

# Koen Brams MARCEL BROODTHAERS, 1970

*Le but de l'art est commercial. Mon but est également commercial.  
Le but (la fin) de la critique est tout aussi commercial.*

## 1. Moi

In 1970, Marcel Broodthaers is mid-career. Having started his visual arts career very late – in 1964, at forty years of age with the infamous solo exhibition *Moi, aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie...* – he has barely the same amount of time left on the international artistic scene. On January 28 1976, at the exact date of his fifty-second birthday, Broodthaers dies after a career of less than twelve years. The greater part of his active life had not been spent on the plastic arts, but on poetry.

Without wishing to mark 1970 as the moment of magic in Broodthaers' career, there can be mentioned various peculiarities about this year in particular. A central role in this remarkable history is assumed by Fernand Spillemaeckers (1938 – 1978), whose career path mirrors Broodthaers' in reverse. Unlike Broodthaers, he was trained as a visual artist. Spillemaeckers had studied at the Académie Royale des Beaux Arts de Bruxelles, where he became the assistant of his professor, Léon Devos. Circa 1966, he decided to study Roman Philology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (U.L.B.) and at the Ghent University. Broodthaers, the poet revamped into an artist; Spillemaeckers did the opposite: he traded his paintbrush for pen and paper.

Broodthaers and Spillemaeckers first meet towards the end of 1969, which coincides with the moment in which the philologist surrenders his last ambition to exhibit, choosing for another profession, namely that of the exhibition maker. Spillemaeckers had in October 1969 still accepted an invitation to exhibit 'paintings in one bland colour' with the art-circle

① from Dendermonde called Celbeton. A month later he decides not to. He didn't exhibit his own paintings, but instead works of art by Daniel Buren, Yves De Smet, Lili Dujourie and Guy Mees, which were accompanied by an audiotape

containing texts by predominantly French philosophers and sociologists including Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Lucien Goldmann. Did Broodthaers learn of Spillemaeckers' exhibition, significantly entitled *Concepts*? Or was it the brand-new curator who got into contact with the Brussels artist? The fact remains that both ② met each other before the end of 1969.

## 2. MTL

The invitation card of *Concepts* contains an odd detail, one of a reference to the names of three galleries: X-One, Plus Kern and MTL. The first gallery, X-One, opened on 24 September 1969 by the endeavours of the married couple Marc Poirier dit Caulier and Chita Foubert in the Braderijstraat in Antwerp. X-One would engage itself with Belgian artists Guy Mees and Philippe Van Snick alongside international heavyweights such as Fred Sandback and Sol LeWitt. The second gallery, Plus-Kern, started in 1969 as well. This initiative from Ghent was named by its founders, the married couple Jenny Van Driessche and Yves De Smet, a Centre for Constructive Design. It accomplished this intent by organising exhibitions including François Morellet, Sol LeWitt, Albert Rubens and Amedee Cortier. MTL, progeny of Fernand Spillemaeckers, opens on 13 March 1970 – two months after the opening of *Concepts*. The Brussels gallery would apply itself as no other to the cause of 'conceptual art'. Practically all of the artists under this banner would have one if not more exhibitions there – from Stanley Brouwn to John Baldessari, from Robert Barry to Marcel Broodthaers.

Spillemaeckers has never explained the meaning of the name of his gallery – moreover, not a single document surfaced in which is revealed any information regarding the mysterious letter-combination. Its origin has triggered all kinds of speculation on the matter. One speculator, for instance, was the Belgian artist Jacques Charlier, who already had a

soloshow in Spillemaecker's gallery during the first year of the existence of MTL. According to Charlier, MTL would stand for... Marie Thumas Louvain, and would be a reference to *pasta al pomodoro*, a highly venerated dish in Spillemaeckers'

- ③ household. During a conversation with the Luxembourgian art historian Sophie Richard, Lili Dujourie, the widow of Fernand Spillemaeckers sheds doubt on
- ④ this interpretation. Are the letters merely a "pleasing combination", as Dujourie had confided to the art historian? Or is the meaning of the name concealed in the meaninglessness of the combination? The latter, a reference to the work of Marcel Broodthaers, does seem the only right hypothesis – without wishing to suggest Broodthaers had anything to do with the naming himself.

