

FROM SURREALIST POEMS TO POP OBJECTS: MARCEL BROODTHAERS'S EARLY YEARS (1945-1963)

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If René Magritte is, without a doubt, the most famous Belgian artist of the twentieth century, he is not the only one to have received international acclaim. Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976) is widely recognised today as a major postwar artist. His brief career as a visual artist lasted from 1964 until his untimely death in 1976. His work, which includes objects, films, writings and installations, has been thoroughly studied by international art historians. This paper addresses a gap in Broodthaers studies: the artist's overlooked years as a poet in Brussels, between 1945 and 1963. During this time, he elaborated recurring themes in his *oeuvre* and developed a robust professional network in the literary, film and artistic circles of Brussels. This paper argues that these understudied, formative years are crucial to understanding Broodthaers's subsequent – and successful – turn to the visual arts.

I. Introduction

Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) is recognised today as a major artist of the second half of the twentieth century. From the 1960s onwards, he created an extensive *oeuvre* at the crossroads of surrealism, *nouveau réalisme*, pop art and conceptual art. Broodthaers experimented with various media, creating objects (including his famous mussel pots), films, writings, and installations. He quickly developed an international career before his untimely death in 1976, on the day of his 52nd birthday. Since then, his career has been widely studied by art historians, mainly in Belgium, France, Germany and the United States.¹ His work has been acquired by renowned international museums, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris and Tate Modern in London. In recent years, traveling retrospective exhibitions of his work opened, successively, in Paris, Kassel, New York, Madrid, Düsseldorf, Moscow, Antwerp, Brussels and Lugano.² Yet, despite the sustained institutional and academic attention to his work, he remains a somewhat unknown figure in his home country, as evidenced by the absence of any major institutional celebration of the artist's centenary in 2024.³

Many of the books and retrospective exhibitions of Broodthaers's work regard the year 1964, the date of his first exhibition, as the starting point of his artistic career. However, the year 1964 only marks the start of the second act of Broodthaers's creative pursuits. From 1945 to 1963, Broodthaers was first and foremost active as a poet. His failure to develop a viable career in this field eventually led him to pivot to the more lucrative visual arts. This first period of his life – spanning more years than his career as a visual artist – has never thoroughly been studied for two main reasons.⁴ Firstly, the available information on his early activities is particularly scarce. Secondly, the artist himself deliberately obfuscated or downplayed some of his artistic endeavours before 1964.

This paper argues that Broodthaers's career as a visual artist cannot be properly understood without a detailed study of these overlooked years. Through a combination of archive-based research, oral history, and a critical study of primary sources, our historical research fills the gaps in existing Broodthaers studies, while also shedding a light on the literary, artistic and political context of postwar Brussels, which formed the background to his emergence as a poet and an artist. Between 1945 and 1963,

1. More than 60 books (monographs and exhibition catalogues) have been published on the artist since 1976. Some of the most important books about his work include, in chronological order: MARGE GOLDWATER & MICHAEL COMPTON, *Marcel Broodthaers* (exhibition cat.), Minneapolis, 1989; CATHERINE DAVID & VÉRONIQUE DABIN (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers* (exhibition cat.), Paris, 1991; MANUEL J. BORJA-VILLET & CHRISTOPHE CHÉRIX (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers. A Retrospective* (exhibition cat.), New York, 2016.

2. They are, in chronological order: *Marcel Broodthaers. Musée d'Art moderne – Département des Aigles*, Paris, Monnaie de Paris, 2015; *Marcel Broodthaers. Exhibitions and Works*, Kassel, Friedericianum, 2015; *Marcel Broodthaers. A Retrospective*, New York/Madrid/Düsseldorf, The Museum of Modern Art/Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía/Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2016–2017; *Marcel Broodthaers. Poetry and Images*, Moscow, Garage, 2018–2019; *Marcel Broodthaers. Soleil politique*, Antwerp, M HKA, 2019–2020; *Marcel Broodthaers. Industrial Letters, Open Letters*, Brussels/Lugano, WIELS/Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, 2021–2022. All exhibitions, except the ones in Paris and Moscow, have led to the publication of an exhibition catalogue.

3. Instead, a few smaller initiatives were organised, including a guided tour of Brussels “in Broodthaers's footsteps” by the author of this article on the day of his centenary, in collaboration with *Jeunesse et Arts plastiques*; a series of conferences by the author and a collective podcast titled *Marcel Broodthaers. Portrait de groupe* organised by the *Institut supérieur d'étude du langage plastique* (ISELP) in Brussels; the projection of a selection of Broodthaers's films at CINEMATEK (Brussels); and a small exhibition at the town hall of Saint-Gilles, the Brussels borough where Broodthaers was born, during the borough's biennial art festival *Parcours d'artistes*.

4. Some researchers have broached the subject, including MICHAEL COMPTON, “In Praise of the Subject”, in MARGE GOLDWATER & MICHAEL COMPTON, *Marcel Broodthaers*, 15–69; MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, *Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976). Les (noms de) personnes*, PhD dissertation, Université Rennes 2-Haute Bretagne, 2004; JOSÉ VOVELLE, “Politique et/ou esthétique de deux post-magrittiens: Mariën et Broodthaers”, in WOLFGANG ASHOLT & HANS T. SIEPE (ed.), *Surréalisme et Politique – Politique du Surréalisme*, Amsterdam–New York, 2007, 217–234.

Broodthaers built an extensive network of contacts in the Brussels literary, film and artistic circles that would prove decisive for the launch and growth of his career as an artist. He also developed, in writing, several themes that would become prominent in his later artworks. Consequently, his career as a visual artist from 1964 onwards should not be regarded as a “clean break” from his career as a poet, but rather as a continuation of it.

