

Open Letters, Industrial Poems

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# Open Letters, Industrial Poems

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH

*The participation of a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France is a social fact that will honour the whole of the close of the nineteenth century. A parallel is found in artistic matters, the way being prepared by an evolution which the public with rare prescience dubbed, from its first appearance, Intransigent, which in political language means radical and democratic. . . . Such, to those who can see in this the representative art of a period which cannot isolate itself from the equally characteristic politics and industry, must seem the meaning of the manner of painting we have discussed here. . . .*

—Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Impressionists and Edouard Manet”

During the twelve years that Marcel Broodthaers declared himself an artist, he produced a wide variety of internally coherent, if elliptical, groups of work. One such group, identified by him as *Industrial Poems*,<sup>1</sup> from the period 1968–70, has gone practically without critical comment. While no more (nor less) hermetic and enigmatic than his other work, these would, by their very identification as “poems,” seem to offer access to what motivated Broodthaers to transform, in 1964, his lifelong profession as a poet and to engage henceforth in the production of visual objects.

1. According to Maria Gilissen, Broodthaers so identified these works only once, on the occasion of their first exhibition in 1968.

Yet by their simultaneous identification as “industrial” these poems also seem, at first glance, to link Broodthaers’s work with that fundamental assumption of modernist thought to which Mallarmé refers in the passage cited above. This is the assumption that an inextricable dialectic links the advancement of the artistic forms of a society to the advancement of its technical means, and that the transformation of the hierarchical structures of a social totality necessitates the transformation of aesthetic hierarchies. As a consequence, it was further believed at the outset of modernism that the participation of the masses in the social production and political life of a state would inevitably lead to their participation in the development of radically different forms of perception. These assumptions formed the basis for the modernist insistence on the absolute contemporaneity of subjects, materials, and procedures, as they did for the critical negation of the work of art as a *unique* object.

But Broodthaers’s decision to identify his poems as “industrial” cannot possibly be connected to this position of the “modernist artist.” Broodthaers, after all, no longer permitted the naive incorporation, within his work, of those structures attesting to the impact of industrial modes of production upon artistic practice. And further, he criticized the way a seemingly progressive and provocative structural simplification of the work betrays, precisely, the dominance of technology’s rationalism and instrumentality. Thus, since, in his view, this reduction only affected the design surface of the object or its compositional or serial structure, Broodthaers castigated the procedure as a “singleness [which] condemns the mind to monomania: minimal art, robot, computer.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems that from the very beginning of his work as an artist he viewed the heroic embrace of advanced technology by visual culture with considerable scepticism. After all, Broodthaers had only recently witnessed this putatively utopian synthesis of artistic and social production in the work of the *nouveaux réalistes* and the American pop artists of the early 1960s, and he suspected the work to be the result of both a misunderstanding of modernity and an extreme simplification of its artistic legacy. “The literalness linked to the appropriation of the real didn’t suit me,” he wrote, “since it conveyed a pure and simple acceptance of progress in art . . . and elsewhere as well.”<sup>3</sup>

But from the highly enigmatic and esoteric character of his work, it is clear that Broodthaers did not build on the other modernist foundation mentioned by Mallarmé either, namely, the impact of the “participation of hitherto ignored people in . . . political life” and its consequences for the modes of contemporary artistic reception. In Broodthaers’s work from the mid-’60s onwards, rarely, if ever, do we find an explicit reference or claim to the political nature of his

2. Marcel Broodthaers, “Ten Thousand Francs Reward” (after an interview with Irmeline Lebeer), p. 43 of this issue.

3. *Ibid.*

artistic endeavor, nor do we see him deploying artistic strategies which, qua strategies, materials, or mode of distribution, would already constitute an assault on the separateness of the aesthetic in favor of an explicitly political conception of art production. While he employed almost all of the late '60s and early '70s forms of distribution, thus, in the context of conceptual art in particular, calling into question the status of the work of art as a unique, auratic object (the book, the film, the print, and the plaques), he also criticized that form of supposedly democratic distribution that spread during the 1960s: the "multiple." Looking upon the multiple with great scepticism, he almost always limited his own editions to relatively—often artificially—low numbers. The only "public" art form that Broodthaers really allowed himself was the open letter, paradoxically addressed, in most cases, to an individual, or to "friends."

Broodthaers's frequently voiced scepticism toward the concept of "progress in art and elsewhere as well" thus not only raises doubts about his commitment to the modernist idea of artistic contemporaneity, its inherent progressiveness, but it also has to surprise those who associate him with the legacy of '60s political and cultural critique. Since the 1940s, Broodthaers, the poet, had been connected to the radical left wing of the Belgian surrealist movement,<sup>4</sup> and Broodthaers, the artist, had participated in the cultural revolution of the student movement of May '68. He had, for example, been present at the temporary occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels ("my museum originates from that date") and he had been affiliated with the Brussels circle around Lucien Goldmann, the disciple of Georg Lukács (Broodthaers refers to one of his books as resulting from his participation in Goldmann's seminar).<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, Broodthaers seems to have distanced himself generally from all the progressivist aspects of the modernist credo, both those stated in the guise of a devotion to contemporaneity and the artistic emblems of a scientific or technological modernity, and those defining themselves through explicitly political perspectives and actions. As a consequence, his work has been frequently accused of remaining ultimately within the domain of the poetic, of being a "literary" practice—a quality for which the work is reproached even now by many "professionals" of the visual. It is an accusation which Broodthaers invoked

4. On November 15, 1945, Broodthaers participated for the first time in a gathering of Belgian surrealists along with Pol Bury, Achille Chavée, Paul Colinet, Christian Dotremont, Marcel Mariën, Louis Scutenaire, and others. (See "Lettre de Chavée à Magritte et Nougé," in Marcel Mariën, ed., *L'Activité Surréaliste en Belgique*, Brussels, Editions Lebeer-Hossmann, p. 342.) In 1947 Broodthaers signed the manifesto "Pas de quartier dans la révolution," along with René Magritte and Paul Nougé, and in 1948 he published two poems ("Projet pour un film," and "Trois poèmes de l'île déserte") in the journal *Le surréalisme révolutionnaire*.

5. Marcel Broodthaers, *Charles Baudelaire: Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes*, Hamburg, Editions Hossmann, 1973. The actual reference reads, "This book has its origin in a seminar by Lucien Goldmann on Baudelaire, which took place in Brussels during the winter of 1969–70 and to which I was invited to participate as an artist."

certaines galeries  
prenant 75%.  
Ce que c'est ?  
En fait, des  
Marcel  
Broedthaers  
Galerie St Laurent  
rue D...  
Du 10...  
Verni...  
vend...  
de 6

Moi aussi, je me  
suis demandé si  
je ne pouvais pas  
faire quelque  
chose et réussir  
dans la vie. Cela  
fait un moment  
déjà que je ne suis  
bon à rien. Je suis  
à l'âge de quarant  
ans.

L'idée enfin  
d'inventer que  
chose d'insinc  
me traversa  
l'esprit et je me  
mis aussitôt au  
travail. Au bout  
de trois mois, je  
montrai ma  
production à  
Edouard...  
le propriétaire  
de la...

Saint-Laurent.  
Mais, c'est de l'art,  
dit-il  
et... oserais  
volontiers tout ça.  
D'accord  
lui, j'aurais je  
Si je tends  
quelque chose  
il prendra 30  
Ce sont, para  
des conditions  
normales

les buchers/minivelle

voluntarily and upon which he commented with amusement: “This denomination [literary] has a pejorative reputation (I wonder why?).”<sup>6</sup>

Yet, paradoxically, it was with a public demonstration of the burial of the literary (the remainder of the edition of his last volume of poetry) that Broodthaers’s work as an artist began, and it was in the erasure or suspension of reading and the displacement of the literary that some of his most important works (operating under the cover of books) would subsequently be accomplished.<sup>7</sup> This fact alone should indicate that Broodthaers’s work—while clearly taking a position of critical negation with regard to the progressive and political implications of modernism—can certainly not be reclaimed for a conservative critique of contemporary visual culture from the perspective of the literary.<sup>8</sup> And this is true even though the often extremely stylized appearance of Broodthaers’s work might mislead naive viewers into the assumption that the elements of mourning and melancholia deposited there act to deplore the loss of a nineteenth-century bourgeois culture embodied in institutions like that of the museum—the museum, of course, constituting one of the centers of Broodthaers’s critical contemplation.

On the occasion of his first exhibition, at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels in 1964, Broodthaers published a by-now notorious and frequently quoted statement in which he draws a facetious connection between the commodity and the commonly held suspicion that all art is inherently fraudulent. This is contained in the statement’s hint that it took only three months to produce the work for his first exhibition as an artist, and that he did not even suspect himself of having produced art until his future dealer told him so:

I, too, wondered if I couldn’t sell something and succeed in life. I had for quite a little while been good for nothing. I am forty years old. . . . The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work at once. At the end of three months I showed what I’d done to Ph. Edouard Toussaint, the owner of the Galerie Saint-Laurent. “But this is art,” he said, “and I will gladly show it all.” If I sell something he’ll take thirty percent. These, it seems, are

6. Broodthaers, “Ten Thousand Francs Reward,” p. 39.

7. The work under discussion is *Pense-Bête* (1964), which is described in great detail in the essay by Dieter Schwarz in this issue. For the subsequent examples of this crucial strategy, I am thinking here of Broodthaers’s work *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*—published as a book in 1969 and extensively described and discussed by Birgit Pelzer and Anne Rorimer in their essays in this issue—and the later work *Pauvre Belgique* (1974), which is the subject of Yves Gevaert’s essay in this issue. In order to avoid repetitive descriptions, I refer the reader unfamiliar with these works to those essays.