On 2 December 1969 a solo show by Marcel Broodthaers opens in the Wide

⑤ White Space Gallery in Antwerp. The title of Broodthaers' exhibition reads: *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblioudebliou/S. Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé.*

*Deblioudebliou/S* is the phonetic transcription of the first letters of each word in the name of the Antwerp gallery. Wide becomes debliou; white, again, becomes debliou; and space becomes S. The fact that the difference in meaning to which the two words 'wide' and 'white' refer is dissolved, appears the most important goal of Broodthaers' design. Such a deficit in meaning was indeed very important to him. But there is more. The rich content of the name of the gallery is entirely nullified; the 'wide white space' is replaced by a nonsensical expression. With the phonetic transcription of the first letters, Broodthaers makes empty the vastly poetic name of the gallery. Perhaps it is an ironic undertaking, in order to demonstrate the similarity between the name of the gallery and that of American corporations such as I.B.M., C.S.C. or S.A.S. If this analogy weren't sought for, then perhaps the clear orientation of the W.W.S. to American art is. The names of artists like James Lee Byars, Carl Andre, Lawrence Weiner, Walter De Maria, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt and Bruce Nauman, divulge in Anny De Decker's gallery-programme a clear predisposal to the latest tendencies that had taken root in the U.S.A. from the middle of the sixties on. Finally, *Deblioudebliou/S* is

also a reference to Broodthaers' exhibition in the Wide White Space. During this show the Brussels artist would apply an analogous strategy to the poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* by Stéphane Mallarmé. Broodthaers had moulded all verses of this world famous graphic poem into 11 anodised aluminium plates – an equal amount of plates as Mallarmé's *poème* counted in double-sided print. Of Mallarmé's poem remains therefore nothing but shape – that is for that matter

⑥ not insignificant. Just like the name of the gallery, *Un coup de dés* is also emptied.

Did Broodthaers' *Deblioudebliou/S* bring Spillemaeckers to the idea of choosing a meaningless letter-combination – an empty signifier – for his own gallery? It is not impossible. Between the distribution of invitations before the exhibition of the Brussels artist in the W.W.S. – before December 1 1969 – and the moment that Spillemaeckers reveals to the public the name of his as yet unopened gallery – December 7 1969 – enough time has transpired for the wondrous name to be

⑦ chosen. It is certain that the W.W.S. was for Spillemaeckers a constant source of attraction and repulsion during his short life as a gallerist. The fact remains that Spillemaeckers had in any case understood the lesson of Broodthaers' 'literary exhibition'. Instead of choosing for a meaningful abbreviation, that in retrospect could make itself susceptible to the ridicule of some artist, he chooses, in the first instance, an empty signifier. For a causal relationship between Broodthaers' *Deblioudebliou/S* and Spillemaeckers' MTL establishing the name of his gallery, there is nonetheless no evidence available whatsoever.

### 3. DTH

When Marcel Broodthaers in December 1969 situated his exhibition around [from "autour"] Mallarmé in the W.W.S., it was already his third solo in the Antwerp gallery. He had by that time also participated in countless group shows, organised by Anny De Decker in her own gallery as well as other locations. In other words, it was not illogical to suppose that the Brussels artist was being 'represented' by the Antwerp gallery. That didn't prevent Fernand Spillemaeckers from

inviting Marcel Broodthaers to kickstart MTL's programme into action. It is in any case proof that Spillemaeckers has one 'thing' or another to do with the W.W.S.

From 13 March to 10 April 1970 Marcel Broodthaers exhibits in the Armand Campenhoutstraat 46 in Brussels, which is where MTL will reside for another year and a half of its existence, before moving to other addresses. Broodthaers interprets

- ⑧ the exhibition as an "assembled artwork", which consists of an invitation card (of which the text is represented verbatim on the vitrine of the gallery, solely legible from the gallery space), 67 paper documents (of which a number are framed and a number are stored in a brown file), a 16mm-film, titled *MTL-DTH*, and a 'catalogue' that
- ⑨ makes its appearance during the exhibition.

