Peeters, Broodthaers's first collector, who passed away earlier this year, also told me that it was Michael Sonnabend who had first told him about Broodthaers.

It's hard not to think that there isn't a relationship between the showing of Warhol's *Race Riots* at Sonnabend in Paris and Broodthaers's inclusion of *Le Problème noir en Belgique* at Galerie Saint Laurent in Brussels. Both works have obviously much in common, as they both bring into Pop art political and social issues.

10. Michael Sonnabend, a literary scholar and poet, was the husband of Ileana Sonnabend. Broodthaers's friendship was been recorded in a short text entitled "Mike Sonnabend," in which he addressed Sonnabend directly, in *Phantomas* nos. 51–61 (December 1965), p. 297.

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Broodthaers made most of the work exhibited at Galerie Saint Laurent in the months leading to the opening. What also characterized *Pense-Bête*, *Pour un haut devenir du comportement artistique*, and *Le Problème noir en Belgique* is the fact that they are all quite topical. *Pense-Bête* was Broodthaers's last poetry book, which had just been released, Michel Tapié's book appearing in *Pour un haut devenir du comportement artistique* came out at the same moment, and the newspaper article from *Le Soir* featured in *Le Problème noir en Belgique* dates from January 1964—precisely the time of Warhol's show in Paris.

Buchloh: Actually I don't even know the political position of that newspaper. . . .

Cherix: It was the main newspaper. . . .

Haidu: It was a bit on the right, like *Le Figaro*.

Cherix: It was a little more in the center than that. "Il faut sauver le Congo" doesn't express a conservative position. It was written by a Congolese as part of a series of three articles, as an in-depth and critical look at the situation in Congo.

What is even more fascinating is that Broodthaers dated the work not from 1964, when the article was published, but December 4, 1963, when an earlier article about the writer of "Il faut sauver le Congo" came out. The December article relates the fact that the writer of "Il faut sauver le Congo," who was seen by the Belgium government as a political activist, had first been prohibited from entering Belgium on the occasion of the wedding of his daughter.

Haidu: But to me, the violence of that piece also overrides the tone of the article. I think Broodthaers was politically savvy enough to know that even if somebody had been writing what could be a difficult piece to write at that time in a Belgian newspaper, it was already a doomed enunciation. In other words, there is nothing about a political alignment in throwing some plastic eggs and black paint on the cover of the paper. The gesture is actually too violent.

Cherix: To me, one key element of the work is the nail, not the eggs, which were, in fact, not painted black but most probably already black when Broodthaers found them. In the work, the black paint appears to be underneath the eggs. By nailing the newspaper to the board, Broodthaers constructs a kind of pillory, an ancient practice consisting of denouncing or shaming somebody or something by exposing them publicly.

Stark: Is your question, Rachel, about whether or not one should read this front page of the newspaper referentially, as a statement of the artist's own political alignment? Or whether, as in the newspaper fragments relating to political events in Picasso's *papiers collés*, for example, we might be mistaken to read the work as articulating a coherent position with respect to the original article—positive or negative?

Haidu: He saves the title, and I think for me that is the key action. "Il faut sauver le Congo" is a statement that is truly pathetic in this context. How can this be articulated in 1964, or 1963, given the history of Congo and Belgium?

Cherix: Well, Congo had gained its independence in 1960.

Haidu: But what Congo had become already by this time is the point.

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Cherix: Sure, there was a civil war.

Haidu: No, not the civil war. The history of *le roi Léopold*. You don't think Broodthaers is sufficiently postcolonial?

Cherix: If you think about Broodthaers's relation to independent Congo, an interesting work to bring into the discussion is *Pour Lumumba*, which was done at the same time. It is a panel painted in a beige color covered with white eggs. Patrice Lumumba was the first prime minister of the independent Congo, who was quickly arrested and murdered—

Buchloh: —on behalf of the Belgian government and that of the United States and with the assistance of the CIA.

Haidu: Don't you think that those two works together make it clear . . . he doesn't have to articulate it as a postcolonial argument. But something like "Il faut sauver le Congo" is too sharp for the delicacies of the Belgian alignments around this topic at the time. Broodthaers was already way past that.

Cherix: If we go back for a minute to the Galerie Saint Laurent show, another element that surprised us while looking at installation photographs of the installation is that *Pense-Bête*, the sculpture, which is always seen as a centerpiece, a manifesto of a sort, was in fact not exhibited in a prominent position in relation to other works, such as *Le Problème noir en Belgique* and *Pour un haut devenir du comportement artistique*. It was displayed close to the floor, next to a quite imposing mural shelf displaying three open copies and four closed copies of the *Pense-Bête* poetry book.

Buchloh: Both the traditional version without the papers and the collaged versions?

Cherix: Only with the collages, from what we can tell. But you could easily read part of the poems, as the collages don't obliterate the text entirely.

Haidu: That is also a nice way to get into the question of how to show the early work. I think you have already suggested that you think about how the work defines its space. Those incredibly belligerent objects like *Pupitre*—

Buchloh: *Pupitre* (Lectern) was, ironically, the work that Magritte recommended to a museum director, saying, Buy this work of a young unknown artist, this is the work that you should buy from this exhibition. And he even misspells Broodthaers's name. It is quite wonderful.

Haidu: But if we are to look at the way he exhibits the sculptural works in the show—even just in these few photographs of the *Pupitre* and the violin case in Catherine David's catalogue,¹¹ for example—all of them are placed almost on the floor. I am not arguing with you about this, I am just trying to point out that he is interested in the space, and the way that he can place the objects in that space in what he would consider a contemporary modality. Like Oldenburg, in a way. Maybe he doesn't know the work, but . . .

Borja-Villel: I agree his works occupy space. Quite a lot has been said about Broodthaers's relationship with the French and American artists, the artists of Pop and Nouveau Réalisme, and Broodthaers's ambiguity toward them.

11. David, *Marcel Broodthaers*, p. 58.

But we might perhaps mention Michelangelo Pistoletto, whom he no doubt met through Ileana Sonnabend. There is even a photograph of Pistoletto and Sonnabend that Broodthaers retouched, putting the following question for the dealer in the artist's mouth: "Aimez-vous le pop?" Pistoletto's *specchi-anti* pictures are from these years, and his interest is not so much the image or the object as the space. As in the case of Broodthaers, this is a negative space in which neither objects nor commodities are added to the world.

Rosalind Krauss: What about his *Décor*?

Cherix: The idea of *Décor* emerges extremely early in Broodthaers's work. His first film, *La Clef de l'Horloge, Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters*, shows this very well. Broodthaers used an exhibition of Kurt Schwitters's works as a stage set for his film, turning Schwitters's assemblages into props. Our exhibition will attempt to show how this notion of *Décor* makes itself gradually more explicit throughout Broodthaers's trajectory. We will evoke as closely as possible, for instance, two of his shows, which can be seen as more immersive environments: *Le Corbeau et le Renard*¹² and *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé*.¹³ We will also present for the first time outside of the Centre Pompidou the original version of *La Salle Blanche* and, of course, *Décor: A Conquest*.

Buchloh: Instead of misreading Broodthaers as an artist engaged in multimedia practices, which is clearly not the case, we will have to develop a theoretical model addressing the intersection of these various strands from the very beginning. For example, what is the role of film in opposition to poetic language in *La Clef de l'Horloge (The Key to the Clock)* or later in *Le Corbeau et le Renard*?

Cherix: That opposition can be discussed, even though to me it is not a clear opposition. Obviously, Broodthaers was a poet for a couple of decades, even without publishing much. His first poetry book, *Mon livre d'ogre*, was published only in 1957.¹⁴ *La Clef de l'Horloge*, his first film, was shot the year before, in 1956, and was fully completed, with the addition of its soundtrack, in 1958; yet strangely Broodthaers always dated it 1957.¹⁵ In other words, according to Broodthaers,

12. *Le Corbeau et le Renard (d'après La Fontaine)* was the title of Broodthaers's first exhibition at Wide White Space in Antwerp, March 7–24, 1968. The film bearing the same title, produced for that occasion, was submitted to be shown at Expmntl, the Knokke Experimental Film Festival, in December 1967, but was rejected since Broodthaers insisted that the film had to be shown on the specific projection screen he had imprinted with a complex invocation of the text of La Fontaine's fables.

13. *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* was the title of Broodthaers's second exhibition at Wide White Space in Antwerp, December 2–20, 1969. It was on this occasion that Broodthaers published the three versions of his paraphrase of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, referring to Mallarmé as "the source of contemporary art, who unconsciously invented the space of modernity."

14. Broodthaers's first collection of poems was published as *Mon livre d'ogre: Suite de récits poétiques* (Ostende: Edition à l'Enseigne de l'Arquebuse du Silence, 1957). It contained a poem from 1947 referring to melancholy as the "bitter castle of eagles," a phrase frequently cited in his later works.