8. For an example of this interpretation of Broodthaers’s critique and its reclamation for a conservative ideology, see Michael Compton, “Marcel Broodthaers,” in *Marcel Broodthaers*, London, The Tate Gallery, 1980, pp. 13–25.

normal conditions; some galleries take seventy-five percent. What is it?  
In fact, only some objects!<sup>9</sup>

This definition of the art object as “something insincere” sets one of the many parameters of Broodthaers’s future investigations: a continuous reflection on the status of the (art) object under the universal reign of commodity production, once the object had lost the credibility of its modernist, utopian dimension. For Broodthaers the work of art no longer operated in terms of its inherited — quintessentially modernist — dialectic: to be simultaneously the *exemplary* object of all commodity production and the *exceptional* object which denied and resisted the universality of that reign. Instead, in the final subsumption of artistic production under the reign of the culture industry — and that is the “industry” that the *Industrial Poems* actually address — the work could now only engage in the destruction of that dialectic. This advent of the culture industry — as we have witnessed it in the past decade — was predicted by Broodthaers with a prophetic clarity that, at the time, made him appear a cynical pessimist in contrast to his peers of the late 1960s and early ’70s, who produced an art with a progressivist spirit.

If, therefore, the title *Industrial Poems* refers at all to the industrial and political conditions mentioned by Mallarmé in his essay on Manet, it addresses a much more specific condition: that of aesthetic production emerging as one industry among others in the culture of the spectacle. It was precisely in its disavowal of the complete disintegration of the aesthetic, in its refusal to recognize the radically altered historical circumstances which had irreparably affected all material and structural conditions of the art object itself, that Broodthaers detected the profound insincerity of the work of art:

I doubt, in fact, that it is possible to give a serious definition of art, unless we examine the question in terms of a constant, I mean the transformation of Art into merchandise. This process has speeded up nowadays to the point where artistic and commercial values have become superimposed. And if we speak of the phenomenon of reification, then art is a special instance of the phenomenon, a form of tautology.<sup>10</sup>

More precisely, it seemed impossible, under these circumstances, to reemploy the definitions of the pictorial and plastic object that had been developed at the

9. See exhibition announcement *Marcel Broodthaers*, Brussels, Galerie Saint-Laurent, 1964. The exhibition announcement was printed over reproductions of fashion advertisement pages.

10. Marcel Broodthaers, “To be *bien pensant* . . . or not to be. To be blind,” p. 35 of this issue.

height of modernism. Thus, Broodthaers recognized, from the very beginning of his artistic career, the necessity of differentiating the specific conditions which determined the conception of modernist strategies from those determining his own work and that of his peers. He criticized the assumptions behind pop art and *nouveau réalisme* that promoted the simple continuation of artistic paradigms and strategies originating in dada, voicing his doubt about the validity of this as early as the mid-1960s. One hears this in a 1965 interview:

One could find the origin of pop art in dada, but society has changed to such an extent since then that any comparison would inevitably draw us into some kind of confusion with dada and surrealism. I think rather that pop art is an original expression of our times, or better yet, our actuality. Pop art did at first develop in American society. American life presents a character—due to the industrial factor—which invades absolutely every aspect of private existence. In America nothing happens any more on the level of individual life. American life consists of a whole series of disavowals which build up, neutralize themselves, and finally annihilate completely the pleasures of existence which a human being normally possesses. I might as well admit that the same phenomenon occurs in Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, the use of language in Broodthaers's *Industrial Poems* differs programmatically from the artistic and poetic rediscoveries of the cubo-futurist *Parole in libertà*, *Zaum*, or Schwitters's *Ursonate* in the work of the *lettristes* of the 1940s or the concrete poets and Fluxus poets of the late '50s and early 1960s.

The double inversion of Broodthaers's "writing" was that, on the one hand, it seems to engage in precisely that modernist strategy of hermetic resistance by which the visual or linguistic sign constitutes itself to refuse the visual or sensual data which the viewer demands, this refusal operating in the semantic disguise of the construction of an anomic object.<sup>12</sup> But at the same time, Broodthaers's writing seems equally determined to investigate the process of reification that the visual sign undergoes when it is transformed into that modernist object of artistic withdrawal and resistance.

Echoing Sartre's designation of Mallarmé as "the prophet who announces our century," Broodthaers, in the mid-'60s, identified the latter as the fountainhead of contemporary artistic projects within the medium of language. Broodthaers was, of course, referring to the way Mallarmé's work spatializes the

11. Jean-Michel Vlaeminckx, "Entretien avec Marcel Broodthaers," *Degré Zéro*, no. 1 (1965), n.p.

12. The social breakdown and fragmentation referred to by the term *anomie* is used here in its linguistic dimension to indicate the object's withdrawal from systems of communication, its self-imposed condition of muteness and silence.

semantic and lexical elements of language on the page. And that spatialization, although it was at least partially motivated by a desire for the semblance of an absolute autonomy of the textual, achieved that autonomy only at the price of an artificial anomie resulting from the destruction of meaning and the erasure of memory from the semantic axis of language. This insistence on the autonomous physicality and pure semiotic presence of functionalized speech acts and commodified objects transformed the very opponent of reification — poetic language — into mute plasticity and objecthood.

Broodthaers's "I, too, wondered if I couldn't sell something" seems to travesty a 1912 statement by Guillaume Apollinaire, who declared, on his invention of spatialized poetic language (the calligram): "And I, too, am a painter." Yet one does not believe that, even in the case of Apollinaire, this proclamation reflects merely an ambition to rival his painter friends whose projects he would soon define in *Les peintres cubistes*, nor that it was generated by what academic fantasies have again and again described as a new strategy to abolish genre boundaries and poetic categories. Rather, it seems that Apollinaire was already attempting to accommodate the fact that the very modes engendered by these conventions of meaning-production were threatened and destroyed by factors outside of poetry and painting, factors which Walter Benjamin described twenty years later: "Now the letter and the word which have rested for centuries in the flatbed of the book's horizontal pages have been wrenched from their position and have been erected on vertical scaffolds in the streets as advertisement."<sup>13</sup>

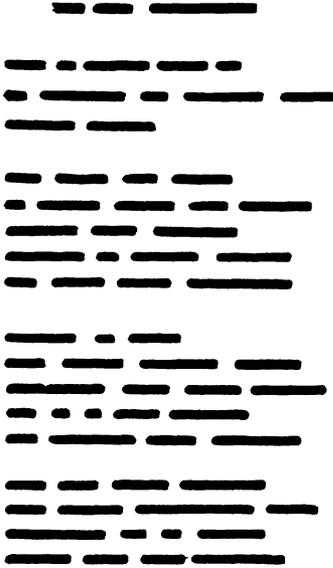
Thus our questions regarding Broodthaers's work, and the *Industrial Poems* in particular, should first of all address the external factors determining his redeployment of these earlier modernist strategies, in particular those of fragmentation and erasure. For these are strategies which — while of central importance and universally present in the work of the dadaists — would have clearly acquired different functions in Broodthaers's reflection on the current conditions of artistic production.

Broodthaers's suspension of the *Industrial Poems* between both language- and object-production and their mutual cancellation distanced his work from that critique of the commodity status of the aesthetic object formulated in late '60s conceptual art, which abandoned traditional pictorial and sculptural materials and procedures in favor of a transformation of art into linguistic definitions.

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13. Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1977, vol I, 2, p. 658.





Left: Man Ray. *Untitled Poem*. Paris, May 1924.

Man Ray, Paris, mai 1924

Right: Louis Aragon. *Suicide*. 1924.

process and thereby became absorbed in the same anomie it opposed. Triumphantly acquiring the status of an object—a spatial and plastic force to match and overcome that force of spatialization that language had acquired in its mundane usage in newspaper typography and advertisement—poetry became mere *chose*, simply one object among other objects. Its powerful presence as a spatial construct was acquired at the price of a loss of narrativity and representation, temporality and referentiality. Poetry had to revoke the wealth of experience which the semantic dimension of language seemed once to have offered its readers and which the visual and spatial dimension now refused through acts of rigorous deletion and erasure.

The third of the major heuristic assumptions about the elimination of traditional semantic functions is that the purification of the pictorial or linguistic signifier would in and of itself accomplish an act of resistance against the positivist and instrumentalist subjection of language to meaning and communication. This belief is still operative even in deconstructive criticism, as evident, for example, in Geoffrey Hartman's question:

Can Derrida's analysis justify a massive displacement of interest from signified to signifier? More precisely, from the conceptualization that transforms signifier into signified to those unconceptualizable qualities of the signifier that keep it unsettled in form or meaning. Is the force of the written sign such that every attributed meaning pales before the originary and residual violence of a sound that cannot be fully inscribed because as sound it is already writing or incision . . . ?<sup>14</sup>

14. Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, pp. 119–120.

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# SUICIDE

A b c d e f

g h i j k l

m n o p q r

s t u v w

x y z

Louis ARAGON.

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## *Fragmentation*

*We read in two ways: a new or unknown word is spelled out letter by letter; but a common, ordinary word is embraced by a single glance, independently of its letters, so that the image of the whole word acquires an ideographic value.*

—Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*

Concomitant with the strategies of deletion and erasure, the strategy of fragmentation succeeds in the abolition of meaning in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advanced poetry. Like its strategic allies, it is riddled with the deficiencies of the spatial liberation's dialectical counterpart: it finds itself merely in the cul-de-sac of the alphabet's infinite permutational and combinatory possibilities. Not unlike the problems faced by the nonrepresentational painters of that same generation, when the abolition of representation and referentiality opened up the abyss of infinitely arbitrary chromatic and compositional permutations, linguistic reduction—the reduction of the syntactical structure to the lexical unit, that of the lexical unit to the phonetic element, and that of the phonetic element to the individual letter—allows for a spiritual flight into an infinity of combinations which will rapidly lead to impasse. The nature of this—as Louis Aragon had anticipated in his 1924 poem *Suicide*—is the mere restriction, mechanistic rehearsal, and infinite repetition of the given terms, namely, the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. This nightmare of reduction was to come

to pass at the hands of successive generations of “language administration” carried on by the bureaucrats of concrete poetry, during the postwar period.<sup>15</sup>