The visitor, if drawn by the invitation card to the Armand Campenhoutstraat, on entering the gallery, will in the first instance encounter nothing but what he's already carrying: the invitation to an exhibition. A second invitation card is distributed after the opening of the show, one in which the viewing of the film *MTL-DTH* is announced. On the card is shown a photo of the vitrine in MTL (taken from the gallery space), upon which the text of the first invitation card is written. Should the visitor receive the second invitation card, he will see what he has seen already: the vitrine, and on it the text of the first invitation. The film itself also deals exclusively with the vitrine of the gallery and the text of the first exhibition card. *MTL-DTH* is projected on the last day of the show on the window-display of the gallery, that has been painted white for exactly that purpose. If the visitor goes by the invitation, he will once again be shown the announcement of the exhibition, this time projected from the display window of MTL. So often is the same thing offered that it almost doesn't appear to be about anything. It is precisely this tautological lump, this semantic cavity, this *mise en abyme*, that it is all about for Broodthaers, just like in *Deblioudebliou/S* and *Un coup de dès jamais n'abolira le hasard. Image*.

That it indeed concerns the emptying of meaning, is proven by the title of the film: *MTL-DTH*. The first three letters form the meaningless name of the gallery of Fernand Spillemaeckers; the last three are the medial letters of the name of the artist [BROO-DTH-AERS]. Those who look for a meaning

to the name of the artist will learn that this is derived of the Middle-Dutch word 'brootate', which means as much as 'lodger', 'residential servant' (literally: 'breadeater').

Broodthaers' name therefore certainly has meaning, but it is precisely these three letters that in this regard do not matter. Whether the name be written as Broodthaer(t)s, -haars, -ars, Broodhaers, Broodthaer(t)s, -aerts, it means the same. DTH is therefore as pointless as MTL. In that way does the title of the film indicate that Broodthaers had thoroughly understood Spillemaeckers' choice of the name for his gallery (in turn perhaps inspired by his own *Deblioudebliou/S*). The artist and the gallerist are clearly on one and the same page.

#### 4. BCD

Broodthaers' first MTL-exhibition doesn't confine itself to invitations, a text on the vitrine, a film and a catalogue. There are in the gallery in the Armand Campenhoutstraat, moreover, 67 paper documents present. Most of these are either encased by two frames on the wall, or set in a frame that sits on two bolsters; lastly, the installation also includes a brown file in which a number of papers are stored.

In the trilingual catalogue (Dutch, French and English), that appears during the course of the show, those documents that are visible are accompanied with a meticulous description. An example: "Le perroquet t.d. rat. et surch. au magicolor jaune". The description reveals about the document the following: that it bears the title *The parrot*, is typed (t.d.), contains elements that are crossed through (rat.) and transcribed (surch.), as in the case of *The parrot* with yellow fineliner. In this manner all documents are described in the most minute, absurd detail. About the filed documents the reader however discovers the following: "16 pieces in a file share the same features". On the one hand, Broodthaers discloses 51 documents without any effort whatsoever, but on the other hand, in what appears to be carelessness he conceals 16 'pieces'. If the documents in the brown file are essentially identical to the framed documents, why aren't they just made available? The opposite question is equally legitimate: if the framed documents are essentially the same as the documents in the brown file,

then why aren't they made inaccessible? Broodthaers wishes to point exactly to this arbitrariness. By maintaining that all documents – the visible and the invisible – respond to the same characteristics, the artist signifies the random manner by which the decision to exhibit in a certain fashion is motivated. One other fact points to the veracity of this interpretation. After the diamond dealer and collector Isi Fiszman had purchased the complete exhibition, Broodthaers decides to provide the catalogue with a supplement – a letter, addressed to Fernand Spillemaeckers. In this letter he draws attention to an object that had, until then, been completely hidden from the visitor: a box of documents from which the 67 items had been chosen for the exhibition. Broodthaers reveals the existence of it and maintains to have donated this box, for nothing at all, to the buyer of the MTL–installation. About the brown file is only known that it contains 16 items; about the box itself nothing is known other than that it contains several documents and has been moved from the backroom of MTL into the private rooms of the collector. Both, the file and the box, have in common that they fundamentally dispute the meaning of the exhibition of the 51 documents. If the selection of documents were actually important, why did the box have to be involved in the transaction between gallerist, artist and collector? Every allocation of meaning to the exhibited documents is in this manner cut short. It is a form of emptying of meaning, as Broodthaers had previously attempted with *Deblioudebliou/S, Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard. Image*, and the endless viewing of the text of the invitation card of his first MTL–show.

