

EN

Marcel Broodthaers Industrial Poems

01.05–13.11.2022

A project in collaboration with

WIELS

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Who is Marcel Broodthaers?

'Broodthaers is pronounced Brotars: four phonetically useless letters in the spelling of the name.'

Marcel Broodthaers is undoubtedly one of the most complex and versatile artistic personalities of the 20th century. He started out as a poet, but subsequently decided to become an artist, embedding in plaster fifty unsold copies of his last book of poetry *Pense-Bête* (1964) and thus transforming it into an artwork with the same title. In its new form as an *objet d'art*, *Pense-Bête* unexpectedly aroused far more interest than it had as a collection of poems. From his earliest exhibitions, Broodthaers demonstrated that he was an artist with a 'sociologist's eye'. He contemplated the rules of the art system with great lucidity, probing the relationship between art and society, museum and collection, value and status of the work, and he was a keen observer of the development of the cultural industry and the process of commodification of the artwork, which was already being discussed at the time. Broodthaers's most emblematic project in this sense is undeniably his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, through which he imitated the workings and dynamics of museums, revealing them to the viewer without hardly ever exhibiting any work.

Through his multifaceted activity, Broodthaers investigated how the success and value of an artwork is influenced by the workings of the art world, communication and advertising in general, and how this influence is relevant in the history of art.

The importance of writing

'And the language of these plaques?'

'Let's say they're rebuses. And the subject is an inquiry into the difficulty of reading entailed by the use of this material.'

Although Broodthaers decided to set aside poetry to become a visual artist in 1964, at the age of forty, it was not a true abandonment and the continuity between his activity as a poet and as an artist can be clearly seen in his works. Language always remained a subject for reflection for Broodthaers and the linguistic element continued to be highly present in his works. His *Poèmes Industriels* (Industrial Poems) are a clear example of the characteristic hybrid nature of his works. In the series produced between 1968 and 1972, words, letters, symbols and punctuation marks acquire a visual aspect and an objectual materiality, due to the relief technique of vacuum-formed plastic. In these works, the artist emulates the function and layout of signs and road signs, but by composing them using his own verbal and visual poetic imagery, he strips them of their essential characteristic: the communication of a clear message.

The Industrial Poems

'What interested me was the way the material deformed the representation.'

Broodthaers entrusted the production of his plaques to a firm that printed road signs, signals and street name plates for the city of Brussels, the very ones that may have awakened his interest in the vacuum-forming process. This technique, which developed rapidly in the 1960s, consists of heating plastic sheets to a high temperature and using a vacuum to ensure that they adhere perfectly to a mould, which creates the design in relief. The artist combined the industrial technique based on the principle of mass production with the manual creation of an original model, composed of a base on which he positioned and glued elements such as ready-made or custom letters, signs and shapes. After the pressure had been applied, these elements stood out from the background for their specific volume and, in some cases, for the different colours applied by the producers. Using this process, Broodthaers almost always simultaneously created two versions of the work, conceiving them as positive and negative, even though none of the plaques is the exact reverse of another.

In the *Industrial Poems* series, Broodthaers juxtaposed industrial aspects, such as the choice of material and mass production, with methods associated with the art world, considering each subject of the plaques as a limited edition of seven copies. However, he hardly ever produced the entire edition of a subject in a single run, partly due to his limited financial means and partly to oppose the rules of the art system that he himself applied. Some of the plaques were produced posthumously and a limited number exist as 'errors' declared by Broodthaers himself, contradicting the principles of both the limited edition and the unique object.

On the occasion of this exhibition, the comparison of a large number of copies of the same subject made it possible to discover variations in colour and composition, some intentional and others entirely accidental, which in turn belie the principle of art multiples and make it impossible to clearly categorize the works. The production of the plaques and the way in which he conceived and presented them allowed Broodthaers to reveal the ambivalence between a reproducible mass-produced object and an original and unique artwork.

The first plaques

Académie I, Académie II [Academy I, Academy II] is the first subject of the group of thirty-six relief plaques produced by Broodthaers from 1968 to 1972. The title, incongruous in an age defined by anti-academicism in the arts and socio-political protest on an international stage, sets the tone of the plaques and positions them between the legacy of a recent past, the context of May '68 marked by social revolt, and the development of a critical artistic practice in the age of advertising and visual communication. The words 'Académie I' and 'Académie II' stand out, referring above all to the 18th-century Académie française, that of Diderot and Voltaire, and alluding to the three main schools of philosophy of Plato's Akademeia.