A wide range of explanatory schemes has been devised by literary critics and art historians to account for the meaning and function of these strategies of fragmentation and erasure in both modernist literature and painting. These extend from the merely mimetic to the concept of allegorical language and the hypothesis of a primary semiotic experience which these strategies supposedly initiate. It seems to have mattered little to most historians that similar or identical literary techniques not only operated contemporaneously to perform diverse, if not opposite functions, but also in totally different political, social, and ideological environments (the revolutionary Soviet Union, fascist Italy, bourgeois Paris, and protorevolutionary imperial Berlin, to mention only the most obvious examples). At the same time it is argued that, for example, the fragmentation of the futurist poem was primarily mimetic, since it is supposed to stage the new perceptual and auditory conditions of urban life in advanced capitalist, industrialized nations on the level of syntax and grammar, on the level of the word and the phoneme themselves. Thus fragmentation is seen to repeat, within linguistic practice itself, the very type of experience to which individuals were now increasingly subjected. The fragmentation of language thus performed not only the depletion of meaning, but also—as has been widely discussed, in particular in the reading of futurist poetry as an assault on traditional linguistic usage—has performed an imitative function in which the heroic condition of modern life, its technological accomplishments, could be captured. Speed of movement, compartmentalization of time into smaller and smaller units, simultaneity of vision are—as we have repeatedly been told—the perceptual and cognitive experiences that the fracturing of syntactical and semantic continuity mimetically reproduces.<sup>16</sup>

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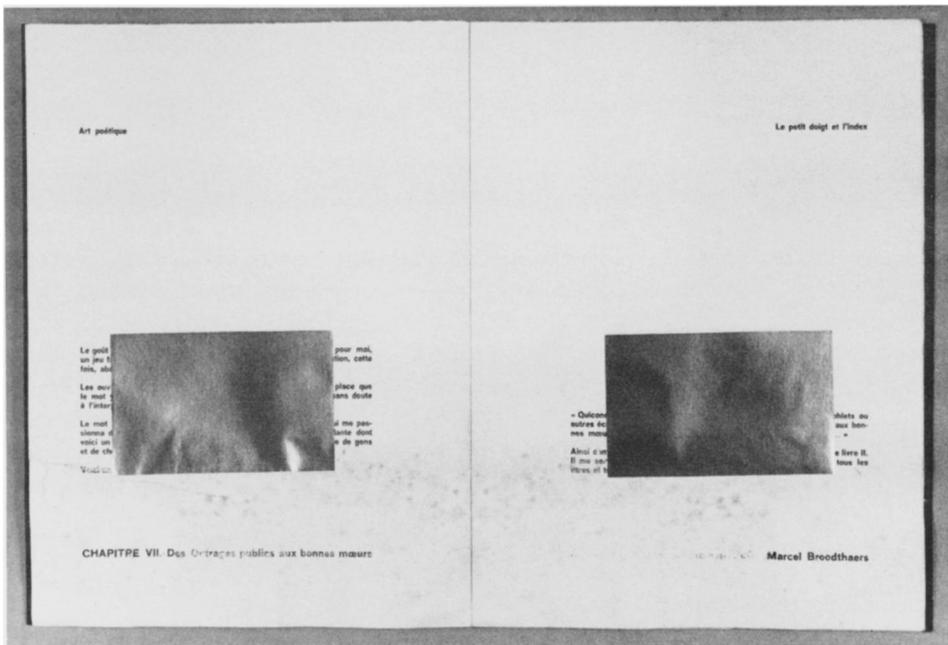
Broodthaers’s exhibition announcement for the Galerie Saint-Laurent recapitulates these strategies of erasure and fragmentation and transposes them into an unforeseen context (the world of art advertisement) and it anticipates in many respects the typographical style and design of many of his subsequent works, in which the typographic and visual conventions of both high art and mass cultural magazines are incorporated into the larger scheme of a reflection on the generation and reification of meaning.

15. The historical reality of this parallelism would, for example, be corroborated by the fact that one of Europe’s best-known concrete poets, the Swiss, Eugen Gomringer, was also the first and certainly one of the most competent authors to write on Joseph Albers. See Eugen Gomringer, *Joseph Albers*, New York, Wittenborn, 1967.

16. For a recent overview of the various interpretative models, see Willard Bohn, *Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914–1928*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Printed on both sides, the announcement uses a set of found advertisement images from a fashion magazine. After rotating them forty-five degrees, Broodthaers then spread a grid of evenly distributed type across the two pages, a grid that bars the reading of the advertising information and generates a reading of his self-advertisement as an artist.

In another but equal way, what was possibly the most important work in this exhibition—the result of Broodthaers’s spectacular act of destroying the remaining parts of his last volume of poetry in 1964—assumes different qualities in the perspective of that historical situation which made it abundantly clear to him that the strategies of the dadaists and their post war followers faced bankruptcy or academicization. Before he decided to insert the remaining edition of his last volume of poetry into plaster, he had already transfigured that volume by superimposing rectangles of colored monochrome paper onto the poems inside the volume, thus prohibiting the reading of those poems. This erasure anticipates the procedure that Broodthaers would apply four years later by transforming the lines of Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* into the black bands which appear simultaneously as erasures and as elements of increased visual emphasis and spatial presence.

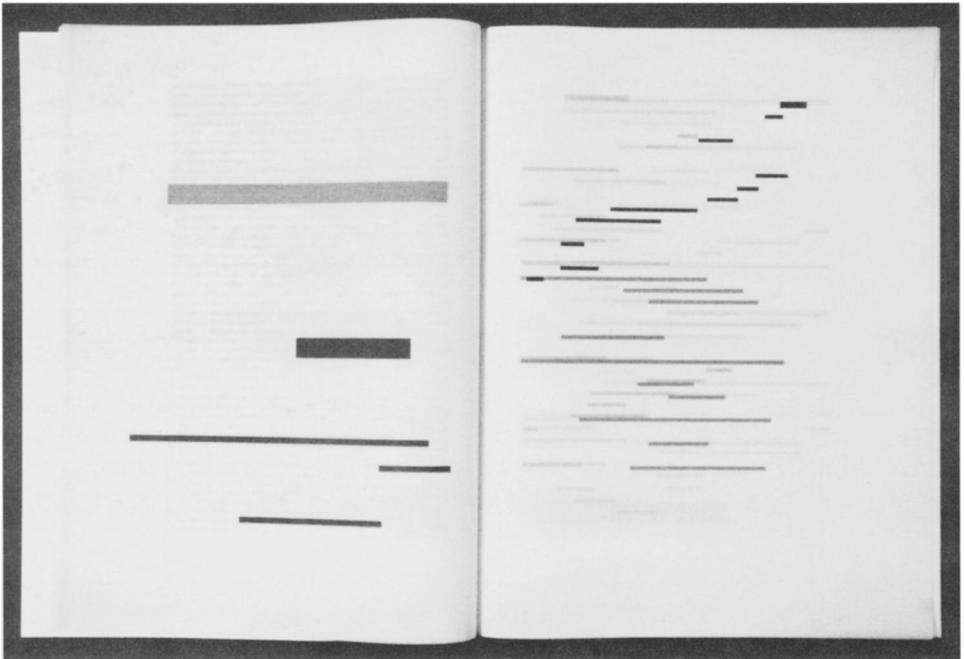


Marcel Broodthaers. *Altered pages from Pense-Bête. 1963–64.*

The chromatic squares and rectangles collaged by Broodthaers onto the surfaces of his poems perform both functions—that of erasure and that of fragmentation—simultaneously, since in many instances they leave the beginning and the end of a verse readable, while in others they conceal the text in its entirety. Occasionally the paper is only fastened at the top and can be lifted like a curtain if the reader is curious enough to do so.

But it seems that these visual erasures of the poems in *Pense-Bête* did not satisfy their author as sufficient to the task of annihilation of the poetic text, since he decided shortly thereafter to reduplicate this process of erasure on yet another level. This new form of objectification occurred when he embedded the remaining copies of the edition in a plaster base, thus adding to the process of semantic destruction by preventing the book from being opened and read at all. The extent to which the semantic and lexical dimension of the poetry is annihilated paradoxically increases the plasticity and presence of the artifact. Since this paradox was so extensively addressed by Broodthaers, one might speculate that it, indeed, motivated his decision and that he considered it to be quintessential to the problematic nature of contemporary art production.

In a (presumably fictitious) interview with Richard Lucas, a small Brussels



Marcel Broodthaers. *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Image (translucent version). 1969.

publisher and art dealer, Broodthaers facetiously poses the question, “Is there a profound relation between art and merchandise?” He then goes on to say that he had decided to write in order “to make dedications and to establish this relationship between art and commodity. In fact, there is a special kind of writing to abolish certain problems.”<sup>17</sup> As is so often the case with Broodthaers’s statements, what this “special kind of writing” and what these “certain problems” could possibly be remains enigmatic. Can we suppose that Broodthaers’s own writing practices, his *Industrial Poems* in particular, were designed to assume these functions?

The group of works entitled *Poèmes Industriels* were begun in 1968—before the foundation of Broodthaers’s key work, the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles—and continued with interruptions until 1970. As a whole this group exemplifies these visual and textual strategies—even though present in Broodthaers’s work from the very beginning—in their most differentiated and developed form. Broodthaers himself has extensively commented—as we will see—on a variety of aspects of these works, in particular their manufacturing technology, the meaning of that technology, and the historical context in which the choice of this procedure situated itself. But he has, to my knowledge, not commented upon the generic title of the group.

*To present Marcel Broodthaers as though he were an “artist” who imprints texts on plaques made of plastic, and thus to show his importance with regard to other artists, would mean to inscribe oneself into the existing cultural order. To say that through his voluntary confusion of all categories (painting, poetry, sculpture, cinema, etc.) Broodthaers eludes these very traditional cultural classifications, opposing them theoretically and practically at the same time, is not sufficient either.*

—Alain Jouffroy

This text appeared on the occasion of the first exhibition of the plaques, announced by Broodthaers as an exhibition of “limited and unlimited editions of industrial poems,” and addressed on the announcement—as with several of his open letters—to “my friends.”<sup>18</sup> Officially this exhibition was presented by a

17. Marcel Broodthaers, *Vingt Ans Après*, Brussels, R. Lucas, 1969, n.p.

18. Alain Jouffroy, untitled text, Paris, Librairie Saint-Germain des Prés, October 29, 1968,

department of the Musée d'Art Moderne that seems to have operated only on this occasion, identified by Broodthaers in the announcement as the *CAB.INE.T D.ES. E.STA.MP.E.S.* The spelling of the department's name subjects the familiar term of artistic categorization to the very process of fragmentation that classification itself exerts on the objects of its discursive order. In this case the fragmentation achieves what one could call a phonetic metonymy, since the actual semantic totality of each word is left intact while phonetic units are isolated and foregrounded, establishing a momentary semblance of rupture within the semantic function. But immediately restored to reexert its presence, this function effects a reading that—against the appearance of rupture—produces a recontainment within both the discursive and the institutional orders.