II. Family, Youth, and the Second World War

Marcel Broodthaers was born on 28 January 1924 in a modest household in the Brussels borough of Saint-Gilles. His father Charles (1885-1961) worked as a waiter, while his mother, Bertha Annecour (1884-1950), occasionally worked as an ironer.⁵ Both his parents showed an interest in the arts: his father took him on museum visits and his mother tried to teach him the piano.⁶ He met his earliest known friend, Charles Bounameaux (1922-2016), in the Scouts when they were both teenagers. Bounameaux remembers the young Broodthaers as having a passion for poetry, and a particular interest in Surrealist poetry and the works of the nineteenth-century French poets Verlaine, Rimbaud, Villon and Baudelaire. The latter would prove a great inspiration to Broodthaers, who, according to Bounameaux, often carried *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) around with him.⁷ Baudelaire would later frequently appear in Broodthaers's visual work, particularly in films such as *Un film de Charles Baudelaire* (1970), which he created while attending a seminar on Baudelaire

taught by the philosopher and sociologist Lucien Goldmann (1913-1970) at the *Université libre de Bruxelles* in the winter of 1969-1970.⁸

Following the German invasion in May 1940, Bounameaux and 16-year-old Broodthaers spent some time in southern France before returning to Brussels.⁹ Broodthaers probably graduated from high school the following year. In the autumn of 1941, he enrolled as a student of chemistry at the *Université libre de Bruxelles*.¹⁰ Shortly afterwards, the university closed its doors to protest German interference in its courses.¹¹ Broodthaers's subsequent activities during the Second World War remain largely unknown, aside from a few details. He met poets, artists, students and Communist activists in bohemian cafés in the city centre. Broodthaers's oldest known contact was the architect, poet and Communist activist Paul Bourgoignie (1915-1995), who shared his interest in Surrealism. A drawing made by Broodthaers, based on Bourgoignie's short story *L'air bête du petit-fils de Proniacovache*, attests to their interaction around 1939-1940.¹² Other acquaintances give some insight into Broodthaers's war years. According to the artist Serge Creuz (1924-1996), he lived in poverty and was nicknamed “the chemist” by his friends; the poet Théodore Koenig (1922-1997), whom he met around the same time, in 1942, has suggested that he followed in his father's footsteps by working as a waiter.¹³ Broodthaers himself rarely talked about his experience of the war. Anny De Decker (b. 1937), who regularly exhibited Broodthaers in her Antwerp gallery, White Wide Space, from 1966 onwards, remembers an offhand comment made by Broodthaers about the

5. MICHAEL COMPTON, “In Praise of the Subject”, 15; CHARLES BOUNAMEAUX, unpublished manuscript titled *Marcel Broodthaers*, 2001 (private collection); *Almanach du Commerce et de l'Industrie*, Brussels, Mertens et Rozez, 1936, 891.

6. MICHAEL COMPTON, “In Praise of the Subject”, 15; CHARLES BOUNAMEAUX, unpublished manuscript titled *Marcel Broodthaers*.
7. *Idem*.

8. MANUEL J. BORJA-VILLEL & MICHAEL COMPTON, *Marcel Broodthaers. Cinéma* (exhibition cat.), Barcelona, 1997, 126.

9. CHARLES BOUNAMEAUX, unpublished manuscript titled *Marcel Broodthaers*.

10. Registration form of Marcel Broodthaers at the *Université libre de Bruxelles*, 1941-1953 (AULB, *Registre des inscriptions*).

11. On this subject, see ANDRÉE DESPY-MEYER, ALAIN DIERKENS & FRANK SCHEELINGS (ed.), *25 novembre 1941. L'Université libre de Bruxelles ferme ses portes*, Bruxelles, 1991.

12. *Oude meesters, moderne en hedendaagse kunst/Art ancien, moderne et contemporain/Old Masters, Modern and Contemporary Art* (auction cat.), Lokeren, 2022, 101. Additional information on the lot provided by email by the auction house.

13. SERGE CREUZ, *Les Peintres de mon chemin*, Bruxelles, 1996, 173-174; THÉODORE KOENIG, *Histoire de la peinture chez Phantomas des années 50/80*, Bruxelles, 1990, 202-203.

German artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), a pilot and parachutist during the war: “Ah, how terrible, Beuys was bombarding me in his Stuka while I was [hiding] in the basement.”¹⁴

During these years, Broodthaers grew particularly close to the Brussels Surrealists. He met the first generation of Surrealists, including the painter René Magritte (1898–1967) and the poets Marcel Lecomte (1900–1966) and Paul Nougé (1895–1967), as well as a new generation of Surrealist poets, such as Christian Dotremont (1922–1979) and Marcel Mariën (1920–1993).¹⁵ The introduction of new, younger poets to the movement shows that it remained an important point of reference twenty years after its foundation. Many of these Surrealist artists and poets, including Broodthaers, joined the Belgian Communist Party during or immediately after the war.¹⁶ The party enjoyed exceptional popularity at that time due to its role in the armed resistance, its antifascist and patriotic stance and, more generally, the prestige of the Soviet Union and Stalin after the war.¹⁷ This double affiliation, to Surrealism and Communism, clearly defined Broodthaers's first writings and activities in the post-war years.

III. A Poet on the Margins of Brussels Surrealism

Broodthaers was 21 years old when he published his first poem in the literary journal *Le Ciel bleu* in

1945. The journal, whose title conveys a sense of renewed optimism, was one of several short-lived journals founded after the war, during a boom in literary and artistic journals. These publications had been banned under German occupation.¹⁸ The editorial committee of *Le Ciel bleu* was composed of the Surrealist poets Paul Colinet (1898–1957), Christian Dotremont and Marcel Mariën, whom Broodthaers had befriended during the war. Other contributors to the journals included René Magritte and the poets Marcel Lecomte, André Breton (1896–1966) and Louis Scutenaire (1905–1987). Broodthaers's first published poem, “L'île sonnante”, appeared in April 1945.¹⁹ The poem, which has both Surrealist and Symbolist undertones, contains a reference to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). It inaugurates a long series of literary references in both Broodthaers's written work and his later artistic oeuvre.

