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ENCLAVE REVIEW

# Real Presences:
# Broodthaers Today
# Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen

Ed Krčma

If the first part of this exhibition's title, 'Real Presences', is puzzling (how has Marcel Broodthaers, with all his deconstructive slyness and provocative opacity, come to be aligned with an appeal to such unabashed affirmations?), the second part introduces questions that are more predictable for a show like this. What image (or, perhaps better, *figure*) of Broodthaers emerges from this exhibition? Which aspects of his practice are emphasized? How have specific examples of his works been reprised? What contemporary forms of artistic work are here deemed to fall within his shadow?

While being widely accredited with a tremendous influence upon contemporary artists, Broodthaers by no means enjoys the same kind of exposure as his contemporary, Joseph Beuys, whose retrospective was being held concurrently at the K20, opposite (see Fergal Gaynor's review in this issue). It was suggestive to have these two crucial figures of post-War European art face each other once again, although in some ways I could not help wanting the roles to be reversed: what about a 'Beuys Today' exhibition together with a much-needed major retrospective of Broodthaers' work instead? In any case, with his relative obscurity in mind, I intend to devote the first half of this text to introducing some of the salient aspects of Broodthaers' artistic output, briefly signalling some key aspects of his agenda.

Marcel Broodthaers (1924-76) had been a poet for two decades before he became an artist. In 1945 he both published his first poem and met his compatriot René Magritte, who handed him a copy of Stéphane Mallarmé's celebrated poem *Un coup de dès* (1897) as a gift. He terminated his career as a poet with the emphatic gesture of sinking the fifty remaining copies of his most recent collection, *Pense-Bête* (1964), into a wedge of plaster, rendering it illegible as text and newly (if lumpenly) available as sculpture. A *pense-bête* is a small token used as a reminder, and Broodthaers would constantly press the viewer to remember the tension between looking and *reading*. His early output also included rebus-like objects redolent of Surrealism, such as *Belgian Thighbone*, a human femur painted with the three colours of the Belgian flag ('The soldier is not far behind', Broodthaers would remark).

Broodthaers' engagement with literature would continue throughout his career. Although his decision to abandon poetry for art required him to renounce much, he remained tenaciously if ambiguously committed to the legacies of Mallarmé and Baudelaire in particular. This engagement found its most ambitious manifestation in 1969, when Broodthaers mounted an entire show devoted to Mallarmé at the Wide White Space in Antwerp. Most famously, this included his *Un coup de dès (Image)*, reprised by Cerith Wyn Evans in the current exhibition, in which Broodthaers displaced the text of Mallarmé's poem and replaced it with horizontal bars matching the exact placement and proportions of the poem's typography, but rendering it fully spatial and blankly illegible. In a related film, *La Pluie (Projet pour un Texte),* also 1969, the artist, deadpan like Buster Keaton, attempts to write at a desk whilst being flooded by a torrent from above: the ink dissipates into an entropic wash as soon as it leaves the artist's pen. Clearly the precarious status of the Author is at stake.

Broodthaers had consistently constructed an artistic persona based upon the assertion of his own insincerity. He relentlessly drew attention to the commodity status of art, to his own self-promotion, and to the discursive and institutional formations in which art operates. The project for which he is best known, *Museé d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, was initiated in 1968 in his Brussels appartment, and led a sporadic and polymorphous

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Cerith Wyn Evans: Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard, 2009.
Photo: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf / Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen

life until it was officially closed in 1972. One notorious manifestation of this fictional Museum happened in this very building – the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf – in an installation entitled 'The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present'. This contained over 300 objects and artworks borrowed from various national and international museum collections, from bottle tops to oil paintings to temple statuary. Contracting the lessons of Magritte and Duchamp, each object was displayed with a small plaque bearing a catalogue number and the words 'This is not a work of art'. This complex work is regarded as a foundational moment in the history of Installation Art and of Institution Critique, probing as it did the assumptions, authority and expository function of public museums.

Particularly during the 1970s, Broodthaers took on his contemporaries, needling the assumptions of Conceptual Art and pointedly countering the shamanic utopianism of Joseph Beuys, by way of an ingenious open letter, published in 1972. His critiques of bourgeois indolence and his exploration of the discourses of colonialism and conquest became more sustained during the mid-1970s, although still in 1974 Broodthaers would affirm, 'The way I see it, there can be no direct connection between art and message, especially if the message is political, without running the risk of being burned by the artifice.' Broodthaers' work insistently, if obliquely, pressed upon political questions, the artist constantly mindful of the discursive formations in which he was embroiled, and of how hungry the culture industry is for the image of artist as free radical.