While Alain Jouffroy's statement, reverberating with the radical language of May '68, seems dated, it nonetheless indicates the extent to which opposition to traditional artistic categories was then viewed as an actual instance of critical resistance to wider cultural roles and functions. Further, it signals the degree to which such linguistic operations actually concretized and implemented the critical and political ambitions of that moment. Six months earlier these ambitions had been stated more programmatically still, in one of the manifestos issued during the May 30, 1968, occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. This pamphlet, most likely coauthored by Broodthaers, thus predates both the production of the first plaques and their exhibition. It states that the Free Association (as the occupiers identified themselves) "condemns the commercialization of all forms of art considered as objects of consumption."<sup>19</sup>

Once the occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts was concluded (as a result of negotiations), this tone of political condemnation receded. In what we must assume to be at one and the same time one of the last manifestos issued by a former occupier of the Palais des Beaux-Arts (even though still dated "Palais des Beaux-Arts, June 7, 1968") and the first of the "open letters" written and signed by the artist Marcel Broodthaers (addressed "à mes amis"), we read the introductory statement:

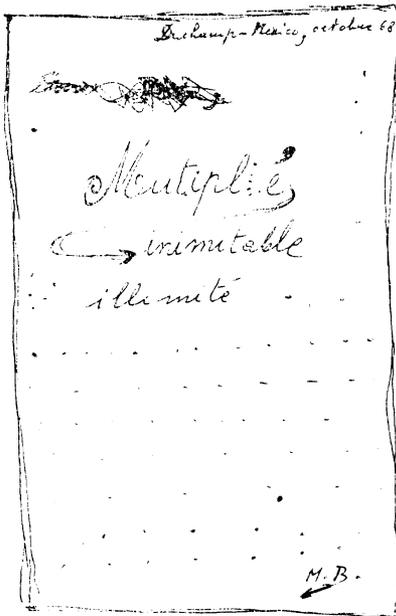
Peace and silence. A fundamental gesture has been made here that throws a vivid light on culture and on the ambitions of certain people who aspire to control it one way or the other: what this means is that culture is *an obedient, malleable matter*.<sup>20</sup>

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published in connection with the first exhibition of the *Industrial Poems*. Subsequently published in excerpts on the exhibition announcement, *BROODTHAERS*, Berlin, Galerie Gerda Bassenge, 1969, n.p.

19. See facsimile reproduction of manifesto, dated May 30, 1968, in *Museum in Motion*, s'Gravenhage, 1979, p. 249.

20. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Palais des Beaux Arts (Brussels), June 7, 1968, addressed "A mes amis," reprinted in *Museum in Motion*, p. 249 (italics added).



Librairie Saint-Germain des Prés -  
184 Boulevard Saint-Germain  
Paris 6ème - Mardi 29 octobre 68 à 18h

Librairie  
St Germain des Prés -  
184 Boulevard Saint-Germain

Mardi 29 ~~20~~ octobre 68 à 18 h.

Exposition de tirages limités et  
limités de poèmes industriels.  
Et d'un livre-film. Le Coucou  
et le Renard.

A mes amis, . . . . .  
M. U. S. E. D. A. R. T.  
C. A. B. O. I. N. E. T. D. E. S. E. I. S. T. A. M. P. E. S.

Département des Hautes-Alpes - M. Brassatkaer

Marcel Broodthaers. Sketches for exhibition announcement, Librairie Saint-Germain des Prés, Paris, 1968.

This letter then ends with the rather surprising remark:

And another word for those who have not participated in these days [of occupation of the Palais des Beaux-Arts] and who have despised them: you don't have to feel that you sold out before having been bought, or hardly. My friends, I cry with you for Andy Warhol.

Written three days after the attack on Andy Warhol's life on June 4, 1968, by Valerie Solanis, this letter gives no reason to doubt the sincerity of Broodthaers's compassion for Warhol. Yet by this time Broodthaers had also considerably modified his earlier optimistic views on pop art so that he would have thought of Warhol as a typical example of the artist who had chosen exactly the opposite road: that of a complete embrace rather than political contestation of those conditions which the occupiers of the Palais des Beaux-Arts had still attempted to oppose, if not actually to change. To the same degree that it had become obvious to Broodthaers that those conditions would have to be accepted as inescapable once the decision had been made to shift from the political to the artistic, Warhol's role and his strategies of pure affirmation warranted increasing suspicion and critique.

It seems then that for Broodthaers the inevitable subjugation of artistic practice to the commodity form, and its product's strict congruence with that form (later he would call the work of art "the tautology of reification"), required an equally strict elimination of all aesthetic illusion (the illusion of rupture and of transcendence, that of pleasure or of political critique, above all that of poetic liberation). But in one respect Broodthaers sets up a crucial distinction between his own attitude and that of most of his (American) peers: this destruction of aesthetic illusion does not imply a parallel destruction of the dimension of critical negation in artistic practice. Such negation, first of all, would contest the continually renewed aesthetic claims that the artistic construct had actually transcended its economic, its discursive, or its institutional boundaries; and second, it would attack the work's continually renewed pretenses to provide anything but the reification of either an image or a theory of transgression. Thus in an explicit critique of his conceptualist peers, Broodthaers would later come to say, "If artistic production is the thing of things, then theory becomes a private property."<sup>21</sup>

The second open letter, signed by Marcel Broodthaers, and again addressed "à mes amis," is dated "Kassel, June 27, '68." Consisting of three sections, two of which were soon to become the texts of the first two *Industrial Poems*, the third text, the actual letter, provides a correction to the letter of June 7. It requests:

In my letter of June 7, '68, it should not read: "You don't have to feel that you sold out before having been bought." Rather, it should read: "You don't have to feel that you sold out after having been bought." This is only to content everybody's ass and everybody's father. My friends, who is Warhol? And Lamelas?<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, as in so many subsequent cases, Broodthaers's literal reversal of a position he had just pronounced does not derive from an attitude of irony (in 1972 he would disqualify "irony as so much straw"). Rather it constitutes the public performance of an opportunistic revision of a moralistic position that had come to appear as no longer tenable. Broodthaers recognized this element of opportunism as an inextricable condition of adaptation to the reality of artistic production. Thus the letter's revision of a critical and radical belief, still held until just before the public recantation, performs the very contradictions inherent in the transition from political thought to artistic practice, or, as he would phrase it shortly thereafter, "If the work of art finds itself under the conditions of fraudulence and falseness, can we still call it a work of art? I have no answer to this."<sup>23</sup>

21. Marcel Broodthaers, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," p. 45.

22. David Lamelas, an Argentinian artist and filmmaker who lived at the time in London, had become friendly with Broodthaers during his visits to Antwerp and Brussels in 1968.

23. Marcel Broodthaers, quoted by Johannes Cladders, in "Befragung der Realität: Bildwelten Heute," in *Documenta V*, Kassel, 1972, p. 162.

The other two texts in the open letter, titled “Académie III” and “Le Noir et le Rouge,” actually became the texts of two of the first plaques to be produced by Broodthaers in the following months. Both texts were, however, to be slightly modified in their transition from “open letter” to “painting” (as Broodthaers would later identify the plaques).<sup>24</sup> “Académie III” was changed to *Académie I* for the black (negative) version of the first plaque, while *Académie II* became the title for the white cast of the otherwise exact replica of the negative version. Each of these was produced, as announced in the open letter, in a “limited edition” (seven copies), thus opposing from the outset the delusory and mythologizing claims—typical of the late ’60s and early ’70s craze for the “multiple”—of a democratization of the art object by means of its merely technical replication.

Yet there was one exception to the principle of producing these embossed plastic reliefs in an edition of seven copies, a principle that governed all of the thirty-odd plaques that followed in the course of the next two years. This, “Le Noir et le Rouge,” already conceived and announced in the public letter as “tirage illimité,” was in fact the only plaque to be produced in an unlimited edition. In its transition from the “open letter” to the art object, this text not only lost the pregnancy of its literary and political title, but was subjected to another slight modification. From the series of cities listed in the letter, certain names were deleted. Conceived to name the cities where the radical political movements of the late 1960s had either originated (as in Amsterdam, Berlin, and Nanterre) or where they subsequently found their internationalist expansion (as in Brussels, Milan, Venice), the text drops four cities—Belgrade, Louvain, Prague, Washington—from its actually produced version as plaque.

The dateline of the second open letter by Broodthaers indicates that he no longer writes from a (recently occupied) traditional art institution, but from the opening of an international art world event: Kassel’s *Documenta IV*. This—needless to say—was an exhibition that did not include artists such as Marcel Broodthaers.<sup>25</sup> What it did represent, however, becoming instantly notorious for

24. Marcel Broodthaers, commenting on his plaque *The Goose*, writes, “‘The Wing and the Goose’ or ‘The Goose and the Wing,’ depending on whether one looks from the left or from the right. 1. The Goose: the painting is white like the feathers of a goose. The letter types are clumsy to imitate the bird’s walk, besides, the wing is placed clumsily between the commas. Did this painting in white plastic make those who produced it think? In order to understand this question, one must know that this type of image depends directly on an industrial technique, on skilled labor. 2. This ‘painting’ is black; the goose has become a wing and the commas have only retained the appearance of commas. In reality they are the indication of a blue dream running along the text. Dream of the goose lost in a blue and stupid world. I would add that my ‘paintings’ are not worth much—not that they are not worth anything. But they are meant for people who prefer paintings to money; unless a change occurs and causes my prices to rise.”