That same month, Broodthaers published another poem in the equally ephemeral literary journal *Le Salut public*. This journal was founded by two other friends of Broodthaers: the Communist militants Jean Seeger (1921–1993) and Alexandre “Marcel” Arents (1923–1958). The journal regularly published writings by Surrealist poets, illustrating the rapprochement between Surrealists and Communists after the war (*cf. infra*). Broodthaers also published a prose poem titled “Le rêve d'un jeune homme malheureux ou l'anarchiste anodin”.²⁰ In this poem, he makes references to both the medieval epic *Reynard the Fox* and Jean de

14. “Ah c'est terrible, ce Beuys me bombardait dans son stuka pendant que moi j'étais dans la cave.” Marcel Broodthaers quoted by ANNY DE DECKER, in “Interview Yves Aupetitallot, Anny De Decker, Bernd Lohaus”, in *Wide White Space, 1966–1976. Achter het museum. Derrière le musée* (exhibition cat.), Bruxelles-Marseille, 1994, 28. Unless otherwise stated, all citations were translated by the author.

15. MICHAEL COMPTON, “In Praise of the Subject”, 15–16; CHRISTIAN DOTREMONT, letter to Freddy De Vree, 1979, quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, *Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976)*, ABC.339; MARCEL MARIËN, letter to Jacques van Lennep, 15 May 1976 (AACB, DN Marcel Mariën, inv. 30.946).

16. The exact date of Broodthaers's adhesion to the Party is not known. The books published in collaboration with his widow, Maria Gilissen, generally indicate the year 1943. See, for example, the chronology in CATHERINE DAVID & VÉRONIQUE DABIN (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers*, 34; SAM SACKEROFF & TERESA VELÁZQUEZ, “Poetry, photographs, and films”, in MANUEL J. BORJA-VILLEL & CHRISTOPHE CHÉRIX (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers. A Retrospective*, 52.

17. PASCAL DELWIT & JEAN-MICHEL DE WAELE, “Les intellectuels communistes et le stalinisme, de 1947 à 1953, en France et en Belgique”, in *Cahiers marxistes*, 146, 1986, 38–43.

18. MARC QUAGHEBEUR, “Éléments pour une étude du champ littéraire belge francophone de l'après-guerre”, in PAUL ARON *et al.* (ed.), *Leurs Occupations. L'impact de la Seconde Guerre mondiale sur la littérature en Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1997, 245.

19. MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “L'île sonnante”, in *Le Ciel bleu*, 7, 1945, 4.

20. MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “Le rêve d'un jeune homme malheureux ou l'anarchiste anodin”, in *Le Salut public*, 3, 1945, 4.

La Fontaine's fable *Le Corbeau et le Renard*. In his later artistic work, Broodthaers would regularly come back to La Fontaine's fable, which children in France and French-speaking Belgium often learn by heart at school. In 1967, he created a film and several objects containing his own rewriting of the story. The following year, in 1968, the fable was at the heart of his exhibition *Le Corbeau et le Renard* at Wide White Space in Antwerp, for which he crafted an edition based on the film. *Le Corbeau et le Renard* appears therefore as another literary bridge (in addition to Baudelaire) between his poetic and artistic activities. The film and the exhibition mark the "literary turn" in Broodthaers's artistic career. After only a few short years as a visual artist creating objects with mussels, plaster, and eggshells, Broodthaers, from 1967 onwards, gradually reintegrated references to language, poetry and literature in his artistic work.²¹ This "literary turn" is visible, for example, in his 1967 series of photographic canvasses, in which Broodthaers shows images of objects and people (such as Magritte) next to words. The reference to Magritte is, of course, not an accidental one. The painter had become famous for his paintings representing words and images, such as *La Trahison des images* (1929), in which the image of a pipe is accompanied by the phrase "This is not a pipe." This painting had a major influence on Broodthaers, who later wrote: "It is with that pipe that I tackled the adventure."²² Words and images also appear side by side in Broodthaers's *Industrial Poems* series (1968-1972), made from vacuum-formed plastic.²³ In 1969, the artist returned to French literature with a second literary exhibi-

tion at White Wide Space, which featured works inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897).

Broodthaers's first publications in 1945 established him as a professional poet but did not lead to his breakthrough in the literary world. Additionally, even though he published poems alongside the Surrealist poets, Broodthaers never managed to become a fully-fledged member of the Brussels Surrealist group. The two journals in which he published, *Le Ciel bleu* and *Le Salut public*, included some Surrealist poets but did not emanate from the Surrealist group, which after the war reorganised itself around the painter René Magritte.²⁴ For example, several prominent Surrealists, including Mariën, quickly disavowed *Le Ciel bleu* as a failed publication, which "[didn't] really fall under Surrealism".²⁵ Tellingly, Broodthaers's name does not appear in the major postwar publications and activities of the Brussels Surrealist group, such as the edited volume *La Terre n'est pas une vallée de larmes* (1945), the exhibition *Surréalisme* at *La Boétie* gallery (1945-1946), the special edition of the American journal *View* dedicated to Belgian Surrealism (1946) and the journal *Les Deux Sœurs* (1946-1947). Dotremont described Broodthaers as a member of a rather "informal" group, while Mariën noted that he was never really a member of the Surrealists.²⁶ Broodthaers was thus clearly a marginal figure, who only occasionally participated in collective publications. He did, however, develop close personal relationships with a handful of Surrealist poets, such as Paul Nougé.²⁷

21. On this subject, see MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, "Marcel Broodthaers, poète, artiste", in *Parachute*, 15, 1979, 33-37.

22. "C'est à partir de cette pipe que j'ai tenté l'aventure." MARCEL BROODTHAERS, "Dix mille francs de récompense. Une interview d'Irmeline Lebeer", in *Marcel Broodthaers* (exhibition cat.), Bruxelles, 1974, 64. Translated by Paul Schmidt in *October*, special issue *Broodthaers. Writings, Interview, Photographs*, 42, 1987, 43.

