

In Other Words/ Image and Language in the conceptual legacy of Marcel Broodthaers

It would be entirely within the bounds of reason to open this essay with a quote by Walter Benjamin. The following, for instance, would suffice to relate the use of syntax/ linguistics in/ to Broodthaers' oeuvre.

“There is no event of thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake in language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents.”

- Walter Benjamin, 'On language as Such and on the Language of Man'
(1916)

But what such a citation also does is detract from the way in which Broodthaers' work functions and wishes to function. It compromises Broodthaers' views pertaining to the conceivable task of his art to communicate - something that, in his own words, he did not subscribe to. Whether or not he abided this task cannot be answered objectively. There are numerous art-historical analyses unleashed upon his rich and complex oeuvre that challenge such a notion. I'd like to view *Pense-Bête* as a conceptual portrait of the artist and consider in which light we can view the provocation of language in Broodthaers. Whosoever should wish to read a seminal account of the (over) interpretations surrounding Broodthaers' legacy, I would recommend Thomas McEvelley's 1989 article. It contains a spicy anecdote about Benjamin Buchloh's furious attempts at convincing Broodthaers of the relevance of Walter Benjamin to the artist's work.¹

Le Pense-Bête displays both image and language as something definitive; as a congealed mass pervading various unread copies of Broodthaers' poem collection *Pense-Bête*. The book, however, cannot be experienced through reading alone, and the

¹ Thomas McEvelley, 'Another Alphabet: the Art of Marcel Broodthaers', in *Artforum* XXXI (1989) No. 13 (November), pp. 106-115

suggestion of an accomplished fact becomes a springboard in order to investigate the contrary: temporal, poetic situations, site-specific associations. The poems are encapsulated by their new form as art-object.

The contained language has ceased to function while it's utility is challenged even further by the illegible book's title: the proverb, *Pense-Bête*, serving as auxiliary, a reminder. The prototype of personal remembrance. To consciously lay a *shortcut* between information and meaning.

When Broodthaers exhibits *Le Pense-Bête* in 1964, the spectator is uncertain as to whether her presence is either neutralized or considered vital. The public weren't exactly enraged by the censorship, and reacted far differently to what Broodthaers envisioned: "Look here, moulded books!". No one was curious about the text, undecided as to whether this concerned the funeral of prose or poetry, something sad or funny", according to Broodthaers' interview with himself, *A 10.000 franc reward*, in 1974.

I think Broodthaers' surprise at his reactions to be crucial. As far as we can know it is a decisive moment of insight into the effects of his work. Everything points towards this moment in time in which he seems to decide to always be one step ahead of his readers. From this moment in time the rolls and patterns of expectation between him and his public were to be reversed.

Many years after this alleged decision, I chose for an art-historical adventure that is intimately connected with this aspect of *Le Pense-Bête*. This was to become a long-winded experience, no thanks to the plethora of intellectual vantage points: writing a thesis about the artistic application of deliberately illegible language in the plastic arts. This was to be an attempt at tracing the genealogy of quite a specific form of provocation of language, located in, Symbolist, Futurist, Cubist, Dada and Surrealist, and then re-entering the arena in the sixties of the last century. If it can be maintained that language, as the rough material for artistic investigation, be an art-historical fact,

then why has so little been published about this omnipresent, inherently connected strategy of sabotaging her own functionality? Besides, how does one go about formulating such a story within academic rules? Broodthaers did little to impress on me his trustworthiness as comrade in my quest. I probed into entire divisions of signifiers. My endeavour appeared to me slightly tragi-comic: the search for meaning behind an occluded appearance of language in image, image in language. My ability to speak is developed more rigidly than its binary opposition, and so did the one and the other manifest itself over a long process throughout many a year. Nevertheless did I remain ensnared by the enigmatic undercurrents and ‘double-takes’ of art that language uses in such a manner as to (almost) work. The oscillation between language and her functionality repeatedly eludes its understanding. The undermining of language by Broodthaers and how this can be seen in an art-historical background, are central to my narrative. Emerging from the supposition that it forms a timeless and ever relevant way into artistic dealing with language manipulations and her implications for image. One sentence to which I keep returning:

“The place where [language] communicates best and most easily is also the place where [it] is the least interesting and emotionally involving [...]