15. *La Clef de l'Horloge (Un poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters)* was shot during an exhibition of the work of Kurt Schwitters at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1956 (October 13–November 11, 1956). Broodthaers subsequently dated the seven-minute short as having been made

his first film and his first poetry book appear simultaneously. We need to keep this in mind: For Broodthaers, there is not necessarily an opposition between film and poetry, perhaps more a simultaneity.

Borja-Villel: Being a poet, Broodthaers found, as Mallarmé had, that he was more interested in the production of painters like Manet than in the literature of his time, which he often found too limited. In relation to his own work, Broodthaers always speaks of three aspects that are indissociable: word, object, and image. The first is related to poetry, the second to the visual arts and everyday reality, and the third to cinema. What interests him, however, is not the complementarity of these disciplines but the spaces between them.

Buchloh: Whereas I was about to suggest that there is a growing awareness of the increasing oppositionality between the two spheres of operation. Broodthaers knows that he remains a poet while he recognizes the increasing obsolescence of his medium, intensified by his discovery of the centrality of filmic practices.

He appears to be suspended between the forces of history. Increasingly, the filmic and technological media become more and more complex as a challenge to poetry and plasticity. And to me it appears as though he were saying: I have to accept this condition, I have to accept and internalize filmmaking as a principle of engaging representation since it is the dominant medium of the present.

Borja-Villel: I would say that the opposition is between an anachronistic medium and one that responds to the present, since the cinema has something anachronistic about it for Broodthaers, and it serves him as an antidote for the hypertechnification of the present. The cinema is a spectacle, but one from another time. Broodthaers never used video, nor did he feel any interest in applying technological advances to his films. His references to classic cinema, especially the silent cinema that had not yet become an object of mass consumption despite maintaining a popular character, are constant. And Broodthaers often uses the cinematographic techniques of the classic films of the '20s. *La Clef de l'Horloge*, which we have mentioned, has clear referents to Léger's *Ballet mécanique*, and the boat in *Berlin oder ein Traum mit Sahne* (1974) alludes to Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*. These references are not nostalgic in character. Although it does not appear that Broodthaers had read Walter Benjamin, since his texts had not yet been translated into French, his melancholy coincides to a good extent with that of the Benjamin of the *Passagen Werk*. His gaze turns to something that has already passed, which is not of the present: something which has failed, and whose failure helps us understand the present better and become critical of it.

Cherix: At the same time, he says in *Trépiéd*, "I am not a filmmaker."¹⁶ And I think we

16. "Interview de Marcel Broodthaers," *Trépiéd* 1 (1968), pp. 4–5; English translation in *Marcel Broodthaers: A Special Issue*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *October* 42 (Fall 1987), pp. 36–39.

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have to take his word for it. He wasn't trained as a filmmaker and never wanted to be seen as such.

Buchloh: So what is he, if he is not a filmmaker who makes films? How does one describe that?

Cherix: I don't think you can, and I think Rosalind talked about that very well in the past. He is not someone you can understand through mediums. One of the questions you had suggested in advance of our conversation was related to Barnett Newman, who said that artists do not open the doors on artistic practices, they close doors. But for me that cannot be applied to Broodthaers precisely because Broodthaers's work cannot be defined according to mediums. Newman closed the door, in a way, since he worked within a tradition of painting; Broodthaers was never part of that tradition.

Borja-Villel: His work is always intertextual. That is how his films function in relation to his exhibitions and objects. *La Bataille de Waterloo*, for instance, is a testimony to the exhibition he held at the ICA, but it also contains references to cinema itself, to Abel Gance and Orson Welles. In *Un film de Charles Baudelaire*, Broodthaers criticizes Minimalism while alluding to Vigo and the possibility of making a cinema that would be simultaneously avant-garde and popular. I think the obsession with discipline is perhaps more a problem for critics than for Broodthaers himself. I don't see the step from "poet" to "artist" as being so much a question of a change of technique as one of a different positioning toward his own artistic production. Gance said that if Shakespeare, Rembrandt, or Beethoven had lived in our time, they would have made movies. Broodthaers makes a similar claim, since he goes continually from one medium to the other, understanding as he does that historic artworks affect the present in mediums other than those they were conceived for.

Krauss: It seems to me that Broodthaers's *Open Letters*¹⁷ are an incredibly important part of his work. Are you going to include these in the exhibition, and how will you display them?

Cherix: Broodthaers, indeed, liked the format of the open letter very much and published a number of them. As a series, they are clearly articulated in relation to each other and they are, of course, deeply associated with the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*.

Krauss: I think the *Open Letters* started as press releases from the sit-ins. They were part of that whole larger community of protesters, or they resulted from the experience of sit-ins, when protesters all over the world appropriated for-

17. Starting in the summer of 1968, with a letter addressed to Joseph Beuys, dated ominously "14 Juillet" and announcing the imminent opening of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in his studio in Brussels, on September 27, Broodthaers's *Département des Aigles* would send out about a dozen *Open Letters*, either addressed to individual artists (e.g., David Lamelas, Jörg Immendorf, Joseph Beuys) or more generally to "friends" (informing them about the progress of his projects or other topical issues engaging him at the time). A group of facsimile letters was reproduced in David, *Marcel Broodthaers*, pp. 194–99; a more comprehensive group was included in Moure, *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, pp. 196–218.

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CABINET DES MINISTRES DE LA CULTURE.

Ostende, le 7 sept.1968

O U V E R T U R E

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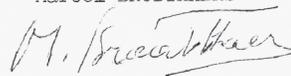
Nous avons le plaisir d'informer la clientèle et les curieux de l'inauguration du " Département des Aigles " du Musée d'Art Moderne.

Les travaux sont en cours; leur achèvement déterminera la date à laquelle nous espérons faire briller, la main dans la main, la poésie et les arts plastiques.

Nous espérons que notre formule " désintéressement plus admiration " vous séduira.

Pour l'un des Ministres

Marcel BRODTHAERS



30, rue de la Pépinière
Bruxelles 1.

à bientôt, chers Amis,

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Broodthaers. Lettre Ouverte (Open Letter). Ostende, September 7, 1968. © Estate Marcel Broodthaers.

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merly private or prohibited institutional spaces and occupied them. And then these protesters communicated with the outside world through press releases, or what we could call “open letters.” So it seems to me that one way of including and understanding the *Open Letters* is to recognize that they resulted from those institutional occupations, in which Broodthaers obviously participated.

Cherix: We include them in different parts of the catalogue. In the show, we will have most probably to regroup them somehow, likely with the founding of the *Musée d'Art Moderne*.

Buchloh: The “open letter” is also a format that Broodthaers inherits from the Internationale Lettriste. I think it is a very important format for him because it fuses the role of the poet with the role of the public activist at the very moment when the role of the poet has become extremely problematic for him. So he adopts the role of the activist and the public speaker precisely when the role of the poet disappears from his horizon of historical aspirations. As Rosalind said, they are very concretely tied to the particular situation of the student and worker rebellions around 1968. Yet these *Open Letters* also allow him to map the two functions, the tribune and the poet, into one particular operation. For example, in the same way that a Soviet factographic writer could suddenly claim the space of public activity when he or she knew that literature was no longer the space and the language within which one could operate, Broodthaers—obviously in an ironical repetition of that political claim for a new publicness of communication—performs his *Open Letters* as though they had been derived from the activist legacies of the Internationale Lettriste.

Stark: But his *Open Letters* are also a deflation of the activist tract. This would be evident in the way he bureaucratized the open-letter form, the way he mockingly situated them within and sent them from this fictional institution.

Haidur: And they were always addressed to private individuals. Sometimes the most private individuals you can think of. “Mon Cher Beuys” is not really to his close friend, if such a thing were possible. But he speaks from the inside of a fictive institution, but also a dusty institution in which he is totally alone. So the form of the letters really breaks apart any possibility of an activist performance.

Buchloh: So it is an openness without a public and without publicness?

Krauss: No, no, no. I don't agree with that. Essentially they come out of the university sit-ins, with the activists claiming the right to speak. That's why they said *tu* to their teachers and they wouldn't take exams, because they were claiming the position of the speakers, the right to speak. And Broodthaers's claim to become the director of his own museum was a way of claiming that right to act on behalf not only of himself but of other artists as well. But I think the *Open Letters* are so central because they are related to Broodthaers's deciding to make himself the director of his museum. To make his voice the origin of speech, of language, of the intercourse between himself and the public.

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Haidu: But Broodthaers is also a different generation. I think *Le Corbeau et le Renard* especially brings up the anxiety and the ambivalence that are provoked by the student movement. *Le Corbeau et le Renard* actually begins in a situation in the university.