23. For more information on the *Industrial Poems* series, see CHARLOTTE FRILING & DIRK SNAUWAERT (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers. Industrial Poems. The Complete Catalogue of the Plaques, 1968-1972*, Brussels-Berlin, 2021.

24. MARIE GODET, *Le poids du réel. Les surréalistes bruxellois et l'objet dans les années 1940*, PhD thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles, 2017, 99.

25. "[Le Ciel bleu] ne relève pas vraiment du surréalisme." MARCEL MARIËN, *L'Activité surréaliste en Belgique (1924-1950)*, Bruxelles, 1979, 341.

26. CHRISTIAN DOTREMONT, letter to Freddy De Vree, 1979, quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, *Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976)*, ABC.339; MARCEL MARIËN, letter to Jacques van Lennep, 15 May 1976.

27. YVES GEVAERT & MARIA GILISSEN, "Biografische gegevens", in *Marcel Broodthaers 28.1.1924/28.1.1976* (exhibition cat.), Rotterdam, 1981, 56; OLIVIER SMOLDERS, *Paul Nougé. Écriture et caractère à l'école de la ruse*, Bruxelles, 1995, 200.

In the autumn of 1945, a project for a new journal provided a unique opportunity for Broodthaers to take on a more proactive role on the cultural and political scene. Over the course of several meetings, Communists and Surrealists discussed the creation of a collaborative journal titled *La Centrale*. The names put forward to lead the journal were the Surrealist poet Achille Chavée (1906–1969), who represented the “first” Surrealist generation in the absence of Nougé and Magritte, and the younger poets Alexandre Arents, Paul Bourgoignie and Marcel Broodthaers.²⁸ The composition of the editorial committee clearly reflected the growing influence of the younger generation of poets and militants. It also indicated that the journal was essentially a political one, as the members of the editorial committee were known first and foremost as Communist militants, and not as prominent Surrealists.²⁹ In the end, the journal never saw the light of day, in part because of Magritte’s mistrust of the young Communist poets eager to join the Surrealist group, whom he condescendingly described as “petty bourgeois poets”.³⁰ *La Centrale* was clearly a missed opportunity for Broodthaers, who not only remained on the margins of the Surrealist group, but also lived on the fringes of society. Now married with a baby daughter, he could not earn a living from his poems and turned to selling second-hand books as well as, according to his first wife Reine Leysen (1930–2000), some extra-legal activities.³¹ Selling books allowed him

to maintain a connection with Surrealist friends such as Mariën and Dotremont, who also worked in bookshops at the time, and with the Brussels literary world more broadly.³²

The year 1947 was a turning point for the young poet. He was a founding member and an enthusiastic participant of *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*. This group, launched by Christian Dotremont, was an attempt at collaboration between the Surrealists and the Belgian Communist Party. Dotremont’s goal was to take Surrealism back to its revolutionary, political roots of the Interwar years.³³ In their manifestoes *Pas de quartiers dans la révolution!* and *La Cause est entendue*, published in the Summer of 1947 and signed by Broodthaers, the group argued that the revolution was both poetic and Marxist, and that one could – and should – be both a Surrealist and a Communist.³⁴ The group also denounced André Breton’s retreat from politics. Unlike their Belgian colleagues, the French Surrealists pivoted away from politics after the Second World War.³⁵

In Dotremont’s eyes, the *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* group would be independent from the Party, while also working in close collaboration with it. This soon proved to be a utopian project. In Paul Aron’s analysis, Dotremont was effectively treading the fine line between the autonomy of the artist and the discipline of a political militant.³⁶

28. According to Mariën, Magritte and Nougé refused to collaborate with Dotremont after he published an article defending the writer Jean Cocteau. ACHILLE CHAVÉE, letter to René Magritte and Paul Nougé, 18 November 1945 (AACB, *Fonds Achille Chavée*, inv. 4383).

29. MARIE GODET, *Le poids du réel*, 257–258.

30. “poètes-petits-bourgeois [sic]”. RENÉ MAGRITTE, letter to Achille Chavée, 29 November 1945 (AACB, *Fonds Achille Chavée*, inv. 4384).

31. REINE LEYSEN quoted in OLIVIER SMOLDERS, *Paul Nougé*, 199–200.

32. FRANÇOISE LALANDE, *Christian Dotremont, inventeur de Cobra* [1998], s.l., 2000, 131, 163; Mariën advertises his bookshop on the back cover of the journal *Le Surréalisme révolutionnaire*, no. 1, March–April 1948.

33. While the Brussels Surrealist Group did not join the Belgian Communist Party during the Interwar years, several of its members (including Nougé and Magritte) expressed their Communist convictions during that time. Some Brussels Surrealists also signed political pamphlets in collaboration with the French Surrealists who had, for their part, joined forces with the French Communist Party. Breton broke away from the Party in 1935. For more information on this subject, see NATHALIE AUBERT, “Twenty years on – *Distances*: Belgian and French Surrealists and ‘the’ Revolution”, in NATHALIE AUBERT, PIERRE-PHILIPPE FRAITURE & PATRICK MCGUINNESS (ed.), *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism. Belgian Modernity in the Making*, London, 2007, 174–189.

34. MARCEL ARENTS et al., *Pas de quartiers dans la révolution!*, Brussels, 7 June 1947; SUZAN ALLEN et al., *La Cause est entendue*, Paris, 1 July 1947.

35. For more information on the evolving political stance of the French Surrealists, see CAROLE REYNAUD-PALIGOT, *Parcours politique des surréalistes 1919–1969*, Paris, 1995.

36. PAUL ARON, “Le Serpent de mer. Le surréalisme et la révolution en Belgique (1947–1950)”, in *Cahiers marxistes*, 154, 1987, 22.