25. While Broodthaers did not participate in *Documenta IV*, he was present at the opening, since he was represented in a group show organized by a gallery that had recently begun to support his work (The Wide White Space Gallery of Anny de Decker and Bernd Lohaus). On the occasion of the opening, several galleries had organized an exhibition of work by contemporary artists in the Hotel Hessenland in Kassel. As had been the case at the opening of the Milan triennale earlier that year, the

KASSEL, le 27 juin '68.

Un cube, une sphère, une pyramide obéissant à u x  
lois de la mer. Un cube, une sphère, une pyramide, un  
cylindre. Un cube bleu. Une sphère blanche. Une  
pyramide blanche. Un cylindre blanc. Ne bougeons plus.

Silence. L'espèce défile les yeux bavards. Un cube vert.  
Une sphère bleue. Une pyramide blanche. Un cylindre noir.  
Comme les rêves dont on se souvient peu; mondes où requin,  
couteau, cuisinier sont synonymes. Un cube noir. Une pyramide noire.

ACADEMIE III.

Une sphère et un cylindre noire. Je préfère clore les paupières  
et entrer dans la nuit. L'encre de la pieuvre décrit les nuages  
et la terre lointaine. Une sphère jaune. Une pyramide jaune.  
Un cube jaune qui fond dans l'eau, l'air et le feu.

TIRAGE LIMITE.

LE NOIR ET LE ROUGE

AMSTERDAM ---- PRAGUE -- NANTERRE ---- PARIS ----  
VENISE --- BRUXELLES -- LOUVAIN - BELGRADE - BERLIN --- WASHINGTON --

TIRAGE ILLIMITE.

Mes Amis,  
Ne lisez pas dans ma lettre du 7 juin 68 : - Il ne faut pas se sentir  
vendu avant l'achat. - Mais, lisez : Il ne faut se sentir vendu après  
l'achat. - Ceci, afin de contenter l'âme et le père de chacun.  
Mes amis, qui est Warhol? Et Lamelaes?  
M. BROODTHAERS -

*Left: Marcel Broodthaers. Open Letter. Kassel, June 27, 1968.*

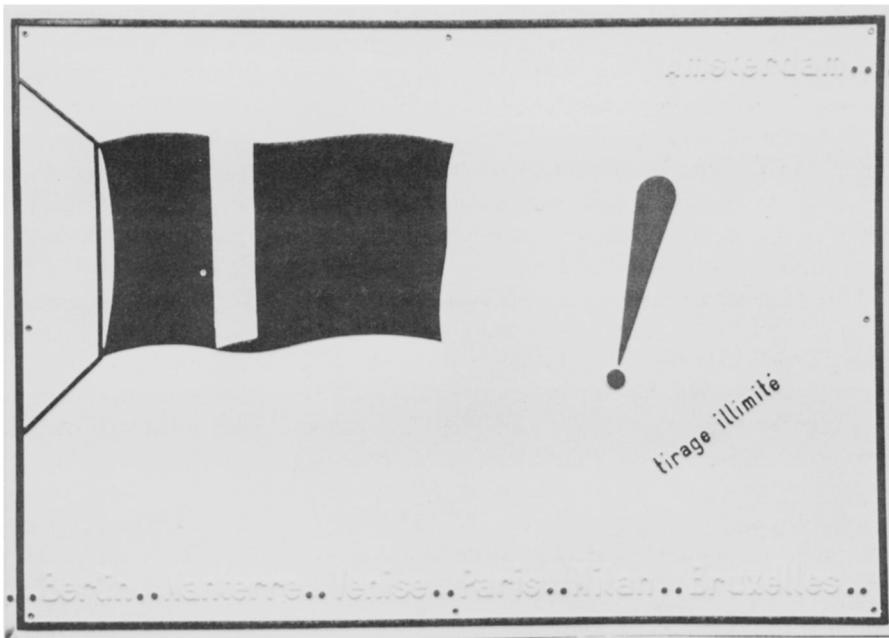
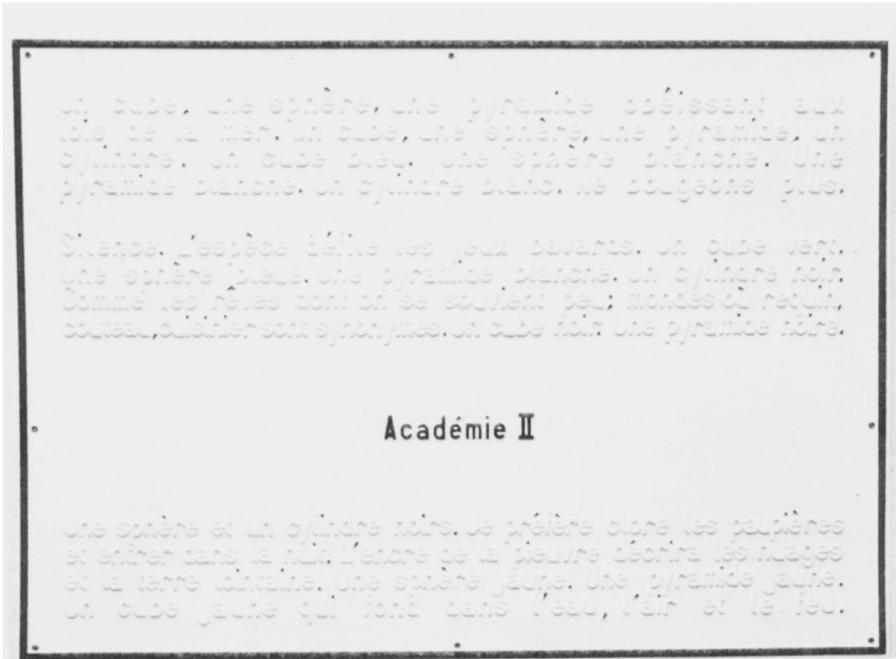
*Right, above: Marcel Broodthaers. Académie II. 1968.*

*Right, below: Marcel Broodthaers. Tirage illimité (Le Noir et le Rouge). 1968.*

doing so, was a peculiar synthesis of pop art on the one hand and late modernist abstraction on the other. This latter was presented in an immense range of reductivist geometric variations (“Post-Painterly Abstraktion” is the title of one of the catalogue essays), with examples from such diverse sources as the Americanized Bauhaus sequels of Joseph Albers and their Swiss counterpart, Lohse, to the op art of Bridget Riley and Victor Vasarely, and the newly emerged American contributions to that tradition in—to European eyes in the late 1960s—the stunning guise of minimal art represented by the works by Andre, Baer, Bell, Flavin, Judd, Lewitt, and Stella.

The titles of the other three catalogue essays clearly indicate the spectrum of the art world’s concerns at the time: “Probleme der Pop Art,” “Op Art und Kinetik,” and “Graphics and Objects: Multiple Art.” With hindsight it is then easier to understand why Broodthaers would have written the following text for his open letter from *Documenta*, and why this text would constitute his own first contribution to the galaxy of mechanically produced art objects.

opening of *Documenta IV* was perceived as a traditional enterprise of the cultural establishment and was accordingly accompanied by active protests from numerous members of the German extra-parliamentary opposition, political activists, artists, and students. For a good documentation of these events and the spirit of “anti-*Documenta*” protest, see Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, ed., *Interfunktionen*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1968), a journal that was actually born in that situation of cultural protest against the domination of the exhibition by mainstream institutional and market interests.



A cube, a sphere, a pyramid obeying the laws of the ocean. A cube, a sphere, a pyramid, a cylinder. A blue cube. A white sphere. A white pyramid. A white cylinder. We will not make any more moves. Silence. The species marches on with jabbering eyes. A green cube. A blue sphere. A white pyramid. A black cylinder. Like the dreams one hardly remembers; worlds where the shark, the knife, and the cook are synonyms. A black cube. A black pyramid. A sphere and a black cylinder. I prefer to close my eyes and walk into the night. The squid's ink will describe the clouds and the distant earth. A yellow sphere. A yellow pyramid. A yellow cube that melts in the water, the air, and the fire.

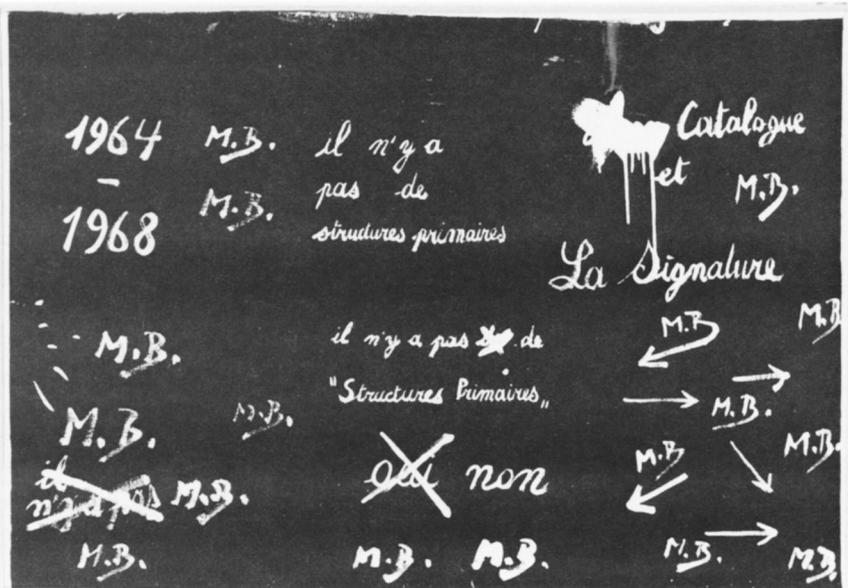
It would thus seem that the plaques, both as a type and a category of Broodthaers's work, correspond to the condition of their historical moment. This occurs in every detail of their textual and visual form, as well as in their material and their process of production. Displacing the political pamphlet or agitational handout, they replace the direct and instrumental language of political polemic and communication with that of the allegorical speech of art about art; and they assume the guise of an advertising device announcing its own status as discursive aesthetic object. But the plaques also insist that the elimination of critique and communication is enforced by the imposed transition from the realm of the political to that of the cultural. It is this suspension of the political that Broodthaers perceived to be the necessary condition of the process of aestheticization. In his analysis this suspension occurs at the very moment of the transition from language to visual object, a moment which the plaques embody in every single feature.