Téléphone [Telephone] constitutes the second subject conceived by Broodthaers. Considering the barely legible monochrome text and the tactility of the relief, *Téléphone* seems to appeal to several of our senses. The text's uninterrupted format recalls telegraphic style or Braille writing. The repetition of 'Je je je je je je je' (I) recalls Broodthaers's poem *Ma rhétorique* (My Rhetoric, 1961) and would later be developed in other texts, including his first Open Letter, dated 7 June 1968 and displayed in this exhibition, in which we find the reiteration of the personal pronoun and the phrase 'Je dis je' (I say I). Another Open Letter on display here, which he openly and formally associates with this plaque, is the one dated 7 September 1968, in which he communicates the upcoming opening of his *Musée*. At the end of the letter, we find almost the identical layout of the terms 'Object Metal Spirit', like at the bottom of the plaque – revealing his approach in which poetry and visual art meet.

Le Drapeau noir (tirage illimité) [The Black Flag (Unlimited Edition)] was produced in two versions, the first in June 1968, including a line with the names of cities where student demonstrations triggered a socio-political protest movement that thoroughly shook the Western world of the time, and the second after May 1969, when the artist updated it with three additional cities: Prague, Mexico City and Berkeley, bearing witness to the international locations where the protests had been crushed by armed forces. The various elements of the composition make up a rebus, deliberately maintaining an enigmatic meaning, which enables Broodthaers to keep a distance from dogmatism, propaganda and totalitarian ideologies. The mention 'tirage

illimité' (unlimited edition), also cited in his Open Letter dated 27 June 1968, reflects on the concept of mass accessibility and Broodthaers's aspiration that the plaque would 'spread indefinitely the wavelength of the poem'.

In both **Multiple (Multiplié) illimité** [Unlimited Multiple (Multiplied)] and **Multiple (Multiplié) inimitable** [Inimitable Multiple (Multiplied)] the main theme is the concept of the multiple in art. By definition, a multiple is not unique, but produced serially, *multiplied* specifically for the purpose of being sold. Broodthaers blurs and makes this status more complex by defining his plaques as 'inimitable unlimited multiples', introducing an oxymoron; a contradiction between the concepts of the original, unique, and art as a cheap, accessible commodity.

Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles

Inspired by the aforementioned insurrectionary context of May '68, and following the production of his first plaques, Broodthaers founded his own fictive museum. He announced its inauguration in the Open Letter of 7 September 1968 and officially inaugurated it on 27 September with its first section, *Section XIXe siècle*. Initially located at his house in Rue de la Pépinière 30 in Brussels, his *Musée* was at once a family home and a social meeting place, a stage for a project, a studio space for work, political debate and discussion, happenings and public reception. In his *Musée d'Art Moderne*, Broodthaers made the complex museum system a subject on a grand scale. He worked almost full-time on this project for four years. During this time he staged twelve temporary sections of the museum in seven cities in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. The sections were dedicated to historical periods, such as the 17th and 19th centuries; art forms, like folk art or film; administrative activities, such as documentation and advertising, and specific themes, like the eagle or the bankruptcy of the museum itself. Artworks are nearly completely missing from the sections of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*. Instead, the visitor could find empty shipping crates, letters, postcards, photographs, films, slides, and inscriptions painted directly on the walls and windows of the various premises. Between 1968 and 1972, Broodthaers's artistic activity largely consisted in that of self-proclaimed director and curator of this travelling institution.

From that moment on, the contents of the *Industrial Poems*, as well as those of the Open Letters, are often closely related to the *Musée* project and consequently also to aspects of the art world and its institutions. One may then assume that the term 'industrial' could refer not only to the production of the plaques but also to the thematic context in which the works are located – namely, the cultural industry that, precisely in Broodthaers's day, was beginning to take in more and more of contemporary life.

Musée d'Art Moderne, Les Aigles, Section XIXe siècle (Les Portes)

[Museum of Modern Art, The Eagles, 19th-century Section (The Doors)] is the only subject Broodthaers made in this large format approximating the proportions of a real doorway. Two separate vertical plaques are set side by side to represent a French window. Each plaque features a frame divided in two by a horizontal glazing bar and flanked by a vertical strip of regular and

irregular shapes representing the bricks and stones of a wall. The frames seem to hold panes of glass through or on which one can read, in capital letters, 'Musée d'Art Moderne' on the left and 'Les Aigles Section XIXe siècle' on the right. Various diagonal stripes seem to indicate heavy rain. Three raindrops run down the panes and irregular shapes, that are found similar in various other plaques, float like clouds or form misty vapours. This optical effect situates the viewer either inside, looking out to the *Musée* exposed to a stormy downpour and partly obliterated by it, or outside, exposed to the rain and looking at the entrance of the *Musée* as a promise of shelter.

