Introduction

The 1960s and 1970s were years of great change and innovation in the arts. Marking the end of Modernism and anticipating Postmodernism, this was a period of questioning and revaluation not only of art, but also of the context and manner, particularly the institutional structures, in which art is presented. The new generation perceived Modernism as limited, introverted and distant from contemporary life. Artists wanted to make works that would be more closely related, and therefore more relevant, to the world in which they lived. During an economic boom, the art market grew, leading to an increase of individual collectors and new museums of modern art which needed to be filled. However, many artists reacted against the ways in which the artwork was ever more wholly becoming a commodity, and sought alternate methods of expressing their ideas. From a present day perspective, those decades appear lively, open and exciting, with artists energetically committed to their principles. With the fashions now termed as ‘retro,’ the years have passed into history and are being examined afresh.

There is often a readiness to simplify the complex interweaving of artists and of movements in both the past and the present. This is no less the case with the period in question during which a whole range of approaches existed roughly simultaneously, from neo-Dada or Pop to Nouveau Réalisme, Arte Povera, Happenings, Fluxus, Minimal Art, Land Art, Idea Art and Concept or Conceptual Art, to mention only some. In retrospect, artists are often organized according to particular movements and those who refuse to correspond neatly are punished with disregard with their work marginalized.

Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76) is a good example of the effect of this tendency. The complex and often contradictory nature of his practice means that it does not fit easily into any particular movement, apart from the broad and often all-encompassing scope of Conceptual Art. Nevertheless, during his relatively short artistic career, from 1964 to 1976, he achieved considerable success. With major retrospectives
in the United States in 1989, Paris and Madrid in 1991 to 1992, Barcelona in 1997, Brussels in 2001, and cited as a key figure for 1997’s *Documenta X*, his importance has been reconfirmed in recent years.\(^1\)

This book provides a close reading of Broodthaers’s work. It is structured around two main themes which serve as means of analysis: his strategy – how he became an artist – and the notion of dialogue – the artist’s relationship with certain contemporaries and predecessors. Whereas some chapters concentrate more particularly upon either one of these themes, they are largely interwoven throughout the book.

Broodthaers was a poet until the age of forty when he launched himself publicly as an artist. However, it is important to note that he did not stop being a poet but that his background shaped his thinking as an artist. In his first exhibition, in 1964, he set out, ironically, his strategy for success: to make works which galleries would exhibit and sell. The works he subsequently made reflected his strategy in that he imitated some of the main movements of the time, in particular Pop Art and, to a limited extent, Minimal and Conceptual Art. However, he did not do so blindly, but examined and responded to the concepts which shaped those movements. In this way he commented on these movements seemingly ‘from within,’ revealing their limits.

By focusing on fundamental issues, including the functioning of art, the role of the artist and his position in society, Broodthaers deconstructed myths on the nature of art and the activity of the artist. He addressed the value of art, and how this was created and sustained by contemporary economic systems. While displaying strength of ideas, he indicated the importance of the materials and objects he chose to use. His attention to formal qualities and his use of craftsmen’s skills developed gradually, leading to a certain visual distance between his work and that of his contemporaries. While they questioned the validity of the art object, Broodthaers accepted it and used it to address the nature of contemporary art.

The years before Broodthaers began working as an artist played a part in his production and word-image relations remained central to his practice. Of particular significance to him were the paintings and texts of René Magritte on the relationship between words and images. Broodthaers’s interests were wide, extending to nineteenth century French poetry and literature, especially that of Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as the bestiaries of Jean de la Fontaine and the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. He was interested in contemporary politics and philosophy, including Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, the theories of Lucien Goldmann, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. By reworking artworks and poems (by Magritte, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and so on), Broodthaers engaged in dialogue with them. The effect of his practice was to lift them out of the narrow confines of cultural bracketing within which they had been located (Surrealism, Symbolism, etc.) and bring them into the contemporary period, thereby opening up other dimensions of interpretation and enabling them to be seen from new angles.

This book examines Broodthaers’s strategy for success and considers his work in relation to that of his contemporaries. He was evidently aware of the artistic context within which he would operate; the title of a 1975 show was *Voyages autour de la mode*, a pun which translates literally as ‘travels around fashion.’ Themes of voyage and the conquest of (artistic and territorial) space, which can frequently be found in the poetry of Mallarmé and Baudelaire, form the basis of many works by Broodthaers, reflecting not only his awareness of his place in the art world but also of his location in a broader geographical context globally.

Post-Structuralist notions of the field can be discerned in relation to Broodthaers’s works and his strategy, in that everything exists in relation to its context. In the case of his early objects, for example, there was a shift of focus from the elements contained in the works, to the relationship between these elements. In an artistic or literary context, Broodthaers located himself by constantly referring to other poets and artists both directly, by remaking works and by naming directly in texts and open letters, and indirectly, by the objects and imagery he used. He referred to contemporary artists as well as past artists and poets, demonstrating a particular nostalgia for the nineteenth century.
He mentioned writers, composers and philosophers whom he admired. Appropriately, a number of artists have referred to him in their own work via titles, objects or images. As dialogue was at the centre of his practice, it is particularly fitting that this dialogue has continued.²

Thus, it is not only critics, curators and collectors who find his work significant, but also younger artists, for whom his importance relates to their interest in Conceptual Art, a renewed questioning of definitions and of the status of art. Broodthaers’s critique of the commercialization of art, in that the structures surrounding the work can ultimately determine it, is still as relevant today.

