Ilga Minjon 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 be eligible to illustrate the
use of language within Broodthaers' oeuvre.

> There is no event or thing in either
> animate or inanimate nature that does
> not in someway 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 pertain–
ing 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–his–
torical analyses unleashed upon his rich
and complex oeuvre that challenge such a
notion. I would like to view *Le 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 (theoretical over) interpre–tations surrounding Broodthaers' legacy, I would recommend Thomas McEvilley's 1989 article. It contains a spicy anec–dote about Benjamin Buchloh's furious attempts at convincing Broodthaers of the relevance of Walter Benjamin to the artist's work. The books that he ① brought him remained forever unread.

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, does not become an experience of reading and the 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 its 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 francs reward, in 1974.

I think Broodthaers' surprise at these 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 now on, the roles 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, despite the plethora of compelling intellectual vantage points: writing a thesis about the artistic application of deliberately illegible language in the plastic arts. It was an attempt at tracing the genealogy of quite a specific form of provocation of language, located in Symbolist, Futurist, Cubist, Dada and Surrealist art, 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 poetic 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. Personally, my natural ability of speaking is slightly more advanced than the academic writing side of language production, 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 uses language in such a manner as to (almost) not 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 here. Emerging from the supposition that it forms a timeless and ever relevant way into artistic dealing with language manipulations and her implica–tions for image. One thought 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

Although language and image in
Broodthaers' work 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,
rhymes, film) of its own *raison d'être*.
Often the symbols of his alphabet, both
plastic and sculptural at once, remain leg–
ible; objects such as mussels, eggs, eyes,
coal and eagles. They are recognizable,
while embedded inside these objects 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, and still 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 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 against function, secluded in
arbitrary sequence, in synthetic material,
chalk, ink, hand writing, film and live
recitation. Often in combination, some–
times as if it were descriptive, objective
signification. More often than that as
reference, abstraction or replacement. A
visual illustration, or precisely as diamet–
rically opposed element of the depicted.

According to Willem von Humboldt,
language is the medium of thinking,
Dorothea Zwirner recollects in her essay
about Broodthaers' use of words and
objects – in which language, as instrument
and criteria for thought, necessarily
implies that its limit coincides with the
limits of our own insight. Broodthaers
repeatedly undresses language,
visually and semantically, exposing its

underlying system of mobile 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 emphasis
on 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. It paves
the way in his artistic path, to displace
words and images, into different correla–
tions, in a critical and poetic shift where
traditional, trustworthy significations and
③ forms reveal alternative contours.

In the first manifestation of the self–
entitled museum *Département des Aigles*
in Brussels, 1968, Broodthaers provides
a collection of eagles with sub–titled
plaques. They read: *Ceci n'est pas un
object d'art/ Dies ist kein Kunstwerk/
This is not a work of art.* The conjunction
of the languages of Europe's historical
superpowers calls to mind the simultaneous
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 achievements of the past, are
erased by disruption, stuttering, disjointed
verses and primordial noise. Language,
as delineation of nations, mode of com–
munication, is deemed no longer capable
of fulfilling her task. This dismantling of
language by the Dadaists naturally is 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 'museum
collection' – 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

④ *is not a pipe" = "This is not a work of art". Broodthaers borrows from Magritte in order to deny Duchamp.*

In the work of Magritte one can establish a binary opposition between the painted word and the painted object, an under–mining of the linguistic symbol and the painted thing, allowing for an abatement ⑤ of the concept 'subject'. During the course of his career, Broodthaers develops the idea of undermining the symbol further, while untangling Magritte's work from its surrealist interpretation. He distinguish–es 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' practice, he had no particular desire to interfere with contemporaneous tenden–cies 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 work to the same com–plex container of the *Linguistic Turn* by contemporary art critics is a misreading of his work. De Duve observes that 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. He 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." Broodthaers' objection is clear as day: 'replacing the spatial and sensorial experi–ence' 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 *10.000 francs reward* discloses, his 'Belgian Pop–Art', from *Le Pense–Bête* onwards, makes use of the image as language – not language as art.