The plaques clearly related to the *Musée* include **Museum, enfants non admis** [Museum, Children not Admitted]. The Latin word "MUSEUM" stands out in the centre of the plaque, in gilded capital letters that ennoble it and lend it authority. Right beneath it, in a smaller font, the warning in red, 'enfants non admis', draws on the language of road signs, or regulations and instructions for users of public institutions. At the bottom of the plaque, three red suspension dots precede the end of a sentence that places this museum in an interminable, indefinite and improbable duration: '... all day long, until the end of time'. This expression, as well as the reference to museum functions and academic forms at the top of the plaque, would be taken up and reformulated in the Open Letter of 19 September 1968 displayed here: 'We'll be playing here every day, until the end of the world'. Broodthaers also maintains a compositional link between the plaque and the letter. The letter is directly related to his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*.

The plaque **Chez votre fournisseur (Le Vinaigre des Aigles)** [At your Supplier (Vinegar of Eagles)] evokes Broodthaers's museum with the figure of the eagle. It is a recurrent subject in his visual works, whose source, he explained, is a fragment from a poem by Broodthaers dated August 1949: 'O Tristesse envol de canards sauvages / Viol d'oiseaux au grenier des forêts / O mélancolie aigre château des aigles' (Sadness, flight of wild ducks / Rape of birds in the forest granary / Melancholy, bitter castle of eagles). The last sentence expresses the symbolism of the eagle – in which the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* is anchored – as a metaphor for loneliness and melancholy, as much as for imperialism. The name of his

museum, Broodthaers explains, 'was born from a poem ... I then made a plaque and transformed 'sour castle of eagles' into 'vinegar of eagles' and it then became *Department of Eagles*. It is a literary memory'.

The diptych **Section XVIIe siècle** [17th-century Section] advertises a new chapter of Broodthaers's *Musée*, which was inaugurated in Antwerp on 27 September 1969. It directly followed the closure of his *Section XIXe siècle* and similarly featured empty shipping crates, sign painting on the windows and about twenty art postcards of 17th-century masterpieces by Pieter Paul Rubens displayed on the wall.

Magritte, Mallarmé and other models

René Magritte was one of Broodthaers's main role models, to the extent that the artist considered himself his critical heir. In many visual and literary works, Broodthaers clearly refers to the master, as in the case of the plaque **Rue René Magritte Straat**, in which not only the inscription, but also the cloud at the top left evokes Magritte, recalling the characteristic curtain that Broodthaers also mentions in the Open Letter dated 27 August 1968: 'One of the unexpected consequences of my activities was to rediscover René Magritte. I saw the curtain, woven by the surrealists and which hides the topical value of his work, open before my eyes.'

Drawing inspiration from Magritte's 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe') in his famous painting of a pipe in *The Treachery of Images* (1928–29), Broodthaers wittily represents a street sign that on closer examination is simply a picture of a street sign, which, moreover, did not yet exist, since Magritte had died only the year before. Furthermore, the small askew 'Rue René Magritte Straat' is made from the same vacuum-formed plastic as the actual plaque, whose technique in turn recalls enamelled signage and advertising plaques. A *mise en abyme* takes place, reinforced by the proportions and colour of the sign's frame within the frame.

The centre of **Modèle : la pipe** [Model: the Pipe] shows the outlines of a pipe surrounded and partly covered by puffs of smoke in the shape of jigsaw puzzle pieces. The positive version of the plaque features the colours of the Belgian national flag, while the negative is in shades of brown suggestive of tobacco. The inscription 'Modèle : la pipe', is positioned below the schematic pictogram of a pipe and echoes Magritte's 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'. Broodthaers defines the surrealist painter and the pipe as "models", fundamental examples that can give rise to signs as reference, copy or index.