Even though the Belgian Communist Party, at that time, was welcoming towards these idealistic artists, other artists, such as Magritte, could not see themselves working so closely with the party.³⁷ The *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* group thus exposed a rift among the Belgian Surrealists – between those (often younger poets) who plunged headfirst into an alliance with the party, and those (including the older Magritte and Nougé) who refused to subsume their art to the party's ideology.

The meeting records and correspondence between the members of the group show that Broodthaers was a proactive member of *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*. He participated in the debates and acted as the group's secretary.³⁸ He was also involved in discussions with a group of dissident French Surrealist poets who briefly created a *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* group in France, before a financial dispute between the two groups put an end to their collaboration.³⁹ This brief link with France explains why the single issue of the group's journal was published in Paris in the summer of 1948. This issue contains a prose poem by Broodthaers, "Projet pour un film".⁴⁰ As its title suggests, the poem can be read as a scenario or outline for a film. It opens with a series of events taking place in an "immobile landscape", which is set in motion by a fly. As the poem progresses, Broodthaers describes three short scenes in succession. In one of these, the narrator walks up the stairs while the "para-surrealist formations" slide down the banister. In its themes and Surrealist imagery, the poem is very similar to Broodthaers's earlier published poems. But the poem also prefigures

his first film, *La Clef de l'Horloge (Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters)*, which premiered in 1958 (cf. *infra*).⁴¹

Shortly after the publication of their journal's only issue, the *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* group slowly disbanded. Tensions were rising as the Communist Party tried to impose its social-realist artistic ideology on its members. In the end, the group's only accomplishments were a couple of meetings, an art exhibition hosted by the Communist Party in 1947, and the publication of one issue of their journal. Dotremont quickly moved on to create another group, CoBrA, in collaboration with Dutch and Danish artists, in 1948. After unsuccessfully trying to collaborate, once again, with the Communist Party, he bitterly broke off all ties with the party in 1949.⁴² Broodthaers, on the other hand, continued to be an active member of the Communist Party until his expulsion in 1951. The reasons for his expulsion are unclear, but it occurred at the same time as the expulsion of some of his poet friends, such as Seeger.⁴³ According to those close to Broodthaers, the party, which was suffering great electoral losses in the context of the Cold War, was trying to rid its ranks of "problematic" individuals (such as poets with no fixed income) in a bid to polish its image.⁴⁴

For a couple of years following the dissolution of *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*, Broodthaers did not publish any poems in literary journals, nor was he associated with any new artistic groups. His expulsion from the Communist Party further isolated him. He kept working as a bookseller and briefly

37. RENÉ MAGRITTE, letter to Marcel Mariën, s.d. [23 January 1946], in RENÉ MAGRITTE, *La Destination. Lettres à Marcel Mariën (1937-1962)*, Bruxelles, 1977, 180-181.

38. CHRISTIAN DOTREMONT & JEAN SEEGER, meeting records of the *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* group, 5, 12, and 19 April 1947 (AML, *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*, ML 06590/0007); CHRISTIAN DOTREMONT, letter to Paul Bourgoignie, s.d. [May 1948] (AML, *Correspondance de Christian Dotremont à Paul Bourgoignie*, ML 05044/0034).

39. The many letters exchanged during this conflict are conserved at AML, *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*, ML 06590.

40. MARCEL BROODTHAERS, "Projet pour un film", in *Le Surréalisme révolutionnaire*, 1, 1948, 4.

41. DENIS LAOUREUX, "Broodthaers et le moule des mots", in *Textyles. Revue des lettres belges de langue française*, special issue *Écriture et art contemporain*, 40, 2011, 33.

42. See, on this subject, CHRISTIAN DOTREMONT, *Le « réalisme-socialiste » contre la révolution*, s.l., 1950.

43. PARTI COMMUNISTE DE BELGIQUE, *Bulletin des exclusions*, 1, 1952, n.p.

44. MARIA GILISSEN BROODTHAERS, "A Conversation", in SUSANNE PFEFFER (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers. Exhibitions and Works* (exhibition cat.), Kassel, 2020, 11; interview with WALTER SWENNEN, 9 July 2018.

enrolled again as a student.⁴⁵ He also remained friends with a couple of Communist militants and Surrealist poets, such as Paul Nougé and Paul Bourgoignie.⁴⁶ More importantly, Broodthaers kept expanding his literary and artistic networks. He was for example close to Armand Permantier (1895–1960), an eccentric painter of landscapes and portraits in neo-expressionistic style, whose work was championed by the Surrealists.⁴⁷

Although Broodthaers did not participate in Dotremont's CoBrA publications and exhibitions, he did befriend some CoBrA artists, such as the photographer and painter Serge Vandercam (1924–2005) and the poet Joseph Noiret (1927–2012), the latter of whom participated in *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*.⁴⁸ These new relationships perfectly illustrate the paradigm shift that occurred at the turn of the 1950s. Groups that had previously been clearly defined (for example, by the publication of manifestoes) now saw their members scattering to the four winds and setting up new collaborations with other artists and poets. This was clearly the case with the Surrealist group. Marcel Mariën ends his historical overview of the Belgian Surrealist group with the publication of

La Feuille chargée in 1950.⁴⁹ As Steven Harris has noted, the publication of this pamphlet can also be read as “the beginning of a post-surrealist activity undertaken by former members of the group”. These former members “continued to associate with one another socially, and even to collaborate on collective publications and reviews, though these were no longer related to surrealism in any explicit way”.⁵⁰

Interestingly, Broodthaers would downplay his own relation to the Surrealist movement later in his career. For example, in 1970, he wrote a short biographical note for the catalogue of his exhibition at the Galerie MTL in which he stated: “I was born on 28-1-24 in Brussels, Belgium, where I live and work. First cultural and public options in 1949.”⁵¹ The original typescript of the text contains an additional sentence that was crossed out by the artist: “Surrealist publications: *La cause est entendue*, *Le Ciel Bleu*, etc.”⁵² A few years later, in 1974, he distanced himself once again from the Surrealist movement by writing that he wanted “nothing to do” with the Surrealist “mindset”.⁵³ As the Surrealist movement was waning, and as Broodthaers's career as a visual artist was flour-

45. ANON., “Boeken onder de hamer”, in *De Nieuwe Gids*, 6 April 1950, 2; registration form of Marcel Broodthaers at the *Université libre de Bruxelles*, 1941–1953. He studied chemistry and mathematics but never graduated.