The enquiry into the purposefulness of the exhibition is further probed by the documents themselves, offering an inducement to an additional interpretation of Broodthaers' MTL–exhibition. The framed documents involve amongst other things doodles, written, sketched or drawn. They are the notes (preparatory and annotative) in function of already realised projects, such as *Le Corbeau et le Renard* (1968) and *Un coup de dés...* (1969). Most of the documents are simply discarded versions of poems that have appeared in his collections of poetry *Bête noire* (1969) and *Pense–Bête* (1963–1964), and poems

that were never published. This finding brings Broodthaers' exhibition in MTL in direct relation to his first solo in the Saint–Laurent gallery in Brussels. In 1964 he fastened numerous copies of his collection of poems *Pense–Bête* with plaster so that they could no longer be leafed through and so made illegible; thereby adding that “he sometimes asked himself whether he too couldn't perhaps sell something for once and succeed in life”. The rest of the text is known: “Eventually I thought of inventing something disingenuous, and I got cracking immediately”.

In 1970, after having been active as visual artist for six years, Marcel Broodthaers reflects on the ‘disingenuous’ start of his career and decides to make a version 2.0 of his debut. The fact that this interpretation works is ascertained by his making of a new work with the remnants of (amongst others) his poetic production, similar to when he in 1964 makes a sculpture with the unsold copies of his poetry collection *Pense–Bête*. Broodthaers, thus, raises the polemic stake: he makes his debut with a completed product, in 1970 he is working with the scrap.

There can be found further evidential material for this interpretation in the first edition of *MTL–Aktuele kunst/MTL–Art Actuel*, that is published in March 1970 ① by Fernand Spillemaeckers. The edition commences with a *Dédicace* by Marcel Broodthaers that is compiled of two parts. The first part is a reprint of his polemic text *Moi aussi, je me suis demandé...* from 1964. The second part is titled *à MTL ou à BCD* and goes as follows: “Le but de l'art est commercial. Mon but est également commercial. Le but (la fin) de la critique est tout aussi commercial. Gardien de moi–même et des autres, je ne sais vraiment où donner du pied. Je n'arrive plus à servir tous ces intérêts en même temps... d'autant plus que des pressions inattendues modifient en ce moment le marché (qui a déjà tant souffert)...” Not only by exhibiting (in part) the ingredients of two poetry collections and of past projects, but especially by combining these two texts as ironic as they are contentious, Broodthaers indicates the need to make way and for his views to be once again put to the test. What is the conclusion? After six years of art the tone isn't any milder. More castigatory than in 1964, Broodthaers now points at the mercantile character of

art marketing. The art market is exposed in an unequivocally sarcastic manner: “unexpected pressure changes the art market (that has already suffered so much)...”. Moreover his jab was aimed not just at art, the artist and the art market, but also at art criticism – a facet that wasn’t announced on the invitation card of his first solo.

Broodthaers wouldn’t have been himself if he hadn’t also added a commentary at his host’s expense to his jeering standpoints. In 1964 he implicated the profiteer of the Saint-Laurent gallery in his sardonic manifest as such: “Au bout de trois mois je montraï ma production à Ph. Edouard Toussaint, le propriétaire de la galerie Saint-Laurent. Mais c’est de l’Art, dit-il et j’exposerais volontiers tout ça”. Broodthaers passed on his responsibility as an artist onto the person who had to deal it. It was Ph. Edouard Toussaint – and not the artist – who labeled the objects as art and offered to sell them. In 1970 Broodthaers passes muster with a short title in which three letters appear twice: à *MTL* ou à *BCD*. It is tempting to see in *BCD* another affirmation of the empty signifier *MTL*. Broodthaers has once described the alphabet as “a die with 26 sides”. In this highly poetic manner he puts in a nutshell one of the most important lessons of structuralism, namely, that the relation between signifier (i.e. a combination of letters) and signified is arbitrary. Every willy-nilly combination of letters can by convention – and not in essence! – be meaningful or meaningless. Each letter in the alphabet, by the throw of a die, can result in a meaningless combination, like *BCD*. That may be the suggestion Broodthaers is offering.