In **Modèle : la virgule** [Model: the Comma], that was produced as a single version, a comma is placed above the pipe and a large title in capital letters below it. The plaque's characteristics and composition seem to be a contraction between Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, with the spatialized language and punctuation of another of Broodthaers's role models: Stéphane Mallarmé. To Mallarmé – the poet of evocative musicality, associative poetics and chance in the structuring and destructuring of meaning – the silent counterpart of

the language constitutes the basic structural framework of the poem, which imposes a rhythm of presence and absence on the text. Taking up and extending this concept, Broodthaers emphasized the comma as either a decorative sign or a 'modèle' of time by interpunctuation that lends rhythm. In his plaques, Broodthaers seldom used it as a conventional punctuation mark, but purely as a disruptive (typo)graphic device to introduce a new way of writing, reading and interpreting text.

All versions of **Pipe Alphabet** were produced around 31 October 1969, the date of the Open Letter in which Broodthaers first cited the *Section Littéraire* of his *Musée*. While the motif of the pipe recalls Magritte's imagery, the play with letters, punctuation, spacing and indexical references is closely linked to the plaque *L'Alphabet* (The Alphabet), also featured in the exhibition, and Mallarmé's enigmatic poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance, 1897), which Magritte showed to Broodthaers when they met in the mid-1940s. Broodthaers not only considered Mallarmé a revolutionary poet, but also the founder of modern art, as he had managed to draw the reader's attention to the visual qualities of poetry, a potential that he too sought to develop as much as possible in his own work.

Livre tableau ou Pipes et formes académiques [Book Painting or Pipes and Academic Forms] is structured like a diptych painting or an open book, with a visible spine in the middle. Both the positive and negative of this plaque feature ten basic geometric shapes presented in perspective, as well as two pipe pictograms, accompanied by the references 'FIG. 1' to 'FIG. 10'. The abbreviation 'Fig.' stands for 'figure'. Generally used as an indexical reference, connecting a picture with its caption in an illustrated book, it implies perception but not yet interpretation, connecting the visual to the linguistic realm, the real to the abstract. In *Livre tableau ou Pipes et formes académiques*, by opposing the symbolic domain of Magritte's pipe to elementary geometric forms, Broodthaers deconstructs the system of primary universal structures, which is based on the latter.

Fig. 1 Fig. 2 (Pipes cassées) [Broken Pipes] is a visual and conceptual sequel to *Livre tableau*. It repeats the same diptych-like structure as well as several elements of the composition, though in utter disorder. Unlike *Livre tableau*, the 'fig.' mentions no longer function as references to an illustration, but become images or signs in their own right. The visual order and rigour of the classification system, which was at the same time established and undermined in *Livre tableau*, implode here. *Fig. 1 Fig. 2 (Pipes cassées)* marks the last occurrence of the pipe symbol in Broodthaers's plaques. The French expression 'se casser la pipe' means dying, perhaps symbolized by the clock in the lower right corner as a reminder of the passage of time.

The subject of Magritte's pipe can also be found in **Interview avec le chat** [Interview with the Cat]. This is an audio work, produced in Düsseldorf in 1970, in which Broodthaers appears to present his cat with Magritte's painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* and asks him questions about contemporary art, figuration, abstractionism, and the art market, to which the cat replies with miaows, that become increasingly frequent and shrill as the interview proceeds. The conversation is soon transformed into Broodthaers repeating the famous exclamation 'Ceci est une pipe; ceci n'est pas une pipe', interspersed with the interviewee's incessant mewling, and ends with the statement that it was recorded at the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, which the artist had moved to Düsseldorf at the time.

Broodthaers's desire to go beyond Magritte's antithesis between the real object and its representation can also be found in his undogmatic and pioneering use of film, where he further sharpens the contrast between vision and concept, perpetually analyzing the mediation potential of sign and symbols. As can be seen in **La Pipe (Gestalt, Abbildung, Figur, Bild)** [The Pipe (Form, Illustration, Figure, Image)], projected in this exhibition, he experiments with the two-dimensionality of the film, plays with the contrasts between static and moving image, everyday objects and symbols – like the pipe – and uses subtitles to add written inscriptions to the images. In the film *La Pipe*, objects appear and disappear behind a cloud of smoke that seems to come out of the pipe. Broodthaers confronts us with the arbitrariness that exists between the real object and its visual (even if filmic) or linguistic representation, reinforcing this concept through inscriptions too.

Puzzle (Triangle) and **Plaque vide** [Empty Plaque] are the only plaques of the thirty-six main subjects that feature neither letters nor text.

In *Puzzle (Triangle)* the only motifs used are pre-existing pictograms, often used on road signs designed to warn road users about potential dangers. *Plaque vide* is entirely white and has no relief, except for the black frame. The blank background, with its lack of depiction, echoes the absence of artworks in Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*. It further echoes the notion of the empty or floating signifier in semiotics, the rudimentary, basic support without content, referent or surplus of signification.