The technical process of their manufacture (a standard and relatively primitive process of vacuum forming a sheet of plastic over a mold/relief of wooden letters and fiberboard cut-out shapes) seems perfectly to have accommodated Broodthaers's needs. It is in these plaques that he finally overcomes all references to cubo-futurist and dadaist typography. This break takes place both at the level of their avant-garde aesthetics and of their various strategies, dispersed and internally contradictory as they had appeared in the pages of the traditionally formatted poetry book or in the guise of collage—the single-sheet, “auratic” original. The casting process not only allowed for a complete integration of typographic and formal elements in one continuous surface, but also destroyed the redeeming features of that negative white space that the traditional page format and the ground of the collage or montage still had to offer. Thus, erasure of language in these panels results as a “natural” consequence of their fabrication in a casting process where language appears literally blinded (blind-stamped), and where it acquires the status of the relief at the cost of readability. Poetic text, artistic object, discursive classification, and institutional demarcation are all literally made “of a piece,” and of one material; in their final format they are framed

as mere advertisement and, in their final form, they are contained as mere object (another art commodity). It is this homogenization (with all its losses of functional difference or of experiential specificity), that these plaques accomplish more than any of his earlier works, even though, as we have seen, the necessity for these strategies is already fully recognized in 1964 in the sculpture *Pense-Bête*.

Obviously the strategies that Broodthaers employs in these plaques indicate a full awareness of previous pictorial devices as they had been developed in the late '50s and early '60s in both Europe and the United States. But monochromy and serial repetition, as these would have been known to Broodthaers from the work of Piero Manzoni, for example, acquire radically different qualities and functions in the blinding of the text of the *Industrial Poems*. Similarly, quasi-mechanical casting, the quintessentially anti-artistic process (at least since Duchamp's late work), which had been widely assimilated in the work of artists of the early 1960s, operates here in an inverted manner. Broodthaers's provocative literalness, turning this industrial process back onto itself rather than projecting it onto the aesthetic object, uses casting to resist the aestheticization of technology.

It would seem, then, that since 1968 Broodthaers's work was increasingly motivated by a desire to contest these aesthetic practices on their own territory and their own terms. In order to perform this successfully, his own work had to engage in a mimicry of those dominant stylistic fashions that rapidly emerged



Marcel Broodthaers. Il n'y a pas de structures primaires. 1968.

and succeeded one another after the mid-1960s. The inherently mythical nature of art production, with its constantly renewed claims to have provided cognitive innovation and pleasure while actually prohibiting recognition of the conditions of its own restriction: to the specialized visual object, to the commodity, to ideological affirmation and class legitimation—all this becomes the explicit target of Broodthaers's analytic and mythoclastic project after 1968.

Inevitably such an approach required various rhetorical strategies: not only that of mimetic paraphrase and elliptical allegory, but also that of an immediate and instrumental use of language, of polemical commentary on the artistic production of his peers. Thus in an open letter of April 1968, mailed in response to an invitation to an international group exhibition in Lignano, Broodthaers already distances himself from a range of contemporary stylistic currencies:

At first I displayed objects of everyday reality—mussels, eggs, pots, and advertisement imagery. This point of departure inscribed me within the context of *nouveau réalisme* and sometimes that of pop art. . . . Today when the image destined for current consumption has assumed the subtleties and violences of *nouveau réalisme* and pop art, I would hope that definitions of art would support a critical vision both of society and of art as well as of art criticism itself. The language of forms must be united with that of words. There are no “primary structures.”<sup>26</sup>

In what had become his typical strategy of publicly contradicting (or correcting, or updating) himself, Broodthaers soon forwarded another letter to the organizers of the exhibition, this dated August 27, 1968. Extensively quoting his earlier letter, he comments upon his statements, arguing,

Today, in August, I would have preferred to have the word “repression” printed rather than “consumption,” even though the two terms have a tendency to be confused with one another. Current events

26. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Brussels, April '68, mailed to the Swiss-American art journal *Art International* and published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Lignano Biennale 1*, Lignano, 1968. Broodthaers is obviously referring to the title of the exhibition *Primary Structures*, organized by Kynaston McShine (Jewish Museum, New York, 1966), which would subsequently serve for a while as a stylistic identification for postminimal and proto-conceptual painting and sculpture. The then—at least in Europe—common confusion and/or simultaneity of the various artistic practices with which Broodthaers would have felt himself to be confronted is evidenced in the title of an exhibition running parallel to *Documenta IV* (1968) titled *Primary Structure, Minimal Art, Pop Art, Anti-Form* (Galerie Rolf Ricke, Kassel, June-September 1968). In 1968, presumably at the time of this letter or slightly later, Broodthaers would have also painted the rather polemical canvas with the same title *Il n'y a pas de structures primaires* inscribed in white on a black field along with an accumulation of dispersed signatures and the two words *signature* and *catalogue* and the dates “1964” “1968.” Both the erasures in the painting (here they are performed by overpainting and crossout marks) and the even distribution of the text over the panel make the painting appear to be a direct parallel, if not anticipation of the plastic plaques emerging at that time or shortly thereafter.

generate new synonyms. . . . There are no “Primary Structures.” . . . I forgot to justify this assertion. That is evident because half of it is missing. This is not the moment, dear friends, to conclude by confessing to you that on 999 days out of 1,000, I am exposed only to boredom.<sup>27</sup>

In this concluding remark, with its deliberate enigma concerning “Primary Structures” (what could figure as their other half in Broodthaers’s thinking: secondary myth?), and its peculiar exaggeration (the 999 days of boredom), Broodthaers once again implicates the newly emerging strategies of conceptual art in his constant critical but elliptical paraphrase. The moves toward extreme spatial and temporal expansion and the recourse to systematic ordering and serialization, typical of the work of many artists of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s in the context of conceptual art (for example, Stanley Brouwn’s *1 Step to 10,000 Steps*, Alighiero e Boetti’s *The 1,000 Longest Rivers*, On Kawara’s *1,000,000 Years*, or Hanne Darboven’s accounting procedures of years and centuries) find their polemical paraphrase and deliberate trivialization in Broodthaers’s literalist approach and his commonsensical pose.

If these artists incorporated the conditions of a totalizing administration—of the “totally administered world” as Adorno has called it—into the very structure and material principles of their work (creating a period style of the index card and the looseleaf binder, of the xerox machine and the filing cabinet, of the typewriter and the telex), to develop one of the most significant and authentic aesthetic changes of the postwar era, Broodthaers, the dialectician, replied to this aestheticization of bureaucray with the bureaucratization of the aesthetic. Thus on September 7, 1968, twenty days before the actual opening of his first fictitious museum, Broodthaers issued another open letter, claiming it to have originated from the “Cabinet des Ministres de la Culture” in Ostend (the Flemish North Sea bathing resort and fishing port, and the least likely place in Belgium for the offices of the ministers of culture to be found). He signs this letter not yet as director of the newly founded museum—a role he will assume shortly thereafter—but with the signature of an accessory: “For one of the ministers: Marcel Broodthaers.”

This letter announces to the “customers and the curious” the imminent opening ceremony of the Département des Aigles of the newly founded Musée d’Art Moderne, and it promises to let “poetry and the plastic arts shine hand-in-hand.” The letter concludes with the statement, “We hope that our formula ‘disinterestedness plus admiration’ will seduce you.”<sup>28</sup>

Once again this letter contains a second textual element which is clearly

27. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Lignano, August 27, 1968.

28. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Ostend, September 7, 1968, in *Museum in Motion*, p. 249.

separate from the letter itself, an accumulation of words, serially repeated and placed in a strict eight-line, eight-column grid. The “poem” can be read either vertically in columns, which would imply the eightfold repetition of each term, or it can be read laterally in lines of nine words each, repeating the group *objet métal esprit* three times. Five of these eight lines from the open letter later appeared in identical form on one of the plastic plaques, this, presumably the third of the series, produced in late 1968 and titled *Téléphone*. Two additional lines of text appear in the plaque and the ideogrammatic rendering of a telephone repeated seven times forms another line. The juxtaposition of these elements provides an example of what Broodthaers might have had in mind when he spoke of the shining appearance of poetry and the plastic arts joining hands.

The two additional lines of text are repeated once each and are combined with a third line of the word accumulation *objet métal esprit* (which is now repeated only twice rather than three times as in the open letter), visually forming what at first glance might appear as a three-line verse of a poem. The lines from the plaque that now accompany the word accumulation already found in the open letter read:

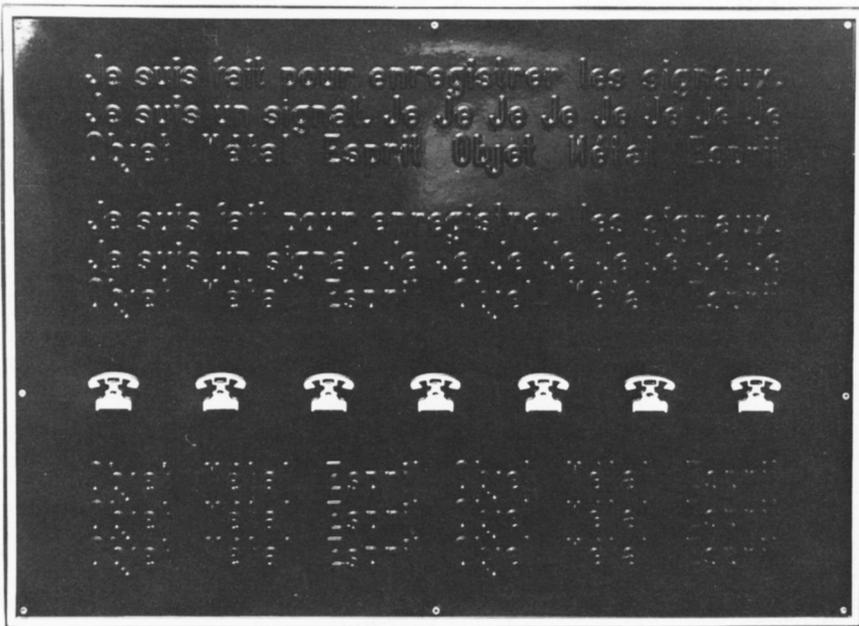
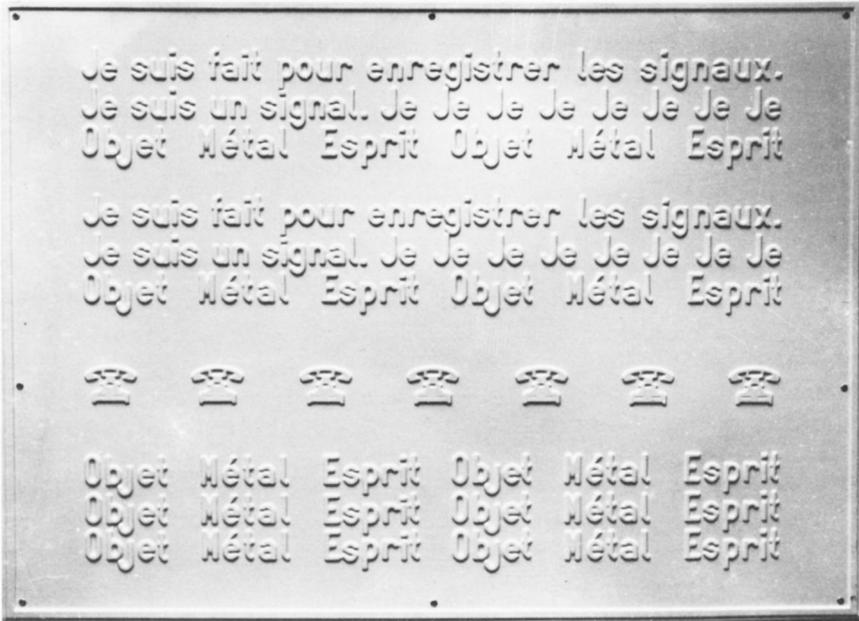
I am made to register signals.  
I am a signal. I I I I I I I

The French *je*, repeated eight times, registers as a fragment of the continuously reiterated *objet*, and this again functions as what I have called a phonetic metonymy, establishing a dialectical relationship between *je* as the particularized syllable of the word *objet* and the word *objet*. Furthermore, the version of the open letter as *Industrial Poem* incorporates yet another element from an even earlier open letter, written from the Palais des Beaux-Arts, which states: “What is culture? I write. I have taken the floor. I am a negotiator for an hour or two. I say I. I reassume my personal attitude. I fear anonymity. (I would like to control the meaning [sens] of culture.)”<sup>29</sup>

At first glance offering itself as an unquestionable declaration of artistic intent, this statement becomes increasingly contradictory when considered within its historical context, namely, a situation of collective political action that

29. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Palais des Beaux-Arts (Brussels), June 7, 1968, in *Museum in Motion*, p. 249. The French original reads, “Qu’est-ce que la culture? J’écris. J’ai pris la parole. Je suis négociateur pour une heure ou deux. Je dis je. Je reprends mon attitude personnelle. Je crains l’anonymat. (J’aimerais contrôler le sens de la culture).” The line “Je dis je” appears first in a poem of 1966, entitled “Ma Rhétorique,” published in a small catalogue on the occasion of Broodthaers’s first exhibition with the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp (See Marcel Broodthaers, *Moules Oeufs Frites Pots Charbon*, Antwerp, 1966, n.p.) It is in this catalogue, as well as in the special issue of the magazine *Phantomas* (no. 62 [February 1966]), that one can see earlier examples of text-accumulations by Broodthaers that fully abandon the formats of his earlier poetry in favor of serially structured, visual and textual grids consisting of three or four nouns only — repeated over and over — anticipating the textual formats of the *Industrial Poems*.

Marcel Broodthaers. Téléphone. 1968. (Above: positive; below: negative.)



had just been negotiated into adaptation and pacified silence. In this event, what saying *I* and resisting anonymity guaranteed was, precisely, the accession to pacification. It was through this compromise that the movement of cultural practice as a continuous activity of reconciliation emerges. At the same time it is in the act of speech that the subject as an instance of resistance is constituted, as it is within language that the dominant mythology of the visual object can be dismantled. Accordingly, the meaning and place assigned to the *je* in the plaque *Téléphone* are obviously shifting, and can relate to the three terms *objet, métal, esprit*, either in succession or all at once. The *je* can alternately refer to the telephone (“I am made to register signals”) or to the plaque as a sign in and of itself (“I am a signal”), to the *je* of the speaker or to that of the reader.

Broodthaers has repeatedly emphasized that the model of language upon which he would like to base his work is that of direct, communicative action among individual subjects, thus going beyond his emphatically reiterated demand that language be joined to the (visual) objects of artistic production. Thus, for example, in the next open letter, written and published in Düsseldorf on September 19, 1968, eight days before the opening of the Musée d’Art Moderne, he states, “I feel solidarity with all approaches which have objective communication as their goal.” Or again, a little over a year later in a letter to David Lamelas, he writes, “How I tend to defend a sense of reality rather than theory or dream.” But it is in the second part of the statement in the earlier letter that the dialectical nature of Broodthaers’s reflection upon instrumental language and communicative action becomes apparent. This emerges when he instantly negates the historical possibilities of this kind of language, except for those that would originate, “[in] a revolutionary critique of the dishonesty of those extraordinary means that we call ours: the press, the radio, television in black [sic] and color.”<sup>30</sup>

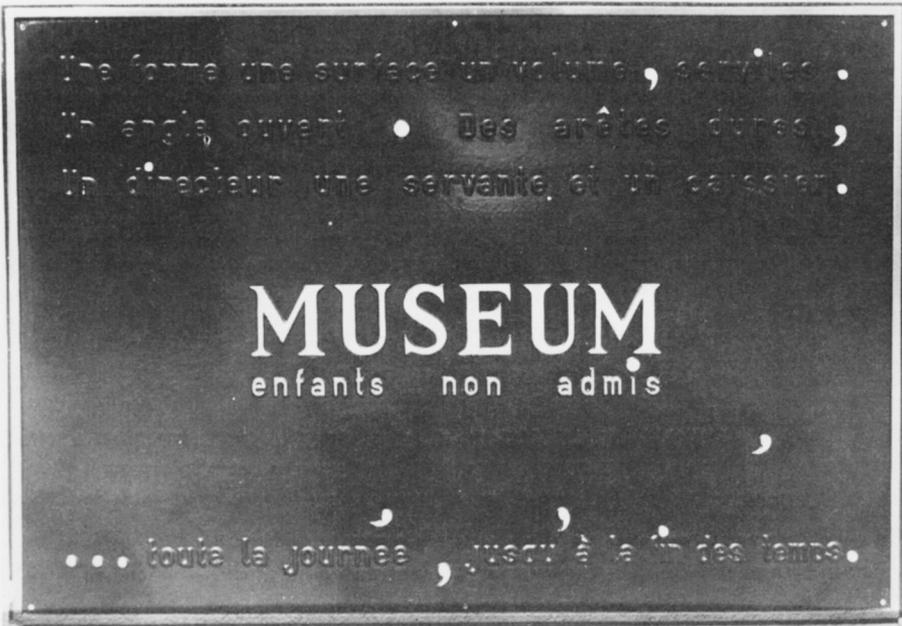
Paradoxically, it is in this very same letter, where the revolutionary critique of mass-cultural and ideological domination is defined as the goal of an approach to “objective communication,” that the Museum is first explicitly presented and that the Département des Aigles appears for the first time on the letterhead. In manifest contradiction to the claim for a political critique of mass-cultural representations, the Museum is presented with the following descriptive statement:

MUSEUM . . . a rectangular director. A round servant . . . A triangular cashier . . . A square guard . . . To my friends, people are not admitted. One plays here daily until the end of the world.

This is the text that then serves as a basis for the next *Industrial Poem*, entitled

30. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Département des Aigles, Düsseldorf, September 19, 1968, in *Museum in Motion*, p. 250. It is perfectly possible that the typo at the end of the letter—the omission of the letter “o” from “*en couleur*,” generating “*en culeur*”—is a deliberate pun, as is the term “*télévision en noir*” (instead of “*noir et blanc*”).

Marcel Broodthaers. Museum. Enfants non admis.  
1968. (Above: positive; below: negative.)



*Museum* (1968)—the plaque most clearly establishing the parallelism between the plaques and the museum fictions.<sup>31</sup>

Again the modifications between the two versions of the text illuminate the categorical differences between the two presentational modes and the different conceptions of language deployed in them. The statement “People are not admitted”—ringing with connotations of class and politics—is changed in the plaque version into the more grotesque and authoritarian “Children are not admitted.” The list of the geometricized administrative roles is equally modified. Broodthaers obviously decided that the plaque version required a text whose appearance would seem more devoted to serious reflection on visuality and plasticity than the rather comical conflation of the language of abstract geometric form with the language of administration. The listing of the quintessentially modernist terms of visual neutrality—“a form a surface a volume”—is suddenly concluded with the unexpected qualifier “servile,” a term simultaneously setting up a link with the subsequent listing of the institutional and administrative functions, which reads, “a director a (female) servant and a cashier.” And the statement “One plays here daily until the end of the world” is reduced to the laconic “all day long until the end of time.”

The open letters, both embodying and practicing Broodthaers’s conception of language as active exchange and direct communication between subjects, attest to this from their very line of salutation. Generally addressed “Chers amis,” this term is occasionally changed or, when accompanied by a “Cher monsieur,” it appears in parenthesis. This occurs when the letter addresses an institution or art official, comically indicating that already in the mode of address a discursive alteration is entailed: made inescapable once the shift into the institutional level of aesthetic reception has occurred. In opposition to the open letters, the *Industrial Poems* incorporate those transformations to which language is subjected in the process of aestheticization: while claiming to be a language of rupture and transgression, and thus of communicative action, it consistently ends up in institutional containment, all the more so since the disavowal of that containment is the condition of its transgressive appeal (“we hope that our formula ‘disinterestedness plus admiration’ will seduce you” is Broodthaers’s phrase).