46. In 1949, Nougé edited two short poems by Broodthaers, titled “Souvenir d’Espagne” and “Toujours l’Espagne”. They were published posthumously in YVES BOSSUT *et al.*, *La partie fondue de l’iceberg*, Bruxelles, 1979, 52–54. A couple of years later, in 1953, Broodthaers wrote two poems, including one also titled “Souvenir d’Espagne”, for Paul Bourgoignie and his wife Suzanne (who was also a member of the Communist Party) as a New Year’s gift. The original manuscripts are published in GLORIA MOURE (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers. Collected Writings*, Barcelona, 2021, 42–47.

47. See, for example, the booklet published in his honour by his Surrealist friends: *Un grand peintre inconnu: Armand Permantier. Témoignages de Paul Colinet, Maurice Cremonesi, Edmond Kinds, René Magritte, Marcel Piquieray, Louis Scutenaire et Robert Willems*, Bruxelles, 1952. Broodthaers and his wife temporarily lived with Permantier at the end of the 1940s. JACQUES VAN LENNEP, “Armand Permantier”, in *Irène, Scut, Magritte and C°* (exhibition cat.), Bruxelles, 1996, pp. 395–397; ROBERT WILLEMS, *Conversation avec Ben Durant*, Gerpinnes, p. 44.

48. SERGE VANDERCAM, “La Conversation de Bierges.” *Conversation avec Joseph Noiret*, Gerpinnes, 1992, 17–18; ÉVELYNE HUYTEBROECK, “Joseph Noiret ou l’évidence Phantomas”, in *Joseph Noiret et l’écriture: CoBrA, Phantomas et après...* (exhibition cat.), Iltre, 2015, 23.

49. MARCEL MARIËN, *L’Activité surréaliste en Belgique*, 344.

50. STEVEN HARRIS, “The End of Surrealism in Belgium”, in PATRICIA ALLMER & HILDE VAN GELDER (ed.), *Collective Inventions: Surrealism in Belgium*, Leuven, 2007, 58, 61.

51. “Je suis né le 28-1-24 à Bruxelles, Belgique, où je vis et travaille. Premières options culturelles et publiques en 1949.” MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “Biographie”, in *Marcel Broodthaers* (exhibition cat.), Bruxelles, 1970, 1. The choice of the year 1949 as the year of his “first cultural and public options” seems to be an arbitrary one, as Broodthaers didn’t publish anything that year, nor did he participate in any significant artistic event.

52. “Publications surréalistes: *La cause est entendue*, *Le Ciel Bleu*, etc.” MARCEL BROODTHAERS, letter to Fernand Spillemaeckers, 17 March 1970 (AACB, *Réserve précieuse Marcel Broodthaers*, inv. 100.464).

53. “J’espère n’avoir rien de cet état d’esprit.” MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “Dix mille francs de récompense. Une interview d’Irmeline Lebeer”, 64.



Armand Permantier, *Portrait de Marcel Broodthaers* (ca. 1940s). Private collection. Source: Group 2 Gallery, Brussels.

ishing on the European art scene, he erased all references to his previous Surrealist publications and activities.

IV. A 'Student' of the Arts: Broodthaers in Mid-1950s Brussels

In 1954, Marcel Broodthaers began publishing poems again in *Phantomas*. This new journal, founded during a second boom of literary journals in the 1950s, clearly illustrates the emerging "post-surrealist" artistic landscape described by Harris. *Phantomas* brought together poets and artists from all horizons: Surrealists, Surrealist Revolutionaries, CoBrA artists, and many others. Consequently, the journal was difficult to define. In 1961, a manifesto written by its founders declared that "*Phantomas* is neither 'pataphysical [sic], nor Dadaist, nor Surrealist, nor Post-Surrealist, nor Para-Surrealist", while the poet and architect Pierre Puttemans (1933-2013) later described it as "oecumenical".⁵⁴

Phantomas was a crucial turning point in Broodthaers's career. His inclusion in the journal, after a long period without any publications, was probably due to his longstanding friendships with *Phantomas*'s three cofounders, who were all poets: Théodore Koenig, Joseph Noiret and Marcel Havrenne (1912-1957), the latter of whom also participated in *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* activities. It is also undeniable that the journal, which regularly invited artists to illustrate its issues, helped spark Broodthaers's interest in the visual arts. This new interest in the arts, which emerged almost ten years before Broodthaers started cre-

ating artworks, coincided with his frequenting of the dynamic *Saint-Jean* neighbourhood and his employment at the most innovative cultural institution of the city: the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* (Centre for Fine Arts, now BOZAR).

The *Saint-Jean* neighbourhood, in the city centre of Brussels, was famous during the 1950s for its many bookshops and art galleries. The most renowned address was the *Galerie Saint-Laurent*, a second-hand bookshop and art gallery owned by Philémon-Édouard Toussaint (1919-?). During the gallery's 22 years of existence, Toussaint organised more than 300 exhibitions of paintings, drawings, objects, and engravings. The gallery was known for discovering young artists and for its ambitious exhibition program, which included the first retrospective exhibition on Belgian abstract art in 1954. Théodore Koenig described it as "the most efficient avant-garde art gallery in Brussels".⁵⁵ The *Galerie Saint-Laurent* was an important meeting point for artists and poets, such as Broodthaers, and was frequented by many employees of the nearby *Palais des Beaux-Arts*.⁵⁶