The 'Bassenge Wall'

Between March and April 1969, for the first time, Broodthaers exhibited fifteen plaques with different subjects, made up to that time, which he arranged on several levels and columns occupying an entire wall. This display, which evokes a façade covered with advertisements characterised by an excess of messages and images that makes them illegible, has been reproduced on other occasions including this exhibition.

In **Porte A** [Door A] the inscription 'Porte A' brings to mind the standard indications and signs intended to facilitate orientation in public institutions, while suggesting the possible presence of further entries and exits. The words depicted on the plaque are a series of opposites describing a door and the space to which it leads, but also referring to the plaque itself: entrance/exit, wide/narrow, wood/steel, felt/glass. All the nouns and adjectives chosen by Broodthaers – evoking the ambiguity of language – question the clear meaning expected from the scientific institution of the museum, as suggested by the word 'musée' at the bottom.

Influenced by Magritte's play on language, specifically the use of writing in painting, and by Mallarmé's use of typographic spacing, Broodthaers's creation of a visual poem composed of isolated, floating terms suggests the liberation of words and signification, freed from the rules and regulations of grammar and syntax.

In **1. David 2. Courbet 3. Ingres 4. Ingres 5. Wiertz**, Broodthaers advertises the four painters listed here as key figures of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXe siècle*. Except for Wiertz, all painters are featured in the *Musée* through postcard reproductions of their masterpieces, taped to a wall. According to Broodthaers, they embodied the emergence of radical ideas, drastic reorganisation of society and new forms of expression. Jacques-Louis David was a leader of the Republican neoclassical movement, while Gustave Courbet is considered the father of the Realist movement. Broodthaers esteemed Wiertz's work as a painter and his role in art history. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was known as the inventor of the aestheticized idealism of the neoclassicist repertoire. Broodthaers repeats his name twice and this blue version of the plaque could reference the rich blue and gold fabrics in Ingres's mysterious *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), a painting that appeared as a postcard in Broodthaers's *Section XIXe siècle*.

Cinema Section

Broodthaers became interested in the medium of film as early as the 1950s; he considered its technical innovations and its institutions, such as cinemas, decisive means for the creation of modern culture and history. Contrary to the classical conventions of the medium, his films are characterised by a free and precise approach that also includes the conscious use of outdated film techniques.

In October 1970, Broodthaers moved his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* to Düsseldorf, where he rented the basement beneath his house in Burgplatz and set up *Cinéma Modèle*, a film programme that ran for five weeks and can be considered a preliminary version of the *Section Cinéma*. Each screened film referred to an artist or writer whom he had selected as a model: Jean de La Fontaine (*Le corbeau et le renard*) [The Raven and the Fox], Kurt Schwitters (*La Clef de l'horloge*) [The Key of the Clock], Magritte (*La Pipe*) [The Pipe], Mallarmé (*La pluie*) [The Rain] and Charles Baudelaire (*A Film by Charles Baudelaire*).

In **Cinéma Modèle**, a black double frame around the plastic plaques brings to mind a projection screen. The motif of the comma, which usually pervades Broodthaers's series of more literary plaques inspired by Mallarmé, appears in different sizes and colours, almost like the visual representation of numerous other 'models' of cinema. A further reference to time and sequencing are the clocks on the plaque striking midday/midnight.

In **Modèle (virgule, point)** [Model (Comma, Dot)], punctuation takes precedence over text, as it becomes both poem-image and image-object. Only one version of this subject is known. The simplified composition and the space on the surface recall Mallarmé's use of the blank space on the page. Although Broodthaers had played with various aspects, rhythms and typographic effects of punctuation in previous plaques, his radical emphasis on these marks here (dots and commas) posits them as the central subject and as the 'modèle' to which the plaque's inscription refers.

At the same address where he screened his films as part of *Cinéma Modèle*, two months later, in January 1971, Broodthaers inaugurated the *Section Cinéma* of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*. This section took the form

of two configurations. Broodthaers opened the first in January 1971, then closed it in June 1972: 'Poetic reality is over, I am sorry to say. What is left? Pessimism and a museum which gives one something to think about, as a place of communication and not a shelter for works of art.' The section's second configuration entitled *Théorie des Figures* (Theory of Figures), ran from June to October 1972. The plaques directly connected with this chapter of his museum include **Museum – Musée, Section Cinéma** [Cinema Section]. Broodthaers initially made the rectangular version as a unique prototype. For the second version of the plaque, he decided to single out the main arrow that should direct the visitor towards the *Museum – Musée, Section Cinéma*. However, a second smaller arrow inside the larger one points in the opposite direction, disorienting and bewildering the viewer. As practical as it might appear, the sign illustrates a 'contradiction', perhaps reflecting Broodthaers's unconventional thoughts on the cinema and the museum as institutions.