The index page of the first *MTL*-magazine yields itself to be interpreted in yet another way: namely the B for Buren, the C for Clauro and the D for Develing, the names of the authors of three out of five texts in the first volume. In the following *MTL*-magazine is included a text by the French art historian, René Denizot, who also might feature as D. If this reading of the three letter combination is correct, then Broodthaers would have wished to bring to our attention the ideological agenda of Fernand Spillemaeckers, who round about 1970 had considered the artist Daniel Buren, the art historians Michel Clauro and René Denizot and the curator Enno Develing as his *maîtres à penser*.

Besides being present in the first two *MTL*-magazines, they had texts of theirs recorded in the audiotape that played a role in Spillemaeckers’ first show, *Concepts*. It is conceivable that Broodthaers meant to focus our attention on such a theoretic preconception. With the enigmatic letter-combination *BCD*, Spillemaeckers’ intellectual baptism certificate is brought to light – his allegiance to radical-leftist theorists. In this light, even a meaningless letter-combination offers no guarantee it won’t give cause for a critical stance that could strike at the heart of an artistic and intellectual project.

- 1 On 29 October 1969 Adolf Merckx, coordinator of Celbeton, addresses a letter to Fernand Spillemaeckers, inviting him to exhibit at the Dendermonde art circle: “If I have understood well from you and your wife, you make paintings in a single, bland colour”.
- 2 The exhibition *Concepts* took place from 10 January to 4 February 1970 in Celbeton in Dendermonde. On 30 December 1969, the collector, Herman Daled, addresses a letter to Fernand Spillemaeckers out of which one can surmise that Marcel Broodthaers had brought him to the attention of the manifestation in Dendermonde. For further reading on *Concepts* and its history, see Koen Brams & Dirk Pültau, *The breakthrough of ‘conceptual art’ in Belgium. The case of Fernand Spillemaeckers. Part 1: Towards a ‘marxist formalism’*, in: *Museum M*, Leuven, 12 September–11 November 2013.
- 3 Sophie Richard, *Unconcealed. The International Network of Conceptual Artists 1967 – 1977. Dealers, Exhibitions and Public Collections*, Ridinghouse, London, 2009, p. 109.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 5 The exhibition took place from 2 to 20 December 1969 in the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp. For the discussion of this exhibition I have used Anny De Decker’s descriptions in: *Marcel Broodthaers* (exh. cat.), Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1991, pp. 140–141.

- 6 See: Frederik Leen, 'Zonder woorden'. Marcel Broodthaers' Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard', in: Frederik Leen (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers in de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Departement voor Moderne Kunst, Cahiers van de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België*, nr. 7, Brussels, 2010, pp. 15–39.
- 7 On 7 December 1969, Fernand Spillemaeckers addresses a letter to Adolf Merckx: "As promised, included is what I propose for an exhibition to take place in the following month. I expect this will be more interesting than mere blank canvases". In this letter is for the first time made mention of the (yet to be opened) gallery.
- 8 I have borrowed this term from Frederik Leen, in: 'De Broodthaersverzameling uitgepakt', in: *Frederik Leen (ed.), Marcel Broodthaers in de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Departement voor Moderne Kunst, Cahiers van de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België*, nr. 7, Brussels, 2010, pp. 15–39.
- 9 The exhibition is described in detail by Anne Rorimer: 'The Exhibition at the MTL gallery in Brussels', *March 13–April 10, 1970*, in: *October*, nr. 42, Fall 1987, pp. 101–125. I also gratefully made use of the description in *Marcel Broodthaers* (exh. cat.), Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1991, pp. 146–153.
- 10 *Marcel Broodthaers*, MTL, Brussels, 1970.
- 11 *MTL–Aktuele kunst/MTL–Art Actuel*, MTL, Brussels, March 1970.
- 12 See Anny De Decker, in: *Marcel Broodthaers* (exh. cat.), Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1991, p. 140: "Broodthaers avait fait un *Projet de reliure pour un coup de dés* avec la mention "L'Alphabet est un dé à 26 faces" accompagnée de dessins de 27 dés couverts de lettres".
- 13 I've made use of Laurence Pen's interpretation in: *Des stratégies obliques. Une histoire des conceptualismes en Belgique*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2015, p. 93 and following. Pen asserts that BCD refers unequivocally to Daniel Buren, Michel Claura and René Denizot. Although this interpretation is plausible, it should always be stated as a possibility and not as a matter of fact.