The version of the story that I know is that he goes into an empty classroom and he writes out *Le Corbeau et le Renard* onto the blackboard in French, in an altered version, not necessarily the version that turns up in the work, and then it dies. There is no aftermath.

Cherix: The text that would become the source for almost every subsequent use is a street intervention; Broodthaers wrote the text on top of a poster.

Haidu: What was so exciting for me about the version that I know was the chalkboard. It was like the plane of authority, and also the play between black and white that becomes so crucial in the work. He writes *Le Corbeau et le Renard* as if he were writing it from memory, but then he ends with “le Renard sonne . . .” or “le Corbeau sonne . . .,” I can never remember which, and drifts off into whatever he can think of. He was trying to produce a kind of action.

There is no image of it, because the point was that it lives as an anecdote, and in fact as an unverifiable one. This is partly why I could not write about it. Anyway, it went nowhere; the point was that it had no pickup. And that also is a kind of key moment in his understanding of 1968 and his place in it.

Buchloh: Can we go back for a moment to the discussion of the *Open Letters*, since you and Rosalind were diametrically opposed in your response? It points to Broodthaers’s capacity to engender these contradictory structures all the time. Were you not saying that the public, political agency of the letters is already contradicted by the fact that they were addressed to friends, or private individuals as though they were friends?

Haidu: Yes, but they are distributed publicly. The point is, how do you use the conceit of a lonely individual writing to another solitary individual and explode that into a public statement? The open letter is also a letter to the editor, which is not a private statement but it is formally a kind of private statement because it is a letter.

Buchloh: But how to you reconcile Rosalind’s reading, which I clearly think is right, with your reading, which is clearly, I think, right as well? This is a difficult task.

Krauss: You mean, that they are press releases?

Buchloh: You stated that they are statements of agency in a public space with a political claim, and Rachel says that they are statements performing a loss of agency and the disability of agency in a private realm.

Haidu: But they are advertisements of the loss of agency, which is exactly what he starts off with in the invitations for his first exhibition.

Buchloh: Advertising a loss of agency is already a pretty paradoxical statement. . . .

Stark: While they come out of the occupations of 1968, the *Open Letters* reflect almost immediately on the failure of the movement. What I mean to say is that the activist tract presumes an immediate and instrumental type of communication, which is something that is shown defused in Broodthaers. The

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question of to whom the *Open Letters* are addressed or whether they will be received at all is kept open. The medium of the letter for Broodthaers is also incessantly fictionalized, as when he writes to Joseph Beuys in the mode of a “found” letter from Jacques Offenbach to Richard Wagner.¹⁸

So the connection of Broodthaers’s *Open Letters* to the Lettrist tracts is perhaps one of ironization. Broodthaers maintained some distance from the Belgian Surrealist group associated with the journal *Les Lèvres nues*, centered around Marcel Mariën and Paul Nougé, with whom the French Lettrists Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord, and Gil J. Wolman were collaborating in the mid-1950s. For example, the Internationale Lettriste group co-authored a tract with *Les Lèvres nues* in 1956 called “*Toutes ces dames au salon!*” denouncing artists who participated in an art exhibition in Brussels sponsored by Shell.¹⁹ The show was titled “*The Petroleum Industry Viewed by Artists,*” and the Shell Corporation bought every work exhibited. The tract listed not only co-signatories and supporters—such as Jean Fautrier, Asger Jorn, and Michel Leiris—but singled out those who refused to add their names or who didn’t respond, like Magritte. A few months later, Broodthaers and a couple others associated with *Phantomas*, including Pol Bury, published a sort of parody letter, which satirized the ex cathedra tone of the Lettrists. It was called “*Les curés exagèrent,*” i.e., the priests are exaggerating, they’re making too big a deal of it.

Haidu: Well, I wonder if we could make the leap into the *Industrial Poems*, his plastic plaques, some of which are based on the *Open Letters* but are addressed to the public. . . .

Cherix: They have a public function, which is indeed close to the function of the letters. He installed these vacuum-formed plaques a few times, in his retrospectives, of course, but also before that. So we have good models of how to use them in our show.

Haidu: Maybe we could go back to what Benjamin started off with, which was the idea of film versus language, which I think is a difficult binary, or a way to binarize Broodthaers that is hard, especially since the very first thing he contends with as an artist is not film and language but objects and plasticity, maybe versus poetry, but he has to create objects and they are these messy *coquillages* . . .

Buchloh: *Le Pense-Bête* . . .

18. Broodthaers actually wrote two letters to Joseph Beuys. The first one, sent from Brussels on July 14, 1968, is an homage to the new Germany “ . . . rising from the dead . . .,” which Broodthaers sees as being represented by Joseph Beuys and Rudi Dutschke. The second letter, entitled “*Politik der Magie,*” is a farewell note to Beuys. It was written in three languages (English, French, German), dated September 27, and first published in the Düsseldorf newspaper *Rheinische Post* on October 3, 1972. Disguised as a found letter from Jacques Offenbach to Richard Wagner, the second letter was subsequently published as a *plaquette*, a booklet with the title *Magie: Art et Politique* (Paris: Multiplicata, 1973). See Moure, *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, p. 196, for the first letter, and pp. 382–89 for the second letter and its subsequent publication as a book.

19. *Les Lèvres nues* was a Belgian post-Surrealist journal. Between 1954 and 1958, Marcel Mariën and Paul Nougé edited the journal’s ten issues, publishing major texts by the French and Belgian mem-

Haidu: I know, I know, of course *Pense-Bête*, but he also has to make more than just the one signal work. He has to make work after work after work, and he has to make them as objects of plasticity. So that if there is such a binary as film versus language, the question of materiality or plasticity almost immediately pushes it aside or flips it over as well.

Buchloh: It's not the only one binary though. It is one binary with, or after, another binary, that is the problem. Film versus language, the filmic versus plasticity, and then—

Stark: “Versus” is right, too, because the mediums are all always interrupting each other, as when he projects a film onto a screen that has been printed with words. In almost all of Broodthaers's films, you are forced to read a lot—in a way that sabotages the audiovisual plenum of cinema.

Borja-Villel: Broodthaers proposes something that is always “in relation,” something that goes continuously from one place to another. He does not define or impose but moves between options and disciplines. When he filmed *Speakers' Corner* in London, five days after the opening of his exhibition of *Peintures littéraires* at the Jack Wendler Gallery, one of the words that appeared most prominently was “Silence.” Nothing could be less messianic, less modernist, and less associated with the specificity of a medium than these paintings. They are literary, but they do not speak.

Krauss: I think, frankly, with that aspect, he's really making a kind of ironic comment about the intertitles. So he is taking film back to its origins in silence, and introducing the intertitle seems to me to be part of that interest in the medium. That is probably also the reason why he was always interested in materializing the surface of the projection.

Buchloh: Let's go back to the historical origins of his filmic practice: He goes to Knokke—

Cherix: He doesn't go to Knokke. You mean in 1958?

Buchloh: But he goes to Knokke later . . .

Cherix: He goes later, but in 1958, it is Knokke that comes to Brussels, because of the World's Fair. The Festival International du Film of Knokke-le-Zoute is *in* Brussels. The 1958 catalogue doesn't even mention Knokke-le-Zoute, but it is the second festival of Knokke-le-Zoute presented in Brussels—the first one had happened in 1949.

Buchloh: But doesn't he show the Schwitters film, *La Clef de l'Horloge*, at that time?

Cherix: He *does* show the Schwitters film in the festival. It was a submission, and there was an arrangement with the festival that the Cinémathèque Royale of Brussels would get a copy of each film submitted.

Haidu: So they would have the copy of it since it was shown in the official festival?

Cherix: To my knowledge, there is no reason to doubt that it was shown. The catalogue indicates it as being screened as part of the World's Fair.

Buchloh: But then he goes later to Knokke and he sees the films of Jack Smith and he sees the films of Hollis Frampton and he sees those of Michael Snow, in

1966–1967. So his film production responds to that, or establishes a dialogue with that American film culture. Once again, there is a very complicated interaction because he does neither what French Lettrist and Situationist film had done in the late 1950s nor what so-called American structuralist film does in the late 1960s. Ultimately, it is incredibly difficult to clarify where Broodthaers’s models of filmmaking really came from.

Cherix: He clearly had a film culture. But what is also true—and, with Broodthaers, it is always fascinating—is that there is a form of internal logic to the work itself. One of his first published texts is called *Project for a Film* (1948): It describes the shooting of an immobile landscape. Then, a fly comes in, giving motion to the landscape, and a wheel starts turning. It is, by the way, exactly what you see in *La Clef de l’Horloge*, made almost ten years later: The only real motion captured by the film is the turning of one of Schwitters’s wheels.