Both **M.B.** plaques feature the enlarged, embossed reproductions of the artist's initials, which can also be seen in the last of the 24 photograms of the one-second black and white film in which his name appears, **Une seconde d'éternité (D'après une idée de Charles Baudelaire)** [A Second of Eternity (After an Idea by Charles Baudelaire)] produced in 1970 and screened in this exhibition. A close examination of the letters on the plaque shows that they were conceived as 24 strokes, the same number as the frames required to create a one-second illusion of movement in a stop-motion film. Broodthaers makes extensive use of celluloid as a medium; in this case too he painted the lines of his signature in India ink directly on the 35 mm film. Broodthaers's film, plaques and other works using his signature are a critical portrait of the art market's fixation on the artist's signature as proof of authenticity and value.

Letters, literature and poetry

L'Alphabet [The Alphabet] exists in two main versions (A and B), forming a diptych. While in some copies the accent is on experiments with colour as code, in others the focus seems to be on the oversized punctuation marks, as if to question the apparent order and authority of the Latin alphabet they partially cover. The subject, materiality and layout of *L'Alphabet* reveal Broodthaers's interest in the many possibilities of reading, through different senses and using space and rhythm. The ideas conveyed in this plaque once again revolve around Mallarmé.

The desire to expand poetry or language and writing into the visual is a main motif of Broodthaers's artistic work and is also conveyed by the film **La pluie (projet pour un texte)** [The Rain (Project for a Text)]. At the beginning of the film, we see Broodthaers writing, and he is suddenly engulfed by what is clearly artificial rain. Unperturbed, Broodthaers continues to write in the increasing gush of water. The rain pours down on the table and text, washing out the writing and making the jar of ink overflow. Broodthaers does not seem disturbed by this. He goes on writing. Puddles form on the page, mingling with the ink. In the last shot Broodthaers finally lays down his pen, the page is covered with cloudy, blurred spots of ink. At the same moment, the writing 'projet pour un texte' is overlaid on the scene.

Broodthaers's plan to free writing and language from the page is also illustrated in his experiments with clay, with which he breaks the mechanical codes of printed communication and radically alters the graphic perfection of standardized characters.

Unlike most of the other plaques and their moulds, made with a mix of readily available or customized wood and metal forms, all the signs for **a, air** were shaped in clay by the artist. The tactility of their rugged relief contrasts starkly with the mechanically reproducible and formally perfect signs of the regular plaques. While the generic letters or fonts used in print reproduction can be considered void moulds, empty floating signifiers, capable of being filled by different *signifiés*, Broodthaers's unique handmade signs are literally the plaque's subject, both in terms of subject matter and as subjectivity of the writer/sculptor.

The plaques **L'oise, l'aile** [The Goose, The Wing] resemble a symbolist mystery that the reader/viewer must decipher. If at first glance these plaques appear to follow the usual positive/negative logic, a difference in composition indicates a more complex structure. They are thought of as a diptych, the second line of each relief features a word in a smaller font: 'l'oise' on the positive, 'l'aile' on the negative. The artist proposes two levels of reading, the first based on the words and their signification, the second on composition and graphic signs and how these articulate, imitate or illustrate a concept or idea. A third, decidedly playful, reading of the words can be made aloud: in French the pronunciation of the letter 'l' sounds like the word 'aile' (wing), but also like the feminine pronoun 'elle', which may refer to both 'the wing' and 'the goose'. Broodthaers explores the musicality, rhythm and associative logic of spoken language, connecting it to avant-garde sound poetry or the origins of poetry in song.

Société [Society] looks like the transcript of loose annotations on a sheet of paper, suggesting the stream of consciousness in preparation for writing a text. Letters, words, punctuation marks and pictograms appear encased in piled-up rectangular and square boxes that compose a pattern suggestive of a brick wall. All the terms are evocative, suggestive and do not make up a syntactically correct sentence. Therefore, the plaque can also be read as a set of linguistic elements carefully chosen for their connotations or typographic effects. Referencing the technique of lead casings used in letterpress printing, *Société* renders apparent Broodthaers's research around typography, the graphic form of characters and printing processes.