The intersection of systems, strategies, references, images, objects and their signifiers remains without a doubt a most 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 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 mussel, and the pan to the table ⑥ and the art, to the mussel and the chicken."

Wilfried Dickhoff suggests Broodthaers to be the inventor of a heretofore unseen form of art. Though in spite of this it is certainly 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 that elements of the form–lettersymbol have been entwhined explicitly 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, the idea of language is solidified in the literal objectification of concepts. 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 mental vision. According to Breton this was "a composition that unites the resources of poetry and the plastic arts together, and speculates about the possibility ⑦ of forming a stronger alliance."

The poet Stéphane Mallarmé was the first to configure the idea of distinguishing the communicative and symbolic functions of language. Broodthaers viewed him as having layed the foundations for contem–porary art. In 1897 Mallarmé wrote the poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le*

hasard, with extensive typographic instruc–tions to be carried out after his death in 1914. The poem contains an eccentric spatial demarcation – a lot of blank spacing and little to hold on to, layed–out in a visual rhythm across twenty pages. The words and sentences are transformed into a mis–cellaneous 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 exploit–ative vulnerability. The immanence of chance stands at the centre of the poem's construction. In spite of grammar rules imposed upon language, chance is inevita–ble. 'Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés': 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 demon–strates for Broodthaers the potential of oppositions between the written word and her visual attributes. He designs a re–make of Mallarmé's poem, replicating typograph–ical 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 contradic–tions'. Censorship immediately springs ⑧ to mind, barricading something that exist underneath. He essentially removes the 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 piece into an abstract work with spatial dimen–sions in which the value 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 spoken recuper–ation of the communicative value which temporarily undoes the erasure of words.

Visually, Broodthaers' *Coup de Dés* recalls Man Ray's 'Sound poem' from 1924. A work on paper that shows crossed out 'text', of which no original is known. The deed itself, on the other hand, the act of erasing, reminds one of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* from 1953. The young Rauschenberg asked his role model – '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–wracking 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, he suddenly changed his mind: the work that was to be defiled must be one that is cherished and priceless to him. The result is startling still: 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, artistic production, the act of appropriation and its resplendence in the face of existence. The act of erasure then, is arguably even more radical than that of Broodthaers, in the sense that, here, the original is tranformed in a way that conflates consequence and intention: 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 removal of information can be equally functional as the act of giving information.

One can understand Broodthaers' use of language by his wish to materialize semantic contradictions. To provoke functionality and expectation, the circumference of legibility at large. 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 reliable functionality that of poetry itself. This functionality forms the very heart of his oeuvre, carefully plastered into visual guises. No longer legible, yet still at work after 52 years. When language ceases to function as language, when art defies its common readability, is precisely the moment when it gets *interesting*. This has become an art historical given, much like a display of conceptual possibilities. Broodthaers' initiation within that history started with *Le Pense–Bête*,

a work that proved to be a foreshadow–
ing of his body of work – that stretches
itself beyond his physical objects into the
intangible, his actions, his museums, his
genuine unpredictability and according to
tradition, his tongue–in–cheek personality.
In other words, a work that I have come
to see as 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*

1 Thomas McEvilley, 'Another Alphabet: the
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2 Christoffer Cordes, ' 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.

3 Wilfried Dickhoff, 'La Conquete de
l'espace. De poetisch–artistieke situaties
van Marcel Broodthaers', *Marcel
Broodthaers in Beeld*, Marie–Puck
Broodthaers (ed.), Brussel 2013, p. 12.

4 Thierry de Duve, 'This wouldn't be a
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*Magritte and Contemporary Art: The
Treachery of Images*, uitgave bij tent.
Los Angeles (Los Angeles Museum of Art),
2006, pp. 95–96.

5 Dickhoff, p. 13.

6 Ibid.

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

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