It is quite remarkable that Broodthaers’s text is titled *Project for a Film*, when it was clearly not meant to be realized as a film at the time. In *Le Surréalisme révolutionnaire*, where it first appeared, it follows an editorial written by Christian Dotremont.²⁰ Dotremont argues that film must be reappropriated by progressive forces. And when you turn the page, after you have read Dotremont’s text, what do you encounter first? *Project for a Film* by Broodthaers.

Borja-Villel: Broodthaers wasn’t interested in the American or European experimental cinema of the 1960s. Nor do his films have much to do with the ways the Lettrists or the Situationists used the moving image. His references are to Keaton, Chaplin, Vigo. In the famous photograph where he poses in the Fantômas mask with smoke coming out of his mouth, he holds the first volume of Sadoul’s *General History of Cinema*. In this book, Sadoul studies the invention of the cinema and its earliest steps, something Broodthaers always showed a great interest in. He even built up a small collection of shadow machines, cartoon projectors, and so on. Those things attracted his interest, and they shed a little light on his priorities.

There’s another factor to be taken into account that’s as central to his film as to the rest of his work: the importance of context and self-reflection. He filmed *Figures of Wax*, for instance, “between two choices,” as he put it. The film was made at the moment when the gold standard was abandoned. Broodthaers makes this explicit by appearing with a newspaper that reports on this new situation. Images of shop fronts, window dummies, and the old London Stock Exchange are seen in the film. But on the other hand, the

20. Christian Dotremont, a Belgian painter and poet, was a founding member of *Surréalisme révolutionnaire*, a short-lived movement launched with an essay of the same name in February 1947 and the tract “Pas de quartiers dans la révolution!” [No camps in the revolution!] from June 1947, which Broodthaers co-signed. Broodthaers’s poem “Project for a Film” appears in the only issue of the journal *Le Surréalisme révolutionnaire: Revue bimestrielle publiée par le Bureau International du Surréalisme révolutionnaire* (March–April 1948), p. 4. In November 1948, with Asger Jorn from Denmark, Dotremont would coordinate COBRA, the international group of artists linking Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam.

film is a performance, and Broodthaers foregrounds this in his fictional conversation with Jeremy Bentham.

Buchloh: But there is a schism, obviously, if someone like Dotremont says we have to rescue film, and then you have Debord at the very same moment who is clearly not aiming to rescue film but to destroy it. And I think Broodthaers, once again, is in between the two positions.

Haidu: We can't take either of those positions; it is not a binary, or it is a binary that he would not have accepted. Neither do I think that he would have accepted at all the binary film versus language, of course. . . . But then you are getting us into a question about the medium, and of course he uses film—but does he *make* films? There is a distinction. Just because you make a film does not mean that you are necessarily engaged in the question of whether you are going to rescue the medium of film or not.

Stark: In 1955, *Les Lèvres nues* publishes the script for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* by Guy Debord, and in the same issue Marcel Mariën publishes a text called “Un autre cinéma,” which provides something like a theory of *détournement* in film—one issue before the journal publishes Debord and Wolman’s “User’s Guide to *Détournement*.” Mariën argues that you don’t need an expensive technical apparatus to make a film, let alone the support of a studio. All you need is to work directly with scraps from already existing films, a soundtrack, and a pair of scissors.²¹ It’s safe to assume that Broodthaers was aware of this theory of filmic *détournement*. There’s an early film by Broodthaers [*Le Chant de ma génération*] from 1959, which is now lost, that seems to have been a montage of various appropriated films. And several films in *Section cinéma* (*Charlie als Filmstar*, *Brussels Teil II*, and *Belga Vox-Mode-20th Century Fox* [all 1971]) are *détournements* made from found commercial and newsreel footage.

Cherix: But that applies even to *La Clef de l’Horloge*. We recently found a copy that was owned by Hubert Peeters, Broodthaers’s first collector. Looking at this copy, we realized that it was made of different film stock spliced together, made very much like a collage. Broodthaers did not have the resources to buy film stocks at the time and most probably made use of what was given to him.

Haidu: He made a copy of *La Clef de l’Horloge*? In other words, he did not order more copies from the film laboratory, he made a copy himself?

Cherix: That is something that we have not yet solved.

Haidu: I don’t even understand. It is a different copy, so it must be also a different film.

Borja-Villel: He gathered the materials, mounted them, and constructed the final film, from which he took an internegative that allowed him to make an indefinite number of copies. Having said that, Broodthaers worked on his films much as he did with the rest of his work, so it comes as no surprise to find films of which various versions exist, sometimes with added intertitles, and sometimes with

21. Marcel Mariën, “Un autre cinéma,” *Les Lèvres nues* 7 (December 1955), p. 14.

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scenes that weren't in other versions. For instance, we have found as many as four different variants of *Une discussion inaugurale* (1968).

Haidu: So this is not because of a poverty of materials; it is because he was changing it, like in the *Pense-Bête* that he uses as a support for his collages. . . .

Stark: Right from the beginning, then, he makes a film on the basis of a previously existing work of art: a *détournement*.

Cherix: In *La Clef de l'Horloge*, no fewer than twelve different works are included, sometimes appearing at multiple times. So it is not about a work in particular; they are intertwined as if Broodthaers were making an assemblage.

Buchloh: But are they all works by Schwitters?

Cherix: They are all by Schwitters, except for one, which shows the word *Merz*. That particular fragment comes from a drawing by Hans Arp, now in the collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou. This work was not in the Palais des Beaux-Arts exhibition, but it had been published in *Phantomas* a few months earlier. It also appeared in the catalogue of an earlier venue of the Schwitters show, at the Kunsthalle in Bern, where Schwitters's work was presented alongside Arp's.

In our exhibition, we will dedicate our first room to *La Clef de l'Horloge*, which will be screened among Broodthaers's poetry books, as if *La Clef de l'Horloge* were literally one of the keys to Broodthaers's work. I think it is important that, in New York at least, people don't relate Broodthaers to Magritte's work only but also to Schwitters's, who was certainly as important to him.

Buchloh: It would also be interesting because I think it was probably the first time that a prewar German artist was rediscovered in the postwar period, which was, of course, not that easy to do in Belgium in 1957. Arman also rediscovers Schwitters at that time. And as you undoubtedly know, there is a French magazine called *K* that republishes Schwitters already in 1949. Villeglé told me that this, and an exhibition of Schwitters at Heinz Berggruen's gallery in Paris in 1954, triggered his rediscovery of Schwitters.

Cherix: You are absolutely right. By understanding this, one might also relate Broodthaers in a more interesting way to some of the great figures of the 1960s, such as Robert Rauschenberg and Ed Ruscha, who also discovered Schwitters very early in their careers. It allows us to realign Broodthaers with a generation of American artists.

Stark: I think we should spend a moment on the question of Broodthaers's reception in the United States. In 1972, he was invited to participate in the exhibition *Amsterdam-Paris-Düsseldorf*. It was an exhibition that started at the Guggenheim in New York and then traveled to the Pasadena Art Museum and finally ended up in Dallas, Texas, I believe. Broodthaers agrees to show *Ma Collection* in the Guggenheim, but then he declines to have his work shown in Pasadena and Texas. He essentially states in a letter to the curator [Jürgen Harten] that he's uncertain how effective the work will be with an American public, since it's based on his claim that Stéphane Mallarmé is at the origin of contemporary art, a claim that he himself doesn't understand within

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the American context. Instead of lending the work, he proposes that the curator publish their correspondence as an information sheet in the exhibition, in order to detail the reasons why he withdrew his work. So Broodthaers is obviously already thinking the possibility of missed communication in different geopolitical or cultural contexts of reception.

Buchloh: Ironically, the three police shirts he included in the first *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé*, the exhibition at Wide White Space in 1968, were from Dallas, Texas.

Cherix: They were. We cannot show them, unfortunately, as they cannot travel because the chalk was never fixed. But we will have *Igitur*, another jacket that was shown briefly alongside the police shirts in the same exhibition.

Haidu: So you are going to reconstruct the Mallarmé exhibition as accurately as possible but without actually mimicking the original?

Cherix: The Mallarmé exhibition actually consists of two shows: *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* and *Exposition littéraire et musicale autour de Mallarmé*, which followed each other. In the first exhibition, Broodthaers had the floor painted black, and that's where he showed for the first time the aluminum plates of *Un Coup de dés . . .* alongside copies of his book. It is also an exhibition where he seems to rearticulate his relationship to Magritte, showing four vacuum-formed plaques with pipe motifs in the back of the gallery, with some kind of small partition wall separating them from the main space, as if they were a background of sorts to his work. Of course, it was Magritte himself who had given a copy of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés . . .* to Broodthaers. Therefore, Broodthaers was paying homage to both Mallarmé and Magritte by associating them in his show. The exhibition also happened at a moment when he becomes very interested in different techniques of display. I think this exhibition can already be associated with what Broodthaers will later call a *Décor*.

