

Exhibition October 5, 2016 – January 9, 2017
Sabatini Building, Floor 1

Marcel Broodthaers

A Retrospective



Tableau et tabouret avec oeufs [Panel and stool with eggs], 1966
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

**MUSEO NACIONAL
CENTRO DE ARTE
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Marcel Broodthaers (Brussels, 1924 – Cologne, 1976) is a key figure in contemporary art and both a reference point and a catalyst for many current discourses and practices. Broodthaers worked within a painting practice but was unhindered by nostalgia for his past, linked as it was to the nobility of the fine arts and its struggle to occupy a dominant position; he worked from literature but stayed outside the literary and publishing world; he worked from a position that challenges the artistic institution but does not veer toward institutional critique. Broodthaers's oeuvre ends up generating its own space, one that is enclosed, sealed, and self-sustaining, just like the egg and the mussel, his frequent symbols. Broodthaers's world is under siege but resistant, hermetic. It is an environment in which there is no conceivable outside and all practices are superimposed or related without hierarchy: a space where film is décor and the décor is part of the cinematic device, where painting becomes literature, while literature becomes object and object becomes word.

Broodthaers's production attempted to answer fundamental questions about the visual arts, reflecting on the idea of representation and the production of meaning through the use of existing systems of knowledge. To do this, he availed himself of intentional anachronism and a subtle and occasionally hermetic rhetoric that gave him the necessary distance from which to look at and lucidly question his own time. He was particularly concerned about by the complacency and exhaustion of certain art forms when they are absorbed by the market and the institutions, and he strongly asserted the subversive capacity of poetry and the visual arts. His work makes of negation, complexity, and its own turning in on itself creative engines, resulting in an oeuvre that cannot be classified among the principal

trends of the period, such as Nouveau Réalisme or Pop Art. On the basis of dialectical negations, he destabilizes categories, conventions, roles—he assumed those of the poet, the artist, the curator, and the museum director—as well as all manner of assumptions, envisaging new scenarios of possibility on the border between word and image where both reveal their differences and their connection. Convinced that “the language of forms must be reunited with that of words,” he attempted to conquer space through poetry, finding his main referents in the poets Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé and in his friend the painter René Magritte.

In 1964, Broodthaers was writing poetry, working as a columnist and photographer,



Chez votre fournisseur (Le Vinaigre des Aigles) [At your supplier (Vinegar of eagles)], 1968
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

and selling rare books. At that point, when he was forty years old, he announced his incursion into the visual arts and opened his first exhibition at the Galerie Saint Laurent in Brussels, for which he encased his volume of poetry *Pense-Bête* [Memory Aid, 1964] in plaster. It was also around that time that Magritte sent him a copy of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard* [A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance], on which Broodthaers was to later intervene, in 1969, by transforming the written words into black strips, replacing the subtitle of "poem" with that of "image," and substituting his own name for the poet's. His intention was not to abandon poetry but to extend it to new formal and conceptual horizons, as is evident from his literary exhibitions *Le Corbeau et le Renard* [The

Crow and the Fox, 1967 and 1968], and *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblioudebliou/S. Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* [Marcel Broodthaers at the Deblioudebliou/S. Literary Exhibition around Mallarmé, 1969]. The most distinctive symbols found until then in his verses now started to appear in his objects. Among them were the mussel and the egg, which he reused constantly through a variety of prisms, giving them various levels of reading and connotation—from references to Belgian identity to his own isolated practice—to reflect upon the idea of representation and semantic association through discrepancies, games, and misunderstandings. Some years earlier he had made his first film, *La Clef de l'horloge. Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters* [The Key to the Clock. Cinematic Poem in Honor of Kurt

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Maria, 1966. The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Herman J. Daled, 2011



Moules sauce blanche [Mussels with white sauce], 1967
Private Collection, New York

Schwitters, 1957], first shown in 1958, with which he paid tribute to Schwitters, also a poet and visual artist who had managed to situate himself on the boundaries of mercantilism and culture. In this film, which was made in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels on the occasion of a traveling retrospective on the German artist, Broodthaers experimented with an inconclusive essay form and the anachronism of black and white, and brought together the languages of poetry, the visual arts, and cinema to which he would repeatedly return.