When these functional edges are explored, however, other areas of your mind make you aware of language potential. I think the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for communication is the same edge where poetry or art occurs.”

- Bruce Nauman²

Although language and image in Broodthaers don’t seamlessly flow into one another, he has drawn an invisible line between the manner in which both (mal)function under his authority. Often undoing existing material (signs, plastic material, existing rhymes, film) of its own raison d’être. Often the symbols of his alphabet, both plastic and sculptural at

² Christoffer eCoredes, ‘Talking with Bruce Nauman: An Interview, 1989’ (excerpts from interviews: July, 1977; September, 1980; May, 1982; and July, 1989), in: Janet Kraynak (ed.), *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words. Writings and Interviews*, Cambridge/London, 2003, pp. 354-355

once, remain legible; objects such as muscles, eggs, eyes, coal and eagles. They are recognizable, while embedded inside these object and their formations lies a conceptual enquiry into cultural correlations between the material layers. As congealed 'translations' from one to the other warped meaning. That is to say: they function in a different manner because of their positioning. The aesthetic, physical and psychological value is rewritten. The images elude definition, but are mostly figurative, yet legible. The use of the language-spectrum by Broodthaers is a different story. When Broodthaers appropriates Existing language, he unwrites, depoeticizes 'text', if you will, while at the same time it is given a new form in which she is deprived of semantic function or legitimacy. The linguistic symbols and punctuation in the Roman alphabet are visually transposed, and used in any conceivable appearance: diametrically opposed to function, secluded in arbitrary sequence, in synthetic material, chalk, ink, hand writing, film and live recitation. Often in combination, sometimes as if it were descriptive, objective signification. More often than that as reference, abstraction or replacement. A visual illustration, or precisely as diametrically opposed element of the depicted.

According to Willem von Humboldt, language is the medium of thinking, Dorothea Zwirner recollects having read this in an essay she wrote about Broodthaers' use of words and objects - in which language, as instrument and criteria for thought, necessarily implies that it's limit coincides with the limits of our own insight. Broodthaers repeatedly undresses language, visually and semantically, exposing its underlying system of replaceable actors: temporal, modular and fragile at once.

The most basic difference between word and image is that text gives meaning, and image displays shape. Maybe the existence of the parameters of this exclusive, dualistic reduction - that is at once traditional and impoverished - provided Broodthaers with impetus to explicitly countermand this binary. The binary represented to him the formal letter symbol, in actuality a question of the divorce between form and content. The circumvention of such a binary may have placed word and image within the confines of

his sculptural assemblage, in a critical and poetic shift in which traditional, trustworthy significations and forms reveal alternative contours.³

In the first manifestation of the self-entitled museum *Département des Aigles* in Brussel, 1968, Broodthaers provides a collection of eagles with sub-titled plaques. They read: *Ceci n'est pas un objet d'art/ Dies ist kein Kunstwerk/ This is not a work of art*. The conjunction of the languages of Europe's historical superpowers suggests to mind the simultane-poem 'L'Amiral Cherche Une Maison à Louer' by Tristan Tzara, right after the foundation of Cabaret Voltaire in 1916. The poem declares the state of bankruptcy of the continent as cultural and civilized beacon, in which language is held responsible. The motif is the metaphor of an unemployed admiral. Reason, coherence and logic, the cultural profit of the past, is erased by disruption, stuttering, disjointed verses and primordial noise. Language, as delineation of nations, mode of communication, is deemed no longer capable of fulfilling her task. This absurdist dismantling of language by the Dada's is naturally more aggressive and political than Broodthaers, but its production and absurdist, blistering nature of the concept are brought about through intense consideration and strategic deliberation. Thierry de Duve elevates Broodthaers' plaques - the instrument with which he contravenes his own 'museumcollection' - to being the quintessence of his greatest source for inspiration. "Such a contradiction has the simplicity of those luminous ideas that mask the complexity of the thought underlying them: "This is a work of art" + "This is not a pipe" = "This is not a work of art". Broodthaers borrows from Magritte in order to deny Duchamp.")⁴

With regard to Magritte one can establish a binary opposition between the painted word and the painted object, an undermining of the linguistic symbol and the painted thing, allowing for an abatement of the concept "subject"⁵. During the course of his career,

³ Wilfried Dichoff, 'La Conquête de l'espace' The poetic-artistic situations of Marcel Broodthaers', *Marcel Broodthaers in Image*, Marie-Puck Broodthaers (ed.), Brussel 2013, p.12

⁴ Thierry de Duve, 'This wouldn't be a Pipe: Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers', *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images*, edition by tent. Los Angeles (Los Angeles Museum of Art), 2006, p. 95-96.