Haidu: But if you just said that for you the Mallarmé show was an early instantiation of the *Décor*, you will also have to show *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, which is obviously a real *Décor*.

Cherix: Absolutely. I can even give you a little preview of our show. We are hoping to articulate a number of early exhibitions by Broodthaers in relation to each other. For instance, we would like to show how *Court-Circuit* leads quite directly to *Le Corbeau et le Renard*. One of the defining moments in *Court-Circuit* occurred at the end of the show. Around the time of the closing of the exhibition, Broodthaers covered the walls with mostly English-language newspapers in order to create a background stage for the shooting of his film *Objet*. He literally creates a *Décor* and clearly announces the role that film will play in *Le Corbeau et le Renard*. So, in our exhibition, we want to make sure that people understand this moment before they enter the room dedicated to *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, which itself will directly precede the one evoking *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé*. After the three rooms, you will enter a larger space mostly focused on the *Musée d'Art*

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Moderne, when it becomes clear that the idea of space has become absolutely central to his work.

Buchloh: Well, then, I think we should attend to the question of the Mallarmé reception a little more: To what degree was Broodthaers part of an overall rediscovery of Mallarmé in the early to mid-1960s?

Stark: I think that Broodthaers's reception of Mallarmé has to be firmly and strictly differentiated from the American Conceptualist reception . . .

Buchloh: . . . Which would be initiated by Sol LeWitt reading Pierre Boulez and others in the musicological magazine *Die Reihe*,²² or would range from John Cage to Dan Graham, culminating in Brian O'Doherty's dedication of *Aspen* 5+6 to Mallarmé in 1967.

Borja-Villel: Mallarmé comes to Broodthaers through Magritte. A well-known anecdote relates that Magritte gave Broodthaers a copy of *Un Coup de dés* on their first meeting. For Broodthaers, *Un Coup de dés* is a book so basic that he declared it, as we know, to be the origin of modern art. But we mustn't forget that *Igitur* is essential too. In a certain way, Broodthaers's interest in Mallarmé explains his artistic development. Like Baudelaire and Rimbaud before him, Mallarmé sought to reinvent his own writing by turning to painting, theater, and opera, which became culminations of that quest. The step Broodthaers takes from poetry to art (and *Décor*) recalls Mallarmé's interest in the theater, the culmination of poetry's expansion toward the rest of the arts.

Stark: For Broodthaers, it seems that Mallarmé's work served as an extremely skeptical model of communication, one in which every communicative act is a wager against the perpetual risk of misdirection, failure, misunderstanding: of never reaching the right recipient. This is one of the meanings of the closing maxim of *Un Coup de dés* . . . : " . . . Toute pensée émet un coup de dés" ("Every thought emits a throw of the dice"). The fact that chance can never be abolished establishes what Mallarmé called the "intimate correlation of Poetry and the Universe"²³: In a universe without God, every word is a dynamic compound linked only contingently and by historical convention with the idea to which it refers.

Chance also functions for Mallarmé as the basic condition of aesthetic reception in modernity. A painting by Manet, as Mallarmé described it in the early 1870s, or any really modern work of art, was a kind of missive sent into a potential future when it might eventually find its audience, or might actually create the conditions necessary for the emergence of a public that could recognize itself in the work—or it might fail completely and never find its

22. *Die Reihe* was a German magazine edited by Herbert Eimert that, starting in 1955, published eight issues on seriality in advanced music. In 1957, an English edition of the journal was published under the same name, and for a number of American artists—from Sol LeWitt to Dan Graham—it served as a source of information on advanced musical theories and their potential impact on the conceptualization of artistic practices. On Mallarmé's importance for post-serialist composition, see Hans Rudolf Zeller, "Mallarmé and Serialist Thought," trans. Margaret Shenfield, *Die Reihe* 6 (1964), pp. 5–32.

93 Stéphane Mallarmé. *Correspondance complète (1862–1871) suivie de Lettres sur la poésie*. ed.

public.²⁴ And I think that is the intimate connection between Broodthaers and Mallarmé. One of them, at least.

Haidu: That's why I like the tragedy of the mime so much, because the mime is such an incredible figure for this work, launched into a universe, in spite of itself. The mime is already so far outside of the world. The mime does not share the same senses as the world, and he is dressed up and made up to be of another world. That was always my attraction to that figure. Of course, the mime doesn't speak, but in not speaking he actually does his work. And that is what makes him such an apposite figure for Broodthaers, the poet who stops writing poetry, and who also gets to make a play out of melancholia, and self-ridicule and pathos.

Buchloh: As in *Waterloo*,²⁵ for example, when he wears the clown's nose, or in his Hyde Park performance.

Haidu: Right, but as you say, there is no advertisement like an advertisement that is not one. It is as though he had taken Magritte onto the level of a performance of what it really means to be an artist in the present. If Magritte had stopped just painting, and had thought for a second about the impact of what he was doing for the figure of the artist, you would have the beginnings of Broodthaers. A practice that moves onto the level of reflection about the role of the author.

Borja-Villel: In Broodthaers's work, there is indeed a performative element that is not Magritte's but Mallarmé's. With its grid of eggshells labeled "mussels," *L'Erreur* (1966) would be an example of a picture that's both Magrittean and Mallarméan. The error is the representation's, but it is an error that is transformed into Mallarmé's "Je dis: une fleur": that is, into something performative with a component of parody and humor, as we observe in Broodthaers's caricaturization of himself as a museum director, in the way he presents himself in that slightly old-fashioned English gentleman's suit.

Krauss: I would like to interject something which Mallarmé says, and I am paraphrasing: ". . . Everything exists to end up in a book."²⁶ It seems to me that Broodthaers's absolutely insistent application of figure signs and numbers to everything ultimately acknowledges that everything will always end up in a catalogue, which is another way of saying a book. And in that you have another parallel practice between Mallarmé and Broodthaers. But I would also like to say that I think that Broodthaers was not only very close to Mallarmé but equally to Baudelaire, and that has to be taken into consideration.

24. Mallarmé, "Manet et le Jury du Salon de 1874," in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 700.

25. On the occasion of the bicentennial of Napoleon's birth in 1969, Broodthaers shipped one of the empty crates from his *Musée d'Art Moderne* from Brussels to Waterloo in the same art shipper's truck that had served to block the view from the studio onto the street on the night of the opening of the *Musée*. Wearing a clown's nose, Broodthaers would perform in Waterloo for a film he made on the site of Napoleon's final defeat.

26. Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Book as Spiritual Instrument," in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2007), p. 226.

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Haidu: But not just any Baudelaire. Is it the Baudelaire of Paris, or is it the Baudelaire of Belgium?

Krauss: Well, Broodthaers actually made a pirated version of *Pauvre Belgique*,²⁷ a Baudelaire project that was never published during Baudelaire's time. His text on *Pauvre Belgique* suggests that Belgians do not have anything original to say, so they have to pirate everything. And Broodthaers then went forward and pirated the presumed cover of Baudelaire's book. I talked to Yves Gevaert, who worked with Broodthaers on this book, and he showed me the *Pauvre Belgique*, which was very funny.

Haidu: It is also funny because when Baudelaire is in exile in Belgium, he writes how horrific he finds the Belgians and he is so unsparing—

Buchloh: —that Belgian subjects cannot even be called subjects—

Haidu: —the subjects that are not subjects. But it is doubly funny because he has nowhere else to go, and that is the beautiful dynamic of *Pauvre Belgique*. It is precisely that paradox in which he has to denounce the Belgians as counterfeiters but then he can only be in the land of counterfeiting after his trials in France.

Stark: In his text on the Baudelaire book, Gevaert notes that there was a copyright lacuna in Belgium at that time, so that they could legally publish and distribute pirated versions of French texts.

Haidu: That's the point. But it is also his only chance to get published at that time because Baudelaire's writings are censored and banned in France.

Cherix: I think it is important to address the question of publishing, since it reveals yet another feature of the relationship between Broodthaers and Mallarmé. One obvious aspect, which equally involved Baudelaire, is the fact that they were both poets interested in the visual arts. Broodthaers must have naturally measured himself against Mallarmé, as Mallarmé had measured himself against Baudelaire. And one of the things Mallarmé had a hard time with is publishing. So it might be not a coincidence that Broodthaers made sure throughout his life never to miss an occasion to publish books. The distribution or the edition size didn't seem to matter to him much, but the act of publishing itself very much did.