It brings to mind Mallarmé's structural research and ambition to write the ultimate poem, in particular his (typo)graphic poem *A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*. Broodthaers also plays on the absence of immediacy of clear meaning, inspired by the tradition of concrete and visual poetry, as well as by associative symbolist poetics. The plaque relates to both literature and the visual arts through its frontality.

In 1972, Broodthaers decided to end the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* project just as it achieved institutional recognition. That year, after its presentation in small galleries, regional museums and private venues, the *Musée* was featured at documenta 5 in Kassel, the famous edition curated by Harald Szeemann that brought the strategies of conceptual art to the forefront of the international art debate.

The closure of the museum also marked the end of the production of the *Industrial Poems* and, a few years later, in 1974, of the Open Letters.

Chronology

1924

Marcel Broodthaers is born in Saint-Gilles on 28 January.

1942

He studies chemistry for a year at the Université libre in Brussels.

1943

He devotes himself entirely to poetry.

1945

Broodthaers publishes his first poem 'L'île sonnante' in the Surrealist magazine *Le Ciel Bleu* and comes into contact with René Magritte and the Brussels Surrealists.

He makes his debut as a journalist for the magazine *Le Salut Public*, signing some of his articles with the pseudonym Marcel Canal.

1946

He opens a bookshop in Rue Notre-Seigneur in Brussels.

1947

On 7 June, Broodthaers signs the Belgian Surrealist manifesto *Pas de quartiers dans la révolution !* together with Magritte, Paul Nougé, Louis Scutenaire and others. Openly critical of André Breton, the document identifies the

Communist Party as the means for bringing about a social revolution; his position on the subject is once again underlined in the manifesto *La Cause est Entendue*, signed of 1st July by Broodthaers and other Belgian artists and writers, and by a group of their French colleagues.

1948

He publishes 'Projet pour un film' and 'Trois poèmes de l'île déserté' in the magazine *Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* published in Paris as a single issue and edited by Christian Dotremont, Noël Arnaud, Asger Jorn and Zdenek Lorenc.

1957

In September, Broodthaers publishes his first book of poetry: *Mon livre d'ogre*.

He produces his first film, *La Clef de l'horloge (Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters)*, shot in 1956 around Schwitters' exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

He starts experimenting with photography and meets the photographer Julien Coulommier, with whom he works on the project *Statues de Bruxelles*, subsequently published as a book in 1987.

1959

He presents his film project 'Poésie Cinéma' at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, consisting of short films and extracts from documentaries and animations by contemporary artists, including his own film *Actualités recon-sidérées*.

1960

He publishes his second book of poetry, *Minuit*, with illustrations by Serge Vandercam.

1961

Broodthaers travels to London frequently to write a series of articles entitled 'Un poète en voyage ... à Londres' for the *Journal des Beaux-Arts*. He spends the summer in Paris, where he also works as a plumber's assistant and a doorman to support himself financially.

He publishes his third book of poetry, *La Bête noire*, illustrated with etchings by Jan Sanders.

1962

On 23 February, Broodthaers meets Piero Manzoni at the *Castellani et Manzoni* exhibition at the Galerie Aujourd'hui at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. Manzoni presents him with a certificate

of authenticity, declaring Broodthaers a 'Living Sculpture'.

1963

He continues to travel in his capacity as art critic for the *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, reviewing exhibitions like those of George Segal in Paris and Jim Dine at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

1964

On 31 January, Broodthaers participates for the first time as an artist in the exhibition *Lauréats du Prix de la Jeune Sculpture Belge* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, where he presents four works in the form of assembled objects.

Between 1963 and 1964, he personally funds the publication his fourth book of poetry, *Pense-Bête*.

From 10 to 25 April, he holds his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels, marking the start of his career as a visual artist. The exhibition features *Pense-Bête*, created by embedding fifty unsold copies of the book of the same title in plaster.

1965

Broodthaers is among the artists presented in the *Pop art, nouveau réalisme, etc...* exhibition at the Palais des

Beaux-Arts in Brussels from 5 February to 1 March.

From 2 to 24 April, the Galerie Aujourd'hui at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels hosts the exhibition *Objets de Broodthaers / Voorwerpen van Broodthaers*. As the title suggests, the exhibition mainly features his assembled objects that reflect the work of his early years as an artist. These include certain recurrent objects with a symbolic and metaphorical meaning, like mussels, eggshells and coal.