It is this awareness that distinguishes Broodthaers’s textual and visual constructs from the legacies of the avant-garde texts that they, at first glance, seem to resemble. They are texts which always already know that “[they will not] escape their structural basis (as avant-garde texts, in the guise of which they will enter

31. In a statement from 1968, Broodthaers comments on the proximity of the plaques to the museum fictions. “The atmosphere of this museum,” he writes, “is also that of the plastic panels. These plaques (85 × 125 cm), fabricated in the manner of industrially produced signs, occupy the border between object and image. According to their mechanical production they seem to deny their status as art objects, or rather I should say, they tend to prove art and its reality by means of ‘negativity.’ These plaques express irrelevance; they refer to something other than themselves” (*BROODTHAERS*, exhibition announcement).

into the analogical series of one of the general textual modes); nor will they escape from their ideological basis (they will always speak the language of the archetype, either for or against it); nor will they escape their institutional basis (they will be read—even after their posthumous destination—from the perspective of the institution).”<sup>32</sup>

It was this awareness of the peculiar condition of the avant-garde text that warned Broodthaers specifically against the general enthusiasm with which language was being incorporated into the works of conceptual art at the very time he was conceiving his *Industrial Poems*. And I assume that it is partially in response to this development that Broodthaers added another section to his museum, the section from which a number of open letters originated, as of October 31, 1969.

Thus the first letter from the “Section Littéraire,” addressed in English to a conceptual artist, begins with the reversal of the first of Sol Lewitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art,” so that it reads, “Conceptual artists are more rationalists rather than mystics . . . etc. . . .”<sup>33</sup> What follows in the letter is perhaps the most pointed critique of the conceptual movement to be articulated by one of the artists whom art history has already relegated to that movement. Once again staging the ritual of a public self-correction, Broodthaers negates the validity of a statement that he had submitted as his original contribution (“to be presented on the level of the page”) to the first major European exhibition of conceptual art:

Let us imagine, in the meantime, dear Sir (dear friends) the real text and the reality of the text as a single world. And its roads, its seas, its clouds, as if they were those of liberty and justice.<sup>34</sup>

Now he suggests the following correction:

In one of my last letters, of August 25, still under the aegis of the nineteenth century and sent to the organizers of an exhibition in Leverkusen, instead of . . . “its roads, its seas, its clouds, as if they were those of freedom and justice,” read “. . . its roads, its seas, its clouds, as if those of repression and absence.” Because the reality of the text and the text of the real are a long way from forming a single world.<sup>35</sup>

32. Charles Grivel, “Production de l’intérêt romanesque. Un état du texte,” *Approaches to Semiotics*, no. 34 (1973), p. 64.

33. Sol Lewitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art” were first published in the English journal *Art-Language* (vol. 1, no. 1 [May 1969], pp. 11–13), and shortly thereafter in the catalogue of the exhibition *Konzeption-Conception*, in which Broodthaers participated. The original sentence read, “Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists.”

34. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Brussels, August 25, 1969, submitted as a contribution to the exhibition and catalogue *Konzeption-Conception*, Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen, Schloss Morsbroich, 1969, n.p.

35. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter (to David Lamelas), Brussels, October 31, 1969, identified as originating from the Musée d’Art Moderne, Section Littéraire, Département des Aigles.

As of 1969 the “Section Littéraire” seems to have taken on the function of questioning the validity of precisely that art practice where the reality of the text and the text of the real appeared to have found their synthesis. Broodthaers’s allegorical impulse in the “Section Littéraire” simultaneously devalidates and conserves. Even as it contests the legitimacy of the historical avant-garde text in the present, it historicizes present practices by linking them to their modernist origins. And at the same time it recognizes and conserves the original and immutable radicality of that legacy. This impulse generated one of Broodthaers’s most important book projects, the transformation of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* into a version subtitled *Image*. In this intervention Broodthaers erases the text of the poem and replaces it with spatial configurations of the poem’s original linear sequence and typographical variations, which he identified as the poem’s “traces” [*sillons*].

Undoubtedly one of Broodthaers’s central works, this book parallels the plaques—in its attitude toward the textual legacy of the avant-garde, in its treatment of language and visual plasticity, and in its allegorization of conceptual art. Once again it is commented upon in an open letter, dated December 2, 1969, and issued on the occasion of the opening of Broodthaers’s exhibition “Exposition Littéraire autour de Mallarmé” at the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp:<sup>36</sup>

Why? Without doubt, I once encountered Magritte, long ago, and he invited me to contemplate this poem. So, I forgot it; I contemplated it . . . today, I make this Image. I say farewell. A long period of life. Farewell to all, to the men of letters that are deceased. The dead artists. New! New? Perhaps. Excepted. A Constellation.<sup>37</sup>

Though disguised as personal commemoration (and certainly originating in it), and as farewell, the sincerity of this homage is belied by the deliberately unacknowledged Mallarmé quotation at the end of the explanation of his project. Like the activities of the “Section Littéraire,” it serves once again as an allegorical commentary upon the aesthetic practices of the present. In exact reverse of the claims of conceptual art, Broodthaers’s visualization of textuality now goes as far as presenting Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* in a special edition of twelve copies in which the spatialized version of the poem has been engraved into anodized

36. The frequently used abbreviation for this gallery, WWS, served Broodthaers as the basis for an additional pun in the announcement of his exhibition, which he subtitled “Marcel Broodthaers at the Debliou—debliou/S,” simultaneously mocking the European craze for all (art) things American, as well as the fashion to present galleries as disinterested, neutral, and efficient agencies of the ventures of contemporary art, indicated through names such as MTL, Art and Project, Modern Art Agency, Wide White Space.

37. Marcel Broodthaers, Open Letter, Antwerp, December 2, 1969. René Magritte presented a copy of Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* to Broodthaers at the beginning of their friendship in the mid-1940s.

aluminum, literally reifying and deliberately commodifying the original poem's insistence on its linguistic and visual autonomy. While conceptual art disavowed both its historical origins (in the quest of the avant-garde text for an absolute self-referentiality) and its contemporary dilemma (in the text's radical denial of objecthood, which nonetheless remains bound by institutional and economic frames of mediation), Broodthaers's objectified textuality foregrounds these conditions.

After four years of existence, Broodthaers's fictitious museum was officially closed by its founder and director in 1972 as his contribution to *Documenta V*. On this occasion yet another "Section" was opened and a final open letter issued under the auspices of the Musée d'Art Moderne (all subsequent open letters were simply issued by Marcel Broodthaers). Published by the "Sections Art Moderne et Publicité," the letter justifies the closure of the Musée d'Art Moderne because it has—as the letter argues—passed from a "heroic and solitary form to one bordering on consecration due to the help of . . . the *Documenta* exhibition. It is only logical that it would grind down in boredom."

Then the letter continues to elaborate on the newly added "Section Publicité"—which in fact consisted of an installation of documents and frames, photographs and catalogues, and several of the plaques—arguing,

It seems a little premature to describe the intentions that have guided me in the realization of the section "Public Relations." Since its image coincides with that of the advertising section of the catalogue of *Documenta* it will help me to avoid a long speech. Once you busy yourself with art, you will always fall from one catalogue to the next.<sup>38</sup>

Broodthaers's remarks remain at least partially cryptic, since, although the catalogue of *Documenta V* does contain a section that documents and analyzes advertising, it does not reproduce any imagery reminiscent of Broodthaers's work. By contrast, the catalogue section "Political Propaganda" begins with three pages of eagle images which could have been borrowed from Broodthaers's catalogue for the "Section des Figures," the exhibition staged earlier that year by Broodthaers at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf.<sup>39</sup> But these pages have in fact been inserted by the editors of that section "in the manner of Broodthaers." More important, though, is Broodthaers's remark that "once you busy yourself with art you always fall from one catalogue to the next." For this serves as a renewed critique of the conceptualists' declaration that supplements, such as catalogues and exhibition advertisements, are not only legitimate carriers of artistic infor-

38. Marcel Broodthaers, leaflet published by the Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Sections Art Moderne et Publicité.

39. For an extensive discussion of the Düsseldorf exhibition, "Section des Figures: The Eagle from Oligocene to the Present," see the essay published here by Rainer Borgemeister.

mation but also egalitarian forms of art distribution. While it is not clear at this point which of the plaques actually figured in the “Section Publicité” of *Documenta V*,<sup>40</sup> and even though one of them actually carries the inscription “Musée d’Art Moderne Dt. des Aigles Service Publicité,” it is certain that some of them appeared in the installation—as one supplement among others (photographs, frames, catalogues)—that officially closed the series of Broodthaers’s museum fictions.

While Broodthaers was clearly reflecting on the role that these disavowed supplements play in the constitution of the artistic construct and its readings, he opposed their transformation into actual works with all the vehemence of his annihilating humor. For Broodthaers, the problematic status of the auratic original—emerging as high art from a history segmented by class and its standards of differentiation and sublimation—could not be resolved by a mere abolition of high art’s object and commodity form. While the experience embedded in the objects of that past and its legacy had to be defended against the desublimation of the present, the consciousness of the present as one of political conflict had to be defended against the artistic promises of an instant resolution of these contradictions. Finally, when it comes to the question of whether or not supplements such as the plaques in Broodthaers’s production could actually be considered as works of art, he turns around and calls them “booby traps” and identifies those who take them for paintings as “simpletons”:

[The plaques] are intended to be read on a double level—each one involved in a negative attitude which seems to me specific to the stance of the artist: not to place the message completely on one side alone, neither image nor text. That is, the refusal to deliver a clear message—as if this role were not incumbent upon the artist, and by extension upon all producers with an economic interest. . . . I prefer signing my name to these booby traps. . . .

And when asked what kind of “simpletons” he intended to catch with these traps, he replied:

Well, those who take these plaques for pictures and hang them on their walls. Although there’s no proof that the real simpleton isn’t the author himself, who thought he was a linguist able to leap over the bar in the signifier/signified formula, but who might in fact have been merely playing the professor.<sup>41</sup>

40. Etienne Tilman’s assumption that all of the plaques were exhibited at *Documenta V*, actually forming the “Section Publicité,” is incorrect, according to Maria Gilissen.

41. Marcel Broodthaers, “Ten Thousand Francs Reward,” p. 42.