Buchloh: There is yet another dimension in Broodthaers's fascination with Mallarmé, one that is possibly comparable, or not, to Debord's relationship with Mallarmé. It is important to recognize this as both a historical parallel and as an opposition. For Broodthaers, Mallarmé really was also the poet who had operated as the most hermetic and radical critic of the instrumentalized debasement of public language in daily journalistic production. And that positions Broodthaers once again in a very peculiar double agency of negation. While he does not share Debord's annihilating position, he clearly

27. Published by Yves Gevaert and Hermann Daled in Brussels in 1974, *Pauvre Belgique* was one of Broodthaers's last books. Based on the edition of Baudelaire's *Complete Works* in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, the text was evacuated by Broodthaers while reprinting the exact format and the page design of Baudelaire's posthumously published notes. Rather than erasing the textual model, as he had done with Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* in 1968, he now "simply" evacuated the textual formation from

places himself on a trajectory of linguistic refusal and communicative resistance that he inherits from Mallarmé.

Stark: In the reception of Mallarmé, the opposition between Debord and Broodthaers turns around the poet's utopian legacy. Mallarmé's *Le Livre* is really one of the great utopian nineteenth-century aesthetic projects, and for Debord, that is the Mallarmé that he wants to keep.²⁸ Mallarmé's project for *Le Livre* was a kind of poetic ritual based in chance that he hoped would secure a new public role for the aesthetic appropriate to an atheist and egalitarian social organization. But, just as the social conditions appropriate to this utopian work never arrived, so *Le Livre* was perpetually deferred into the future. The Situationist position on Mallarmé is summed up by another Belgian, Raoul Vaneigem, who states, "When a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity."²⁹ Conversely, Broodthaers is really a counter-utopian artist in every possible way. What he keeps from Mallarmé is the poet's failure.

Buchloh: What is a counter-utopian artist? A counter-utopian artist would normally be a reactionary artist, no? For example, if we consider Cubism as a utopian aesthetic form in 1912, with the *retour à l'ordre* after 1915, we confront counter-utopian impulses that are clearly reactionary.

Haidu: No, even utopian artists can be reactionary artists.

Krauss: Francis Picabia is the perfect example.

Haidu: Picabia is so often the answer. But how can you equate reaction with counter-utopian thought? Counter-utopian thinking is a form of skepticism; reaction is the nondialectical opposite. Reaction is not antithesis; it's not so simple.

Stark: Broodthaers is counter-utopian because he has lost faith. Paradoxically, even in calling for the abandonment of art, Debord keeps faith that the utopian hopes of the artistic avant-gardes will be realized directly in life and that revolutionary praxis will be carried out "at the service of poetry."³⁰ That is completely off the table, it seems, for Broodthaers. The project of changing life is off the table.

Borja-Villek: In both Mallarmé's and Broodthaers's cases, there is a radical mistrust of the unfulfilled promises of modernism. Both flee from naturalism and

28. Guy Debord encountered Mallarmé's *Livre* through Jacques Scherer's publication of Mallarmé's manuscript notes for the project in 1957. Jacques Scherer, *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957). On Debord's reading of Mallarmé, see Emmanuel Guy and Laurence Le Bras, eds., *Guy Debord: Un Art de la guerre* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2013), p. 51.

29. Raoul Vaneigem was a key Belgian member of the Internationale Situationniste until 1970. His most notable Situationist tract was *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (1967). This quotation is found in "Banalités de base," *Internationale Situationniste* 7 (April 1962), p. 38; English translation in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989), p. 97.

30. Situationist International, "All the King's Men," *Internationale Situationniste* 8 (January 1964); p. 31; English translation in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), p. 155.

positivism in all their modes. And in both there occurs a certain process which we could call “de-profanation.” There is an element of mystery in both, but for Broodthaers the mystery does not refer to a higher reality but leaves the viewer in a state of perplexity. It has, in fact, an element of the forbidden. Broodthaers makes this explicit in the introduction to *Pense-Bête*. The interesting thing in the case of both artists is that the artwork is already a prohibition in itself, for it can’t be read. There is a certain sense of failure. It cannot be otherwise, since it’s the only way to avoid contributing to the proliferation of more objects in contemporary society.

Cherix: What you say about the idea of failure is essential to really understand Broodthaers. From the very beginning, he questions what failure can be, first as a poet, and then as an artist. . . .

Buchloh: But failure as resistance and refusal, or as a more complex operation?

Krauss: Should we take up Benjamin’s topic about Conceptual art? I would like to point out that Benjamin talked about how Broodthaers sabotages various movements, various projects, and I would state that very often he states his contempt for Conceptual art, and if that’s not sabotage, I don’t know what it is.

Cherix: One aspect that should be discussed before, as you cannot think of one without the other, is Broodthaers’s relationship to Minimal art. He makes a number of works in 1968 that critically address the idea of “primary structures.”

Buchloh: And he shows in a gallery, Wide White Space, in Antwerp, that is one of the key galleries of the European reception of American Minimalism.

Cherix: And he participates in Yves Gevaert’s group show at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in 1974 with a number of artists closely associated with Minimal art, for which his contribution was nothing else than *Jardin d’Hiver*!³¹ Broodthaers wrote that Minimal art was for him somehow beyond the point, because, in his own words, the language of forms had to be reunited with the language of words.

Buchloh: But what is the language of words for him at that time and in that position? Is it the language of poetry?

Cherix: He doesn’t explain.

Buchloh: I think what is so difficult, at least for me after all this time, I still cannot understand what it is that Broodthaers reclaimed in his opposition against that type of Minimalist and Conceptualist radicality. Is that a counter-utopian

31. Yves Gevaert curated the exhibition *Carl André, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Victor Burgin, Gilbert & George, On Kawara, Richard Long, Gerhard Richter* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, January 9–February 4, 1974. Broodthaers’s contribution consisted of the *Jardin d’Hiver*, an installation that he repeated two more times in subsequent exhibitions. In a sense, *Jardin d’Hiver* formed the first *Décor*, a particular new genre of exhibition design reflecting on its proper constitutive elements and conditions. The first version comprised several groups of palm trees and garden chairs, along the walls and in the center of the space, with vitrines and frames displaying nineteenth-century English prints of exotic animals and insects. A video monitor showed a feedback loop of spectators walking through the exhibition. In the second version, which retained most of the elements of the first installation, the monitor showed Broodthaers leading a live camel borrowed from the Antwerp Zoo into the museum.

model? How do you identify that? Is he reclaiming the lost body of painting, the lost body of poetry?

Cherix: Like Robert Smithson, he shares with a generation of Conceptual artists the idea that Minimal art needs to lead to something else.

Buchloh: Yes, but that is not Marcel's reading, that is definitely not Marcel's prospect.

Cherix: No, it is not, but at the same time, it's his generation, a generation of Conceptual artists basically who really defined through their writings what we understand today as Minimal art. Their reading of Minimal art gave birth to Conceptual art.

Broodthaers, however, was less interested in the idea of the dematerialization than of the function of the art object. His *Décors* gave another function to those objects. He explained this idea very well in the last years of his life.

Buchloh: Can we take him that literally? I don't think Marcel ever gives us a clear definition of what the function of art is. I think it is always the negation, an emphasis on the lost function of art. The *Décor* is a space of irreality, not a space of a potential phenomenological, let alone functional, communicative reality.

Haidu: That—if anything—is what he takes away from Minimalism; that it does create an air of irreality in the room, however real it might be.

Buchloh: Is the *Décor* not the quintessentially anti-phenomenological operation? Minimalism had prided itself on having established a phenomenological interaction with the spectator, the subject, the object, and the architectural container, and now he totally denies the phenomenological progress with which Minimal art had rightfully approached its new spectators.

Haidu: Because he sees that Minimalism—just as Buren's canvases over the skylights in the Palais de Beaux-Arts—recreates the space in its own image, as Andre recreates the room as a function of itself. So if he is thinking about functionality vis-à-vis the work of art, what he gets from Minimalism is the trick by which it turns a phenomenological argument into an argument about itself, an advertisement for itself.

Buchloh: But what is the function of the melancholic operation in the *Jardin d'Hiver*, for example? Is it grotesque-comical? Why would that be placed in the context of a Minimal exhibition? That is what I am still trying to understand a little bit better. How does the melancholic negation of the radicality of Minimalism become a progressive critical force, rather than a mere melancholic force of mourning that refuses to participate in Minimalism's operations?

Cherix: Yves Gevaert told me that Broodthaers did *Jardin d'Hiver* as part of his group show primarily because he needed a stage for a film. It goes back to the idea of function that we mentioned earlier. I'm not saying that it cannot also be read differently, but his goal might have been to make a film.

Haidu: He made it three times.

Buchloh: Which one are you showing?

Cherix: We are going to show *Jardin d'Hiver II*. With the film projected on a

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screen. My conversation with Gevaert convinced me that you absolutely need the film.

Stark: At Documenta 4 in 1968, where many of the major American Minimalists were shown, Broodthaers published an open letter, which soon thereafter became a plaque titled “Academy” that reads, “A cube, a sphere, a pyramid . . .”³² When he talks about Minimalism, as far as I know, it is almost always explicitly in opposition. Even Broodthaers’s term “the conquest of space” has to be read in dialogue with a critique of Minimalism.