⁵ Dickhoff, p. 13

Broodthaers develops the idea of undermining the symbol further, while untangling Magritte's work from its surrealist interpretation. He distinguishes between the system of symbols that transmit reality, and those systems that bring about reality, while emphasizing the absolute embeddedness of those systems of symbols themselves. Reality itself is faulty.

In contrast to these art-historical reference points incorporated into Broodthaers' practise, he had no particular desire to interfere with contemporaneous tendencies in conceptual art. Nevertheless was he subjected to the sixties time-frame. *Dematerialistic* language experiments, such as those by Lawrence Weiner or Robert Barry, he deemed *New Academism*. Attributing his own work to that same *Linguistic Turn* by contemporary art-critics is an evident misreading of his work. De Duve observes the Linguistic Turn in the art of the sixties represents a conversion overseen by the figurative influence of Duchamp, and strengthened by Magritte's work produced between 1927-30, the latter's self-titled 'cavernous period'. The critic goes on to suggest that the conceptual enquiries into language in art were in retrospect egregiously interpreted as the revelation that art represents a visual system defined in a way that is analogous to the Saussurean model - one that contains the 'inherent proposition that the goal of conceptual art was to replace the spatial and sensorial experience with linguistic definitions'.⁶

Broodthaers' objection is clear as day: 'replacing the spatial and sensorial experience' was last on his list, armed as he was with his alphabetical plasticity. He sought for the comprehension of the 'eternal return to the new' through his own work. As *A 100.000 franc reward* discloses, his 'Belgian Pop-Art', from *Pense-Bête* onwards, makes use of image as language, much like poetry. Language is in these terms not the artwork.

The intersection of systems, strategies, references, images, objects and their signifiers remains without a doubt a fascinating facet of Broodthaers' oeuvre. Objects are used as word-objects, hollow slogans, that shed light on the fundamental poetic disposition between object-image, image-object, text-image and image-text. The sculptural

⁶ Ibid.

demarcations acquired as result are named as 'zero-words' (mots zéro), in so doing does he set in scene 'the meeting between various functions that refer to one and the same reality: the table, the egg, the muscle, and the pan to the table and the art, to the muscle and the chicken'.⁷

Wilfried Dickhoff suggests Broodthaers to be the inventor of a hertefore unseen form of art. Though in spite of this it is not the first time that words and images have been placed in a sculptural context. If we look at the *Poème Objet* by André Breton he constructed in 1935 we can immediately see explicit elements of the form-lettersymbol have been entwined in one and the same manner. The surrealist principles of the poetic image, and the inner workings of language, are stretched past their mark. Breton replaced the semantic signification with intuition. A broken photo behind glass, in pieces. The lens of the camera, a metaphor for the human eye, now fragmented. A small eagle-shaped object is mounted above the frame. An egg, one that is fastened with rope to the carton floorboard. It states *Je vois* above the line. *J'image*, beneath. In this surrealist attempt to make new subjective connections is contained the idea of a congealed language of the literal objectification of ideas. They function not only as object, but also as imagination. A central element of the surrealist effort is contained here: the sensorial, ocular sight opposite the associative sight, or in other words, the intuitive perception. According to Breton his own definition was that of 'a composition that unites the resources of poetry and the plastic arts together, and speculates about the possibility of forming a stronger alliance'.⁸

Stéphane Mallarmé first configured the idea of distinguishing the communicative and symbolic functions of language. Broodthaers viewed him as having laid the foundations for contemporary art. In 1897 Mallarmé wrote the poem, "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard", with extensive typographic instructions to be carried out after

⁷ Dickhoff, p. 13

⁸ Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism and Politics*, Oxford, New York 2004, p. 154

his death in 1914. The poem contains an eccentric spatial demarcation, with much blank space, and little grip, spread in between a visual rhythm over twenty pages with words and sentences on a miscellaneous range of type fonts and sizes. The typography emerged from his wish to 'unmask' and escape from the tradition of language, that subjects us to a strict and regulated system of capitalistic exploitative vulnerability. The immanence of chance stands at the centre of the poem's construction. In spite of grammar rules imposed upon language, chance is inevitable. 'Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dé': every thought emits a throw of the dice. The cast die is irretrievable, as imminent decisions are irreversible.