His interest in the museum as institution comes to the fore after 1968, when he founded the *Musée d'Art Moderne. Département des Aigles* [Museum of Modern Art. Department of Eagles] in his Brussels home, declaring that he was no longer an artist and had become the director of this fictitious museum. He thus displaced his position as a producer of artworks in order to address the status of art in society. This project, perhaps his most important work, took him four years. In that time he mounted twelve temporary exhibitions, which he called “sections,” in seven cities around Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. The sections correspond to chronological periods, such as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; then marginal artistic media like film and popular art; specific subjects like the “eagle” in his *Section des Figures* [Section of Figures, 1972], for which he gathered about five hundred representations of eagles on a wide variety of supports; and various aspects of the functioning of the museum, such as publicity, documentation, and financing. Most of exhibitions included no artworks but focused instead on elements of institutional

October 5, 2016 – January 9, 2017

bureaucracy such as posters, invitations, panels, timetables, signs, and catalogues. For example, his *Section Financière* [Financial Section], included in the current exhibition, was developed as a publication accompanied by invitations and contractual documentation. It consists of a dust jacket wrapped around nineteen copies of the catalogue of the 1971 Cologne Art Fair, each one dedicated to an artist or writer. On the jacket are the words “Musée d’Art Moderne à vendre pour cause de faillite” [Museum of Modern Art for sale—due to bankruptcy, 1970-1971]. The same information is repeated inside in German together with an indication that the contact for commercial inquiries is the Galerie Michael Werner in Berlin, which

had a stand at the Cologne fair. Announced at the same time is a contract for the sale of a gold ingot stamped with the form of an eagle, the institution’s emblem, in order to save the museum from ruin. The sale would be formalized with a letter from a curator that would dispel any doubts about possible forgeries. In this way, the artist made a comment on the value of art in various respects, from speculation, the market, and its codes, to the role played in it all by the institution of the museum.

With his *Musée d’Art Moderne. Département des Aigles*, it was not so much art that Broodthaers created as new margins for artistic creation. He reveals the discursive



Salle blanche [White room], 1975. Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d’art modern. Centre de creation industrielle Exhibition view Marcel Broodthaers. *A Retrospective*. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia

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Museum-Museum, 1972. MACBA Collection, MACBA Foundation

nature of the museum and its position of authority while at the same time asserting the disruptive potential of the artistic object and warning of the dangers of its assimilation and legitimization by the dominant structures. The fictitious museum closed precisely when it won institutional recognition at documenta 5, the contemporary art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, in 1972.

That year, he began the first works in the series that would later be called the *Peintures littéraires* [Literary Paintings]. His return to the pictorial medium was to an extent a provocation in that it coincided with the rise of conceptual art and the question of serialization in minimalism. Broodthaers chose to introduce tension to the categorizations he chose for his pieces. His

“paintings” were not painted by him; instead, he supervised their execution, which was commissioned from a printer and publisher of art books. They were not unique objects but produced in series of five or six, a fact he emphasized by exhibiting up to three copies of a single painting in different positions, and they are made up solely of printed text. In these texts, identifications are similarly elusive, with disconcerting associations between the written names of figures of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and the verbs that accompany them.

In early 1974, Broodthaers transformed a room at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels into an exuberant garden that he called *Un jardin d’hiver* [A Winter Garden]. From that year until his death, he worked on the idea of