1966

From 26 May to 26 June, the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp hosts the exhibition *Moules Oeufs Frites Pots Charbon* for which a catalogue is also published.

1967

A major solo exhibition entitled *Marcel Broodt(h)aers / Court Circuit* is held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels from 13 to 25 April.

1968

Within the context of the 1968 protest movements, Broodthaers participates in the first days of occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts as an intermediary between the artists and the museum staff.

Between April and May, he produces his first plastic plaques: *Académie I*, *Académie II* and *Téléphone*.

On 7 June, he writes his first Open Letter, which would be followed by many others in which he discusses various themes associated with museums, art and being an artist.

He produces the first version of *Le Drapeau noir (tirage illimité)* following the student protests that took place in the cities mentioned on the plaque: Nanterre, Venice, Paris, Milan and Brussels.

On 27 September, he opens the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXe siècle*, at his house in Rue de la Pépinière in Brussels. He maintains this fictive museum for four years, during which he opens twelve sections in seven different cities: Brussels, Cologne, Le Coq, Antwerp, Düsseldorf, Middelburg and Kassel.

From 29 October to 19 November he presents several plaques at the exhibition *M.U.SÉ.E. D'.A.R.T. CAB.INE.T. D.ES. E.STA.M.P.E.S, Département des Aigles* at the Saint-Germain-des-Prés bookshop in Paris.

1969

Between March and April, for the first time, he exhibits fifteen plaques with different subjects, made up to that time, which he arranges on several levels and columns occupying an entire wall. This display has been reproduced on other occasions including this exhibition.

He produces the second version of *Le Drapeau noir (tirage illimité)* following the student protests in several international cities – Prague, Mexico City, Berkeley – that he adds to those already cited in the first version of the plaque.

He opens three new sections of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*: the *Section XVIIIe siècle* in Antwerp; the *Section Documentaire* at Le Coq and the *Section Littéraire*, which exists only as a correspondence and publication project.

1970

He opens the *Section XIXe siècle (bis)* of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf for two days from 14 to 15 February, and the *Section Folklorique / Cabinet de Curiosités* at the Zeeuws Museum in Middelburg.

He moves to Düsseldorf, where he works as a correspondent for the Ateliers Création Radiographique of the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF).

He presents his film *Une seconde d'éternité (D'après une idée de Charles Baudelaire)* at the Galerie Folker Skulima in Berlin.

1971

On 12 January, Broodthaers opens the *Section Cinéma* of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in the basement of his studio in Burgplatz 12 in Düsseldorf.

From 21 October to 7 November, he holds the exhibition entitled *Film als Objekt – Objekt als Film*, at the Städtisches Museum in Mönchengladbach, in which he displays films and projections from slides, along with numerous objects featured in his films.

In October, he opens the *Section Financière* of the *Musée d'Art Moderne* at the Kunstmarkt and in November at the Galerie Michael Werner in Cologne, where he provocatively puts the museum up for sale due to bankruptcy, announcing 'à vendre pour cause de faillite'.

1972

From 16 May to 9 July, he opens the *Section des Figures / Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute* of the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* at the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, displaying over 300 objects and images relating to eagles. He opens the final sections of his museum at the Neue Galerie at documenta 5 in Kassel: the *Section Publicité* from 30 June to 8 October, the *Section d'Art Moderne* from 30 June to 15 August, and the *Musée d'Art Ancien, Galerie du XXe siècle* from 15 August to 8 October.

1973

He moves to London. On 7 September, Broodthaers opens the exhibition *Peintures Littéraires, 1972–1973* at the Galerie Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne, where he displays his recent *Literary Paintings* created by printing text onto canvas.

1974

Broodthaers lives in Berlin for six months, participating in the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin artist residency programme.

He displays his first *décor* entitled *Un jardin d'hiver* in the collective exhibition *Carl Andre, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel*

Buren, Victor Burgin, Gilbert & George, On Kawara, Richard Long, Gerhard Richter at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. The *décors* are a series of installations devised by Broodthaers that consist of a group of his works and other objects, often borrowed for the duration of the exhibition.

1975

From 11 June to 6 July, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London holds the exhibition *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*. The exhibition rooms of the show at the ICA also become the set for his film *La Bataille de Waterloo*.

At the end of the year, he presents *L'Angélu de Daumier*, his last *décor*, at the Centre national d'art contemporain in Paris.

1976

Broodthaers dies in Cologne on 28 January, the day of his 52nd birthday.

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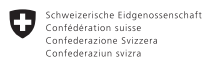


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