This book provides an overview of Broodthaers’s work to show how the various areas do not exist in isolation but strongly interrelate. It addresses not only his visual works but also his texts and poetry. While some particular works and writings are discussed in detail, the thought patterns which determined the artist’s overall approach to his work are also analysed. Broodthaers’s significance is underlined with particular regard to his informed and astute questioning of established structures in language, classification and art institutions. His method was often that of setting up contradictions in order to emphasise that it is necessary to go beyond surface terms, labels, structures. He shifted his position to show how there are no fixed positions, no constants. He used both positive and negative forms to illustrate the double-sided nature of reality. He established fictions, such as his museum, through which ‘it is possible to grasp reality as well as that which reality conceals.’³ His wit and humour mask fundamental and complex issues in art, politics and society.

² See Marcel Broodthaers: Correspondances, exh. cat. (Zürich: Galerie Hauser & Wirth, & New York: David Zwirner Gallery, 1995) which largely comprises the results of a questionnaire. A number of Broodthaers’s contemporaries were asked why he had a difficult reception; his relevant importance historically and currently; whether their own work was influenced by his; and if they had any personal memories of him. A similar survey was carried out by Marie-Pascale Gildemyn in ‘Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers,’ +0 (Plus minus null), Brussels, vol. 47 (1987), pp. 20–33.

Broodthaers’s work is split in this book into three chronological groups: the early objects from around 1963 to 1968; his large museum project, the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, from 1968 until 1972; and his later semi-retrospective exhibitions, the Décors, from 1974 to 1976. Although these dates are accurate, they emphasise some areas of his activity whilst reducing the focus on others. Nevertheless, such a structure helps to digest his large and complex body of work; the text of this book demonstrates how this breakdown serves simply as a device of clarification, with the different sections of the book closely interrelating.

The chapters are arranged roughly chronologically, although not strictly so. Chapter 1 sets the scene for Broodthaers’s move to become an artist. It looks at his poetry, his early texts, exhibition reviews and visual works. Chapter 2 examines in detail the texts in which he set out his strategy, his concept of the role of the artist and the artist’s place in society. Examples of his work are discussed which deal with the relationship between art and commerce. Chapter 3 focuses on the early objects with Chapter 4 on the notion of the shell in his work with particular regard to the Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles and the Décors. Chapter 5 deals with works on the theme of travel and space, with Chapter 6 on the political nature of particular works and events of the early 1970s, locating Broodthaers in relation to a number of his contemporaries.

There are some difficulties that must be taken into account when writing about Broodthaers’s work. Although it is possible to see a large number of his individual objects, paintings, prints, and so on, in private or public collections, many of his more significant works consisted of temporary installations and exhibitions in which each part was dependent upon the whole within which it was shown, as well as a particular temporal and physical context. Outside of this context, these parts have other values and Broodthaers was not in favour of re-making complex works of this kind. For curators nowadays, the issue depends upon whether an installation, for example, is defined as an individual work, in which case it may be shown like any other work, or

sée fictif comme le mien permet d’avoir prise sur la réalité comme sur ce qu’elle cache.”
as an exhibition, in which case it would be ‘recreated,’ a term which implies a degree of participation from the curator. Maria Gilissen, who was made responsible by the artist, in a brief will, for deciding which of the objects he left should be considered works, tends to favour the first interpretation. According to Gilissen, Broodthaers did not repeat himself during his lifetime, but this should not prevent us from showing his work now.

However, it is now impossible to experience many of his works at first hand, outwith the temporal and physical contexts in which they were made, and the viewer becomes largely dependent on secondary sources, namely books, catalogues, reviews and other documentation. Broodthaers was aware of this problem, and this was partly why he considered the catalogue an integral part of the exhibition. Nevertheless, the temporary nature of his work imposes limitations on the present-day viewer.

Furthermore, his work is not easy to discuss. It appears to form a web, every area of which is interwoven with so many other areas that to extract any one for examination will misrepresent the whole. Yet, to attempt to discuss his entire output at once is impossible. In addition, in texts and statements Broodthaers often intentionally contradicted himself, denying simple interpretation. His work requires very careful decoding, unravelling, and even then there is never a straightforward solution. As Freddy De Vree has written, ‘Broodthaers always acts in an allusive, indirect way in which the knot of meanings is not unravelled, but strengthened.’

This ultimate impenetrability is not aided by the visual clarity of much of Broodthaers’s work. He presented clear, familiar, apparently unambiguous objects and images which the viewer has no difficulty in describing on a formal level. However, the meaning and underlying

5 The Section Publicité was shown at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 1995, and at Documenta X, Kassel, 1997.
intention are far harder to grasp and, once ensnared in the web of his work, the viewer realizes that there are ever more layers to comprehend; his works 'seem at once so harmless and so enigmatic that one has the feeling either of being able to understand them at first glance or of never being able to understand them at all. Whilst these works may seem superficial, we cannot help feeling that we are looking at something of great intellectual profundity.' It is perhaps this lightness of touch and apparent superficiality which have led to a lack of wider recognition of the works' significance.

A further aspect of interpretation is his use of language. He used words in a manner which cannot easily be translated, and the non-French-speaking audience is always limited in its appreciation and understanding of his writings and his visual works of which words formed a vital part. Broodthaers’s use of puns and word play means that translation is difficult. His range of references leads to limits in understanding his work without a detailed knowledge of French literature and a familiarity with Belgian culture.

While the above may be seen as obstacles, they are integral parts of his works’ richness and complexity. The viewer/reader is encouraged to think and question, so for Broodthaers to enable straightforward interpretation of his work would contradict its very nature. Because any piece should be considered part of a greater whole, to analyse a small element in isolation is meaningless. At the same time, it is impossible to define the whole, for it is constantly changing. As the artist wrote in 1972,

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We cast a stone into the water,
circles appear, we coagulate them, and from
these we extract a theory, we throw
a stone further, and work
voluntarily in darkness.
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