Broodthaers is first introduced to this system of concrete poetry by René Magritte in 1945. It demonstrates for Broodthaers the potential of oppositions between the written word and her visual attributes. He designs a re-make of Mallarmé's poem, replicating its typographical structure, printed on interchanged layers of transparent and non-transparent paper. Broodthaers, however, replaces all text, in its entirety, with black bars. Mallarmé is unwritten, made unreadable. 'An evacuation through the contradictions'.⁹

Censorship immediately springs to mind, barricading that which exists. He removes the essence of words that allow access to thought; the communicative value of Mallarmé's work. Once again, just as with *Le Pense-Bête*, the blessed content, that original attempt at poetic creation, is defiled, made illegible. His adjustments transform the work into an abstract work with spatial dimensions in which the value of the work is reduced to being exclusively symbolic. The original presentation of the work in Wide White Space, in Antwerp in 1969, saw the installation of a tape-recorder that played Mallarmé's poem on repeat, recited by Broodthaers himself. A written recuperation of the communicative value signified a momentary negation of the erasure of words.

Visually, Broodthaers' Coup de Dés recalls Man Ray's 'Sound poem' from 1924. In this work a crossed out 'text' on a piece of paper seems to suggest that in its tradition,

⁹ Freddy de Vree, *Marcel Broodthaers, Marcel Broodthaers*, Amsterdam 1979, p. 30

somewhere along the way there has been lost entirely the original text beneath its censored remains of black bars.

The deed itself, the act of erasing, reminds one of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* from 1953. The young Rauschenberg asked his role model - calling the latter 'an established artist' being something of an understatement - whether he could completely deface one of his works. The legendary request is renowned for its nerve-racking verve. De Kooning was initially reluctant, but ultimately succumbed and agreed to giving one of his sketches. While rummaging through his things, having stumbled upon something especially useless, the famous artist changed his mind: the work that was to be defiled must on the contrary be cherished and priceless. The result is startling as ever: an incandescent appearance, the original and the erasure in one. The epicentre of all tension, the momentousness of the deed, the enquiry into value, hierarchy, what it means to be an artist, the act of appropriation and its resplendence in the face of existence. One might be inclined to suggest that the action of erasure is more radical than that of Broodthaers, in the sense of transformation that the material experiences, while consequence and result are explicitly equal to one another: De Kooning's original will never be seen again. The destruction is itself a creation: the apotheosis of the conceptual thought-process in which the secretion of information can be equated to its distribution.

One can understand Broodthaers' use of language by his wish to materialize semantic contradictions. To provoke functionality and expectation, the entire circumference of legibility in general. Without representing the literal opposites of subjects, his work becomes an investigation into the *upside-down* of meaning. The imaginary duplication of an image, its symbol or its meaning keeps repeating ad infinitum, its only task being that of poetry itself. This use is the core of his oeuvre, carefully solidified by both plastic and visual elements. In spite of its illegibility, the conditions of the completed labour are still at work 52 years after its completion.

Art gets interesting that moment in time in which language stops functioning as language. Such data is by now a common aspect of art-history and indicative of the manifold conceptual possibilities. While *Le Pense-Bête* initiated Broodthaers' own career in the art-world it simultaneously announced the beginning of a new historical chapter. His artistic oeuvre would extend far beyond the tactile artworks themselves, his actions, his museums, his genuine unpredictability and according to tradition, his tongue-in-cheek personality. I've come to regard this work as something of a portrait of the artist himself.

Words are like a certain person/ Who can't say what they mean/ Don't mean what they say"

- Tom Tom Club

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November 2016

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