The *Saint-Jean* neighbourhood was also famous for its numerous artist and literary cafés. Two of them, *Le Petit Rouge* and *Café Saint-Jean*, were located right next to each other on the *place Saint-Jean*. Magritte once described the former as "a kind of *Deux Magots* in Brussels", in reference to the famous café in Paris.⁵⁷ The artist Walter Swennen (1946-2025), who met Broodthaers in 1965, described the café as the stronghold of the "old Brussels Surrealists", whom he also called "Broodthaers's godfathers".⁵⁸ (The most famous Surrealist café in Brussels, *La Fleur en papier doré*, was

54. "Phantomas n'est ni 'pataphysique [sic], ni dadaïste, ni surréaliste, ni post-surréaliste, ni para-surréaliste". THÉODORE KOENIG et al., "Manifeste en service commandé", in *Phantomas*, 24, 1961, n.p.; PIERRE PUTTEMANS, "Paul Bourgoignie, le surréalisme, le Daily Bul et Phantomas", in *Textyles. Revue des lettres belges de langue française*, 8, 1991, 199.

55. "la gellerie [sic] d'avant garde [sic] la plus efficiente [sic] de Bruxelles". THÉODORE KOENIG, letter to Carlo Nangeroni, 25 January 1966 (AML, *Fonds Phantomas – Théodore Koenig*, ML 04861/126).

56. JACQUES LACOMBLEZ quoted in JACQUES LACOMBLEZ & MARC RENWART, "Trop peu dire pour un vécu", in *Phases Belgesques. Courant continu* (exhibition cat.), Mons, 1990, 12-13; THÉODORE KOENIG, *Histoire de la peinture chez Phantomas*, 15.

57. "sorte de *Deux Magots* de Bruxelles". RENÉ MAGRITTE, letter to André Bosmans, 5 December 1963, in RENÉ MAGRITTE, *Lettres à André Bosmans 1958-1967*, Paris, 1990, 327-328.

58. "vieux surréalistes bruxellois [...] les parrains de Broodthaers." Interview with WALTER SWENNEN, 9 July 2018.



Georges Thiry, Galerie Saint-Laurent (ca. 1960s). © Guy Jungblut/Yellow Now – coll. AML 00307/d11.

located only a few minutes' walk from the place *Saint-Jean*.) *Le Petit Rouge* and *Café Saint-Jean* were located across the street from the *Galerie Saint-Laurent* and were particularly crowded on the nights of the gallery's vernissages. Another important meeting point for artists and poets of the neighbourhood was the *Restaurant Perraudin* on *rue Saint-Jean*. The restaurant, owned by Paul Perraudin (1901–1963) and his wife Augusta Bretin (1903–?), was known for hosting the vernissage dinners of the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* and offering meals to artists in exchange for artworks.⁵⁹ The dinner parties at *Perraudin* and the long evenings at *Le Petit Rouge* and *Café Saint-Jean* were immortalised by the photographer Georges Thiry (1903–1994). His small black-and-white photographs perfectly illustrate the new friendships and networks that emerged in mid-1950s Brussels.

Aside from these rich but informal encounters with poets and artists in the *Saint-Jean* neighbourhood, Broodthaers managed to find employment at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*. Founded in 1928, the *Palais* soon became the most important exhibition hall for modern and contemporary art in Belgium. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the institution exhibited major Belgian and international artists such as Alexander Calder (1898–1976), Paul Van Hoeydonck (1925–2025), Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Mig Quinet (1906–2001), and Pol Mara (1920–1998). Besides exhibitions, the *Palais* also organised popular theatre and music shows and hosted the Belgian film museum and library. The institution's activities flourished in the postwar years under the leadership of its general director, Pierre Janlet (1900–1991), and the director of exhibitions, Robert Giron (1897–1967).⁶⁰ Among their

achievements were the creation of two prestigious awards for young artists living in Belgium (the *Prix Jeune Peinture Belge* and the *Prix Jeune Sculpture Belge*, known today as the Belgian Art Prize), and the foundation of an avant-garde commercial art gallery inside the *Palais*, *Galerie Aujourd'hui*, led by Janlet. They also published a weekly journal, *Les Beaux-Arts*, which became the reference for all cultural news in Belgium. Finally, the *Palais'* different boards and committees were filled with private art collectors, who actively participated in the institution's activities and development. At a time when Belgium had no museums for contemporary art, private collectors acted as the main tastemakers on the art market.⁶¹ They often bought works exhibited at the *Palais* and, conversely, loaned out their own collections for exhibitions at the institution.⁶² In short, the *Palais* was a microcosm of the art world and the place to be for all art and culture aficionados.

Broodthaers began working at the *Palais* around 1956. It is highly probable that his employment there resulted from his contacts with employees of the institution whom he met at the *Palais* or in the *Saint-Jean* neighbourhood. One of these contacts was Berthe Moulart (1901–?), who oversaw the room and gallery bookings at the *Palais*. She is described by several of Broodthaers's friends as a "good fairy" who helped him get work, as he struggled to live off his poetry.⁶³ (Broodthaers also worked odd jobs outside the cultural field during this time; for example, he was hired as a labourer on the construction site of the 1958 World Fair.)⁶⁴ The precise nature of Broodthaers's jobs at the *Palais* is not known. According to his friends' testimonies, he worked as an assistant

59. BERNARD GIRON quoted in PIERRE GHÈNE, *Inédits de René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Marcel Broodthaers, Maurice Béjart, E.L.T. Mesens, Pierre Alechinsky et d'autres... Entretiens avec Bernard Giron*, Nivelles, 2002, 146; interview with PAUL-DAVID PERRAUDIN, 25 May 2018.

60. FRANCINE-CLAIRE LEGRAND, "Regard personnel sur un choix historique", in *40 ans de Jeune Peinture Belge 1950-90. Regard contemporain sur un choix historique. Hommage Karel Geirlandt. 40 jaar jonge Belgische schilderkunst 1950-90. Een actuele visie op een historische keuze. Hommage Karel Geirlandt* (exhibition cat.), Bruxelles, 1990, 18.