October 5, 2016 – January 9, 2017

what he termed “décors” in the different exhibitions he mounted, once again questioning the autonomy of art through a variety of strategies, such as restoring the function of the artistic object as a prop. He also used the exhibition as a spatial device for work and exploration, reusing and repositioning his earlier works in different contexts, and generating new possible meanings for works like *Planche à charbon* [Coal Board, 1967], which he displayed horizontally for the first time. These works furthermore demonstrate his fascination for the cinema. Indeed, he used some of them as film sets. For instance, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* (1975), presented at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, was used to shoot *La Bataille de Waterloo* [The Battle of Waterloo, 1975]. Also notable is his tendency toward indistinctness and contamination between reality and fiction or between private and public space, a theme that looks back at the origins of collections and museums, his own included. Through pronounced anachronisms both in the concept of the décor itself and in the motifs of the installation, such as palms, parrots, or carpets, these *Décors* trace historical links with issues like colonialism, and they point toward the interdependent relationship of art with other fields such as history or politics. In his last exhibition, *L'Angélu de Daumier* [The Angelus of Daumier, 1975], at the Centre national d'art contemporain in Paris, he dedicated various rooms to different themes. *Salle blanche* [White room], for example, was a full-scale reproduction of one of the rooms in his home, with the walls and ceiling covered with words related to art and the artistic process, while the *Salle outremer* [Overseas Room] worked with the concept of the sea as an exotic

fantasy and metaphor for escapism as found in colonial narratives.

Broodthaers said that he reflected “on society and culture through nearly all the pieces I produce.” Throughout his career, he maintained a stringently critical attitude toward his own work, his position as an artist, and the milieu he had entered, and he demanded the same of his viewers. Through a complex and cryptic oeuvre, he urged them to question the mechanisms and conditions of not only art and literature but also knowledge in a broad sense. The communicative possibilities of his discourse and practice meant that he largely found his development and exposure in the visual arts, transcending the small audience of connoisseurs that had been reached by his poems. This balance between complexity and hermeticism, together with the recognition—evident in his numerous writings and open letters—that the communicative act is a potential agent for change, have ensured that his proposals remain relevant and fully operative within contemporary debate.

Tableau et tabouret avec oeufs, 1966

Chez votre fournisseur (Le Vinaigre des Aigles), 1968

Maria, 1966

Moules sauce blanche, 1967

Salle blanche, 1975

Museum-Museum, 1972

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Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Sabatini Building

Santa Isabel, 52

Nouvel Building

Ronda de Atocha s/n
28012 Madrid

Tel. (34) 91 774 10 00

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Sundays

from 10 a.m. to 2.15 p.m.
the whole Museum is open,
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are open Collection 1
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(check website)

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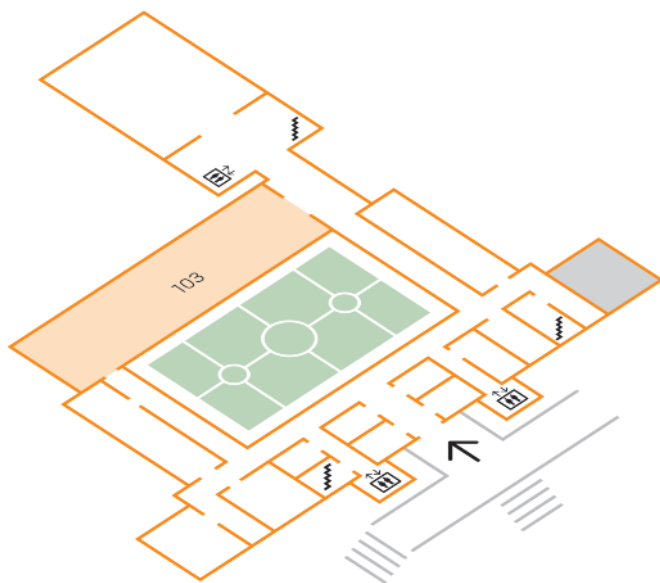
A propósito de...

Marcel Broodthaers. A Retrospective
Guided visits with commentaries
by the mediation team
Fridays at 7.15 p.m. and
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(From October 9)

Encounter

What became of institutional critique?
Wednesday, October 5 at 7 p.m.
Sabatini Building, Auditorium
Participants: Christophe Cherix,
Jean-François Chevrier, Dirk
Snauwaert, Dorothea von
Hantelmann, and Manuel Borja-Villel

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