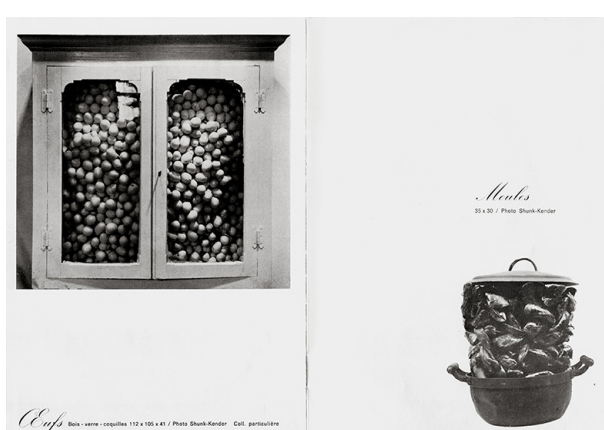


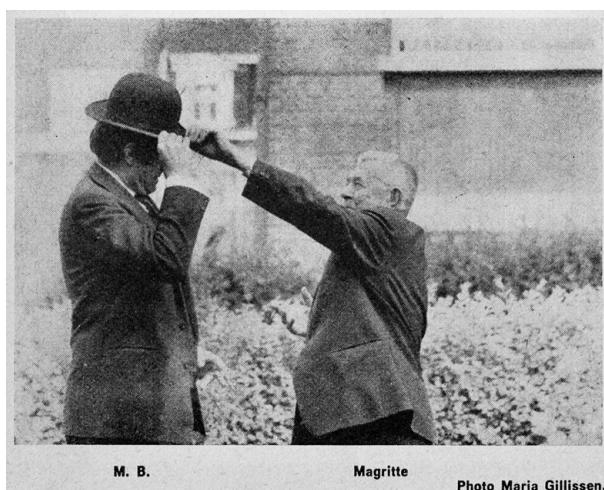
October 2022

Marcel Broodthaers

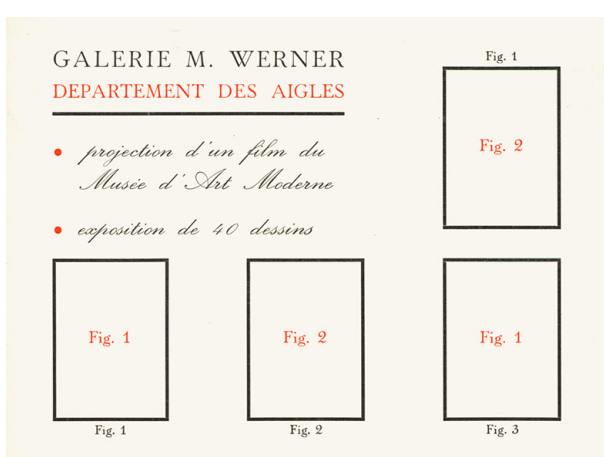
Alongside the exhibition «Marcel Broodthaers: Poèmes industriels», a study day on the artist had been arranged by the Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana MASI in Lugano. In my lecture, I addressed the question of how Broodthaers was regarded by his contemporaries – as a Surrealist poet, as a Belgian Pop artist or as a representative of the emerging Conceptual Art of the 1970s. Broodthaers' uncertain status within contemporary art stemmed from his work, and he deliberately fostered this ambiguity in his statements. Broodthaers was well aware that to be an artist meant to insert oneself into the art system, while at the same time being inscribed there; it was a matter of inserting oneself into a context in order to demarcate just this and make the conditions and limits it entailed recognizable. Broodthaers saw his efforts to play with the forces governing art as futile, as he put it in an open letter to the Italian critic Lea Vergine in 1973: "The things of art constitute a platform on which I occupy a place, having the feeling I have nothing to say. (It would be a real pity if this proved to be wrong. Some of my strongly involved friends want to convince me of this.)"



In 1972, Daniel Spoerri told me about Broodthaers and added that the latter was considered "a Belgian Spoerri", in the sense of an epigone of Nouveau Réalisme. In fact, a preliminary inspection of Broodthaers' works made of eggshells and mussels could lead one to see his pieces as accumulations of found everyday things and the exhibition of his Musée d'art moderne, Département des Aigles (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles) at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf as a prolongation of Spoerri's collections of objects. Once a poet, Broodthaers, by his own account, connected his entry into the world of art to a particular experience. In 1965, he said in a self-interview, "Il y a 18 mois que j'ai vu à Paris une exposition de moulages, ceux de Segal; ce fut le point de départ, le choc qui m'entraîna jusqu'à produire moi-même des œuvres." ("Eighteen months ago, I saw in Paris an exhibition of casts, those by Segal; this was the springboard, the shock, that led me so far as to produce my own works.") George Segal made his figures by wrapping a model in bandages soaked in plaster to form a hollow shell. He did not make a cast from it, but treated the shell taken from the model as a sculpture – comparable to the eggs and the mussels; it is no coincidence that the French word moule has a double meaning: "mussel" and "mould".



On his official initiation into the world of art through an exhibition at Galerie St-Laurent in Brussels, Broodthaers famously wrote in 1964: "L'idée enfin d'inventer quelque chose d'insincère me traversa l'esprit et je me mis aussitôt au travail." ("The thought of creating something insincere passed through my mind, and so I set to work immediately.") Insincere meant that his objects had the semblance of being works of art, perhaps as examples of Pop Art or Nouveau Réalisme, thus becoming eligible for symbolic and economic exchange. As a poet, who had first appeared in the circle of Belgian Surrealists in 1945, Broodthaers worked with the figurative meaning of language and transferred this to objects.



Eggs and mussels were elements in the plastic language of the artist and were not an end in themselves; they demonstrated the artistic rhetoric of containers lacking content, of signs without objective counterparts. The eggshells and mussel shells became rhetorical figures on account of their being devoid of content, and thus able to set off a sequence of references. This prompted Broodthaers to mention René Magritte, "l'irritable, le maladroit, le grand René Magritte" ("that irritable, inept and magnificent René Magritte"), as he once described him. In his published "Interview imaginaire de René Magritte" ("Imaginary interview with René Magritte") he inserted a photograph of Magritte placing his bowler hat on Broodthaers' head and, with this gesture, symbolically handed him the task of pressing ahead with the attacks on alleged certainties. Broodthaers interpreted Magritte's picture "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") as representative of the gap that opens up between the illustration of words and of the object in question. He found confirmation of this point in an essay by Michel Foucault, which he advised me to read. According to Foucault, Magritte had abolished a coherent level of meaning for the signs dispersed in the picture, which in effect brought painting's ability to speak in the affirmative to a halt.



If one takes the model of the "pipe" as a foundation, any object could be termed a rhetorical figure in order to make it available as an illustration and to take the stage arbitrarily as an interchangeable element. To this end, Broodthaers made use of the common abbreviation "fig." for illustration in French and English, and in schematic depictions took this so far as to deny the rhetorical figures any referentiality beyond each other. When he designed his own catalogue for the Städtisches Museum Mönchengladbach in 1971, he used the cardboard box which the museum provided to the artists as a means for presenting their work to display a sequence of references – Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 0 and Fig. 12. In contrast to the contemporary American artists, who substituted for the creation of objects with verbal statements, Broodthaers neither established a system with this sequence of numbers, nor used it to give any instructions. Fig. 0 denoted the tautology, generating a short circuit. Connecting 1 and 2 to the number 12 conjures up a literary figure: Mallarmé's midnight, when time stands still. That was the second piece of advice that Broodthaers gave me: "Lis Mallarmé, et puis tu comprendras tout." ("Read Mallarmé, then you will understand it all.")