The present exhibition features the work of ten artists in four main galleries, with works by Stephen Prina, Kirsten Pieroth, Henrik Olesen and Susanne Winterling appearing in more than one room. Reflecting the heterogeneity of Broodthaers's own (postmedium) practice, there was huge variability in the form the works took: found objects, newspapers, assisted readymades, photographs, postcards, slide shows, projected images, sound recordings and constructed environments. Much of the work was provisional in feel, rather low-tech and unassertive, and the display certainly required knowledge of Broodthaers' work, amongst other things, to give it coherence. The curation allowed for connections to emerge gradually between works, but to say that these were not forced would be an understatement. Nevertheless, Olivier Foulon's presentation of Whistler's *Ten O'Clock Lectures*, translated into French by Mallarmé in 1888, connect in both theme and protagonist to Wyn Evans' appropriation of *Un coup de dès* upstairs. Pieroth's concern with literary voyages and cartographic practices is also nicely introduced by Andy Hope 1930's small painted version of *A Voyage on the North Sea*. Nevertheless, the range of cultural references proliferates in dizzying fashion throughout the show. Édouard Manet, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, Mallarmé, Whistler, Maurice

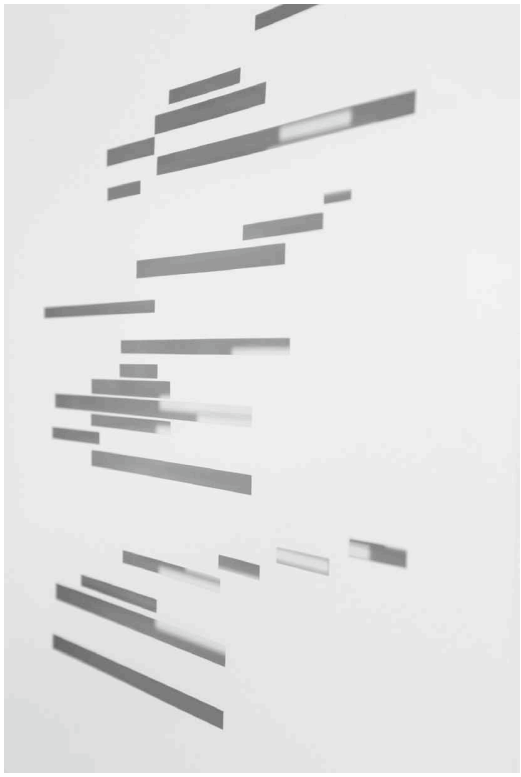
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Lemaître and Karl Robert are all directly referenced, and my sense was that the exhibition required such a high level of spectatorial literacy that few viewers would feel fully adequate to it (which is not necessarily a criticism of the show).Several artists made explicit reference to specific works by Broodthaers himself: Prina to the aforementioned 'Eagles' exhibition, Wyn Evans to his Mallarmé work, Andy Hope 1930 to *A Voyage on the North Sea*, and Pieroth to *The Conquest of Space*. These were subtle, elegant and exacting revisitings, with Prina's *Retrospection Under Duress, Reprise* (2000) being a particularly sophisticated reflection upon Broodthaers' achievement. Framed photographs of items catalogued in Broodthaers' Eagles show were laid out on four long strips of packing paper, as if awaiting their hanging. Each was accompanied by a plaque reading 'What else could this be?' and, at the end of the fourth column were colour photographs trained upon the lighting apparatus used to illuminate the Acropolis in such spectacular fashion. Broodthaers' 1972 exhibition subtly illuminated the ideological foundations of public art museums, flagging their association with the symbol of the eagle (and all its connotations). Yet the public museum remained the arena in which he chose to operate, as one of the few public arenas where this kind of complex, critical practice could still take place. Prina seems equally aware of this tension, balancing a critical attention to the power dynamics and spectacular effects of the culture industry with an assertion of the intelligence and subtlety that the spaces of art might still provide.

Nevertheless, Prina's address to the question of art's political role remains rather oblique. Indeed, aside from Henrik Olesen's explicit queering of our vision of 19th century art, the address to politics is even less direct than in Broodthaers' own work. Broodthaers had antagonists, and he also repeatedly held up the signifiers of colonialism and institutional authority to be thought through and puzzled over. Perhaps because a good deal of the lessons of Institution Critique have been internalized by contemporary museums themselves, these dimensions of Broodthaers' practice are not foregrounded in this exhibition. That is not to say that the agency of symbolic systems, boundaries and currencies are not present here – Winterling and Tuerlinckx, for example, certainly dwell on the establishment of such frames and demarcations – but these tend to be abstracted from specific discursive structures and other social systems.

Broodthaers emerges here as a progenitor of refined, cryptic and highly culturally literate forms of artistic labour. He licenses certain demands to be placed upon the viewer and, despite (or perhaps because of) his acute critical intelligence, offers a deceptively ambitious sense for what resources are available to art in order to save it from its status as merchandise. Art's status as commodity, however, is not a key concern (it seemed to me) for any of the artists here. Perhaps this aspect of art's predicament now simply goes without saying: yes, art *is* a commodity, but it is not reducible to that status and does what it can to surpass it (although not, here, *challenge* it very explicitly).



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Indeed, as Rachel Haidu, in her major new study of Broodthaers (*The Absence of Work,* 2010), has noted, much of the artist's reputation rests upon his inaccessibility. Is there a way in which this work operates through a seduction by way of obscurity? As Broodthaers himself says, the viewer must want to figure out the rebuses he presents, to read them and turn them over as meaningful if elusive signs. Given the concurrence of the major Beuys retrospective held video in the opposite building, it is instructive to compare, as Broodthaers himself did, his mode of obscurity to that of Beuys. If Beuys, arguably, relied upon a suspension of the critical faculties of his audience – so that the myth of the shamanic artist and the almost ritualistic significance of his materials could be felt – Broodthaers refused the injunction placed upon the artist to offer clear messages and instead placed the emphasis upon the problem of *how* meaning is made, and on what (and indeed *whose*) terms. Without antagonists, however, this Bartleby-like refusal loses some of its purchase, which is not to detract from the sophistication of the assembled contributions here, aimed as they are in other directions.

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