Buchloh: Even though that is formulated much earlier.

Stark: What I think he critiques in Minimalism is a presumed neutral relationship between objects and bodies in space. And of course, in the most sophisticated models of Minimalism, this vector from subject to object is complex, since it is conceived as a phenomenological relationship. But for Broodthaers that vector is always overlaid with language, and language is the medium of ideology, language is a primary medium of nation-state identity. . . . Thinking of the “conquest of space” in this way might be a means to link the colonial imagery of *Jardin d’Hiver* with the critique of Minimalism and phenomenology.

Borja-Villel: His critique implies a double negation. Broodthaers criticizes the culture of spectacle, but he does so with a spectacle: the cinema. It’s just that his “cinema” is anachronistic. So too is the *Décor*, which is intrinsically related to the cinema. Broodthaers is very clear about this in a note published in *Ciné Culture* in February 1974:

A film by Charles Baudelaire is not a film destined for cinéphiles. Why? Because this film was shot in the 19th century. And cinéphiles have never seen any film spools that date from a time when Muybridge, the Lumière brothers, and Edison were not even born yet. . . . This most recent project, entitled “A Winter Garden,” is based on the idea that cinema is a greater calamity than theater, but a minor one by comparison to television. What I want to state is that the calamity is always the function of an ever increasing audience, which benefits the expansion of prescriptions.³³

In this case, the relationship between film and *Décor* is clear and made explicit by the artist himself.

Broodthaers does not wish to participate in the formulae of either

32. For the *Open Letter* mailed from Documenta 4, see Moure, *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, pp. 190–91.

33. “Un film de Charles Baudelaire n’est pas un film destiné aux cinéphiles. Pourquoi? Parce qu’il a été tourné au XIXe siècle. Et que les cinéphiles n’ont jamais vu de bobines datées d’un temps où Muybridge, les frères Lumière et Edison n’étaient pas encore nés. . . . Ce dernier project, baptisé ‘Un Jardin d’Hiver,’ est basé sur l’idée que le cinéma est un malheur plus grand que le théâtre et moins grand que la télévision. Je ve ux dire que le malheur est fonction d’un public chaque fois plus nombreux, au bénéfice de l’accroissement des recettes.” Marcel Broodthaers, “Un film de Charles Baudelaire,” in *Ciné Culture* 105, February 7, 1974, p. 97.

Minimalism or Nouveau Réalisme. He is, as we know, critical of the new avant-gardes. He is one of the first artists to recognize the theatrical component of contemporary art. The predominance of installations from the '80s onward does no more than confirm his intuition. This theatricality may have an aspect that is not infrequently reactionary, since the singularity of the aesthetic experience is absorbed into the totality of the spectacle. The *Décors* recognize and anticipate this development in art. In Broodthaers, *Décor* and film are intimately related. The first is the film set: what remains when the film is finished as an index of its absence, either because the film has already been made or because this has not yet occurred. Both anticipate and in a way annul this development of art.

Buchloh: But language is also the medium—pardon me for playing the devil's advocate—of poetry. What about the *Peintures littéraires*?³⁴ They come a little bit later, but still.

I think we should take the question a little further, perhaps, asking once more about his strategy with language. Did he conceive of the deployment of language as a dialectical operation, whereas the linguistic interventions of the Conceptualists were ultimately not a dialectical operation? The displacement of the painterly and sculptural object by somebody like Lawrence Weiner, for example, was really presented as a triumphant transcendence of the legacy of mythical implications of artistic object production in the traditional media. And it was presented as an extraordinary, progressive operation that changed the distribution form. Conceptual art introduced linguistic immediacy—similar to abstraction in 1915—as the collectively accessible universal form. It changed the material forms of object production, and—in an aspiration for the expansion of collective communication typical of 1968—of reception. Whereas Broodthaers's conception of language, from the very start, opposed that model, and positioned itself visibly as a loss as much as a model of transformation. That, I think, is one dimension where he differs from Conceptualism.

Stark: The two poles of Conceptualism, between Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth, for example, operate something like the two sides of the linguistic sign. On the one hand, Weiner emphasizes language's materiality to the point where words can become a sculptural medium; and, on the other hand, for Kosuth, words are almost a neutral vehicle for the idea.

Buchloh: A tautological structure.

34. *Peintures littéraires*, an exhibition organized by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh for Rudolf Zwirner Gallery in September 1973, consisted of several series of printed canvases, each comprising nine elements, listing the names of some of the key literary figures in particular nation-state cultures and languages (English, French, German). The last series was devoted to Al Capone. On that occasion, Broodthaers also produced a short film, which had to be shown along with the *Peintures littéraires*, called *Analyse d'un tableau* (1973), its images subsequently serving as the point of departure for the trilingual book *A Voyage on the North Sea* (London: Petersburg Press; Brussels: Lebeer Hossmann; and Cologne: DuMont, 1973).

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Stark: This brings us back yet again to Mallarmé, because this is another aspect of his value for Broodthaers. In Conceptual art, just like in the reception of Mallarmé, there's a polarization in the attitude toward language between the idealists and the total materialists. And in Broodthaers's work, just like in Mallarmé, there's a dialectical relationship established where the materiality of the word interrupts the extraction of meaning, but language's allusiveness is always there to interrupt pure plasticity.

Krauss: Benjamin, I just want to ask you: Isn't there in Broodthaers's writing a kind of contempt for Conceptualism?

Buchloh: Well, I would not say it is contempt. I was just trying to rephrase it. He was very close to some of the Conceptual artists; he was close to Weiner, for instance. For a while at least, Conceptualism was his artistic milieu, the context in which he was publicly presented and perceived. He was very close to Michel Claura and Daniel Buren in Paris, for example, and to Johannes Cladders, Konrad Fischer, and Jürgen Harten in Düsseldorf.³⁵ They were part of the milieu within which he presented his work after the initial presentations in Brussels. And that was where and how he was recognized. He was recognized as a member of the emerging group of Conceptual artists who formulated the beginning of an institutional critique, so I don't think it was all that clear how he related to some of them. At the same time, the polemic against Kosuth was manifest from the very beginning.

Haidu: But that was easy because Kosuth was not there. You can say the same thing about how he was first shown as a "Belgian Pop artist." He was constantly being translated into these universal terms, and within that he has to differentiate not only his position but also his mode of making a position. This is what we were talking about earlier as his counter-utopian mode, but also his skeptical and ironic mode, which you do not necessarily find among the Conceptual artists—and this is where we go off the wires. . . .

Buchloh: To go back to Conceptual art for one moment, what about the *Peintures littéraires* and their relationship to Conceptualism, for example? How do we read them now? I am surprised that nobody at the table seems to have gone for the bait, because I cannot answer this question myself. What is the relationship of the perpetual resuscitation of the literary and the poetical dimension, or the perpetual resuscitation of painting as a horizon of loss?

35. Johannes Cladders (1924–2009) was the director of the Städtisches Museum, Mönchengladbach, a small town near Düsseldorf, where he organized major international exhibitions of American and European Minimal, post-Minimal, and Conceptual art. Broodthaers invited his friend Cladders to perform the official rites and speech of inauguration of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Section XIXe Siècle, Département des Aigles* in Brussels on September 27, 1968. Konrad Fischer, the former artist Konrad Lueg, had emerged as one of the central dealers of the European reception of Minimalism in Germany in 1967, exhibiting in his gallery the work of Carl André, Bruce Nauman, Sol LeWitt, et al, often prior to their exhibitions in New York. Jürgen Harten, an early supporter and friend of Broodthaers, was the director of the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf who curated what remains undoubtedly the most important exhibition project by Marcel Broodthaers in 1972, the exhibition of the icon and emblem of the eagle, entitled *The Eagle from the Oligocene to Today*.

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Cherix: There is for me a moment in Broodthaers's oeuvre that we could call, using his title for a drawing made in 1973, *Le Retour de la peinture*. Where is he then? In Düsseldorf. And what does he see? Painting coming back. So I don't think it's necessarily a reaction to Conceptual art, but more likely a way for him to reappropriate something that he sees happening around him.

Buchloh: But that's a different phase. The *Peintures littéraires* are earlier than the return to painting.

Haidu: They begin in 1972.

Borja-Villel: It's very interesting to note that in 1974, when he is living in London, he writes a text for Richard Hamilton's *Trichromatic Flower Piece*. One of the few texts Broodthaers wrote about the production of one of his contemporaries, it speaks to us both of Hamilton's work and of his own preoccupations. Hamilton's engravings are quite ironic. They mix the flower with a turd that forms its base, and they somehow constitute a response to the supposed return to painting that was being announced in those years. Broodthaers divides the text into two parts. The first, entitled "The Painter's Despair," addresses the painter and the impossibility of representing reality. It also tells us how it is impossible for any artist to evade their own history and the historical and social conditions in which he or she is situated. The second part of the text addresses the "art lover," meaning the viewer, who is offered no keys to the interpretation of the work by the artist, even though he might seem to possess them. For Broodthaers, painting is governed by the same patterns as film and poetry. And for him, it, too, is an anachronistic language. The text on *Flower Piece* is written in a kind of archaic French.

Stark: I think the *Peintures littéraires* address a lost poetic tradition—that of Mallarmé, Lautréamont, Lewis Carroll, or Hölderlin—without claiming access to it or holding out for its resuscitation in the present. This brings us back to my initial question about reification. Poetic language in Mallarmé's or Lautréamont's conception is the absolute enemy of reification and of instrumentalization. What Broodthaers does in the *Peintures littéraires* is to persistently reify not only language but also the promise of poetic language represented by this legacy. These literary paintings, which give the date of birth and the death for a series of European cultural figures, are like tombstones. They don't just show the materiality of the signifier in a Mallarméan operation, but they are saying something about the reification of poetry as such, or at least marking a historical distance from the aspirations of this poetic tradition.

Buchloh: But at the same time, he ruptures the information when he gives the wrong names and the wrong dates. And he is really breaking the logic, so to speak, of Conceptual art, with its absolutely didactic self-referentiality and its tautological clarification. And then, of course, he also adds at least one utterly heterodox group devoted to Al Capone.

Haidu: I always hesitate, because I wanted to write on these and I didn't. I always

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thought that they had something to do with academicism and the entry of the figure into a kind of rigid canonical set of structures. So that the *Peintures littéraires* played with these *idéés reçues*, like “the mind of James Joyce” or “the turpitude of Oscar Wilde.”

Stark: Are they not also always limited by national identity? Don’t you have one series referring to French figures, and another series referring to German figures, etc.?

Cherix: An interesting aspect of the *Peintures littéraires*, which might have been overlooked in the past, is that he premiered each of the three first series—English, French, and German—together with the screening of one of his films. A screening of *Analyse d’une peinture* was, for instance, organized during the first showing of the French series. Why did he always make sure that the series premiered with a film?

Buchloh: But a film like *Analyse d’une peinture* was not at all relating to those paintings on the wall. They were totally different.

Cherix: I’m not so sure. You think they have nothing to do with each other?

Buchloh: No, not directly.

Cherix: But you have a printed text on a canvas on the wall. It is one way to understand it as a projection.

Buchloh: Yes, but they were shown as canvases . . .

Cherix: Well, unstretched, like a screen, a projection screen.

Borja-Villel: *Analyse d’une peinture* was shown at the opening of the *Peintures littéraires* exhibition at the Galerie Rudolf Zwirner. And it seems the two are related. At the end of the film, the artist appears rolling up a canvas which itself, in a text written at the time, speaks of the phonetic resemblance between “bateau” and “tableau.”

Cherix: The invitation cards for the first three exhibitions indicate that every time, he showed a different film—perhaps distantly related, but a film. To me, the fact that he explicitly states in the certificates that come with the *Peintures littéraires* that he does not allow you to frame, stretch, or glaze the canvases seems to point to the fact that he wanted these paintings to look like screens.

The Daled Collection³⁶ that we acquired a few years ago included a work from the English series of *Peintures littéraires* that Herman Daled had bought while Broodthaers was still alive. Daled had to buy it together with a copy of *Speakers’ Corner*, the video shot at Hyde Park. It does not necessarily mean that you have to show them together, but it clearly indicates that Broodthaers thought of the video and the film as two works closely related to each other.

Buchloh: So once again we have a situation where we cannot decide whether the canvas is a screen or a painting?

36. Herman Daled, a radiologist from Brussels, was one of Broodthaers’s friends, supporters, and earliest collectors. His collection of Conceptual art, created with his then-wife Nicole Verstraeten, included sixty-five works by Broodthaers. It was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2011.

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*Broodthaers and Johannes Cladders inaugurating
the 19th Century Section of the Museum of Modern
Art, Department of Eagles. Brussels. 1968.*

Photograph by Maria Gilissen.

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Cherix: It is a metaphor of the screen.

Haidu: But we could as easily take it back to the question of materiality that Trevor brought up vis-à-vis language. If it is a canvas, then the question of what makes it a painting is what is at stake. And equally, when he gives instructions about how to treat these canvases, then that is still what is at stake. And it is, yet again, another critique of Conceptual art, because Conceptual art sets about making these kinds of insane claims and then turns these into a work of art. We have to discuss what he does with the series of words that he puts on the paintings, and whether these matter or not. When you stare at these things long enough, you can also come to realize that a joke is being played on you. In the endless rearrangements of subjects, pronouns, etc., all of the play is nothing but a red herring. It doesn't matter what he puts on the canvas, it is the canvas as a structure, and he states that he is making a non-claim, unlike his Conceptual peers.

Buchloh: Finally, the most important question: Would we know from the Broodthaers of 1964 to '66 that the museum would eventually become the center of all of his critical reflection, the apogee of his oeuvre? It is like asking the question, would you know in 1912 with *Nude Descending a Staircase* that there would be a readymade the following year? That there would be that kind of an epistemological leap?

Cherix: It would be far-fetched. But retrospectively I feel that you find indications early in Broodthaers's oeuvre that announce his *Musée d'Art Moderne*.

Buchloh: For me, the only way to see this is to say, he expands the allegorical model. I can't think outside my own box. The evacuation of the dominant structure—he is evacuating the Pop model, he is evacuating the Nouveau Réalisme model, he is evacuating the iconography of the commodity.

Haidu: But there's no space in that for reflection on the museum.

Buchloh: He expands that to the next model.

Haidu: I have to say I always see it as an extension, as Rosalind is saying, from the *Open Letters* and the relationship to '68. To invite students and young collectors and Buren to your living room and have a night that is simultaneously decrepit and festive—because they stayed really late, and they drank a lot and they sat on crates and they smoked and talked and so on.

Cherix: But that's just what people were doing then. There's nothing singular to Broodthaers about that—

Haidu: Except declaring yourself the director of a museum, and even inviting what were somewhat fancy curators to come and give open lectures. Getting someone like Cladders to do that in good faith means that you are already exhibiting—doing—something very different from what those other people were doing then.

Cherix: There is a form of progressive detachment. He goes from making objects that he doesn't really make, very much in the spirit of Schwitters—only Broodthaers uses plaster, not glue—to taking on a role which is not anymore about making art but about looking at art. Something gradually expanded

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there. To your question, however, no, I could not have foreseen that in 1964 Broodthaers would initiate the creation of his own museum. But from the position of the museum, looking back at his earlier work, you clearly see steps that quite logically lead to such a move.

In our show, it comes back to the inherent difficulties of showing the *Musée d'Art Moderne* and the temptation to bring all the elements together. For me, however, Broodthaers's museum doesn't amount to the sum of its parts.

Haidu: It is about dispersal.

Cherix: Exactly, it is about dispersal. Broodthaers's museum was created over four years, in twelve sections, and across seven cities. So we don't want in our show to rebuild a museum that in fact never existed outside of fragments scattered in time and space.

Buchloh: Originating in a perpetual reflection on the framing devices and the presentational devices and on the devices that determine the meaning of the object, and I think that is partially a response to Trevor's still valid question of how he relates those two models. Because his peers of the early 1960s, like Fluxus and Maciunas, for example, ultimately never asked that question. They never got that far, when they asked the question of the distribution form, but they did not ask the question of the institutionalization, or the circulation of the object.

Haidu: How are you going to show the *Museum*?

Cherix: We will show a selection of fragments, which will be clearly displayed as fragments, without making any attempt to bring them back together. *Section Publicité*, which had been carefully preserved, will be there, but others, such as *Section des Figures*, won't. We have to accept not only the fact that key aspects of Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne* are simply lost, but also that they were not always meant to be conserved.

Borja-Villel: For us, it is fundamental not to fetishize the objects, not to transform his *Coquillages* into a version of Pop, his *Museum* into a variant of institutional critique, or his *Décor* into a precedent of installation art. We approach the exhibition on the basis of the interrelation of various exhibitions that marked Broodthaers's career (*Court-Circuit*, *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, *L'Angelus de Daumier*, etc.). Indeed, the *Salle Blanche* and *Section Publicité* give us keys to the way Broodthaers rethought his work years later. Obviously, Broodthaers is not with us, and I don't think we can continue with the kind of mirroring his work consisted of. However, we can understand his strategies. If there is one artist of the second half of the twentieth century who rethinks exhibition devices, it is Marcel Broodthaers, and that's something we have to bear in mind. In this respect, film can play a major role. When all is said and done, it is one of the aspects that lend consistency to his whole oeuvre and generate that intrinsically inapprehensible space which this artist sought from the very beginning.