61. KAREL J. GEIRLANDT, "Il y a vingt ans", in KAREL J. GEIRLANDT (ed.), *L'art en Belgique depuis 1945* [1983], Anvers, 2001, 39, 46–48.

62. VIRGINIE DEVILLEZ & FLORENCE HESPEL, "Émile, Ernst, Tony & Co: Hedendaagse kunst in België, een netwerk (1945–1960)", in JAN DEBBAUT (ed.), *Collectie Tony Herbert* (exhibition cat.), Deurle, 2011, 24.

63. See for example THÉODORE KOENIG, *Histoire de la peinture chez Phantomas*, 204.

64. MICHAEL COMPTON, "In Praise of the Subject", 18.



*Georges Thiry, Marcel Broodthaers (right) and the artist Jean Raine (1927-1986) in a Brussels bar (ca. 1960s).
© Guy Jungblut/Yellow Now – coll. AML 00307/d23/001.*

for the popular documentary film cycle *Exploration du monde*; helped with the organisation of the warehouse and the installation of art shows; and, more importantly, worked as a tour guide and lecturer during art exhibitions.⁶⁵ Broodthaers, who had no academic or artistic training, specialised in giving poetic commentary on the exhibited artworks. His work was later praised by Bernard Giron (1935–2011), the son of Robert Giron, who also worked at the *Palais* and who described his tours as “extraordinary poetic elucubrations”.⁶⁶

Broodthaers's employment at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* during the institution's heyday marked an important turning point in his career. His excellent relationships with the *Palais'* administrators and his various jobs gave him unprecedented access to study the new developments in art, and to analyse the inner workings of the art world. His proximity to the art world led art critic Jacques Meuris (1923–1993), who met Broodthaers around that time, to describe him as a member of the “marginal Brussels establishment”, someone who was “introduced into the artistic milieu without actually being a part of it”.⁶⁷ In short, Broodthaers continued to grow his networks, which no longer only included poets and writers but also, increasingly, artists, art dealers, and key institutional figures of the Brussels art world.

V. Words and Images: Broodthaers's First Forays into the Visual Arts

Broodthaers's gradual inclusion in the art world is clearly visible in the creative projects he set up and contributed to from the second half of the 1950s onwards. While he remained, first and foremost, a poet, his work progressively incorporated images, thus creating a dialogue between words and images – a recurring theme in his later artistic work too.

After years of occasionally publishing in journals, Broodthaers published his first poetry volume, *Mon livre d'ogre*, in 1957. In total, he published four poetry volumes between 1957 and 1964. The poems in these books are often very short and contain, just like his earlier poems, Surrealist and Symbolist undertones. Recurring themes include the night, the passage of time, the forest, and children's tales. Another recurring theme is the animal world, especially in his third volume, *La Bête noire* (1961). Some of these animals, such as the parrot, the mussel, the eagle, the camel, and the cat would appear frequently in Broodthaers's later visual work, such as the *Musée d'Art moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968–1972). Additionally, in Broodthaers's poems, animals have human emotions and often talk, reminding the reader of La Fontaine's fables. Another characteristic of his poetry volumes is that they are all illustrated. His first volume, *Mon livre d'ogre*, contains an abstract frontispiece by his long-time friend Serge Vandercam, who had recently won the *Prix Jeune Peinture Belge* at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*. By adding a work by Vandercam to his poetry volume, Broodthaers associated himself with the winner of the most prestigious artistic award of his time. The following book, *Minuit* (1960) was again illustrated by Vandercam, while *La Bête noire* was illustrated with black and white prints by the young art student Jan Sanders (1936–2016). Broodthaers met Sanders at the *Palais* through Claude Vermeylein (1926–?), a lawyer who assisted Janlet in his *Galerie Aujourd'hui*, and the two young men would regularly meet up at the *Café Saint-Jean*.⁶⁸ Broodthaers's last volume, *Pense-Bête* (1964), was published around the same time that he started exhibiting his artworks. The illustrations reflect this shift to the visual arts, as the volume is illustrated with squares of coloured paper that partially (or even totally) cover the poems. This idea resurfaced in 1969, when Broodthaers covered up the words of

65. JACQUES MEURIS quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, “Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers. 28.1.1924–28.1.1976”, in *+0*, 47, 1987, 21; SERGE CREUZ, *Les Peintres de mon chemin*, 174; ANDRÉ JOCOU, “Marcel Broodthaers est mort”, in *Notre Temps*, 69, 1976, 15.

66. “des élucubrations poétiques extraordinaires”. BERNARD GIRON quoted in PIERRE GHÉNE, *Inédits de René Magritte*, 35.

67. “L'establishment marginal bruxellois [...] il semblait introduit dans les milieux artistiques sans en faire partie à proprement parler.” JACQUES MEURIS quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, “Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers”, 21.

68. MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, *Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976)*, ABC.1000.

Mallarmé's poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. The title of the resulting work, *Un Coup de dés. Image* (1969), emphasised the change in status of the poem, from text to image.

Broodthaers's poetry volumes are highly sought after by art collectors today. At the time of their publication, however, they were completely ignored by literary critics and journals, leaving Broodthaers to sell his volumes to friends, as well as visitors and collectors of the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*.⁶⁹ The personal inscriptions in his volumes clearly indicate that his professional and artistic networks were expanding. He inscribed several copies to the tailor and art collector Gustave Van Geluwe (1883-1962), whose house in Brussels was a hub for international artists and art collectors.⁷⁰ Van Geluwe often allowed struggling artists to pay for his tailoring services with artworks – or, in the case of Broodthaers who was once seen leaving Van Geluwe's shop with a new pair of trousers under his arm, with poems.⁷¹ Other new friends who received inscribed poetry volumes were Pierre Janlet, the director of the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*, and the architect Constantin Brodzki (1924-2021), Berthe Moulaert's son, who became a great friend of Broodthaers.⁷² Jacques Ledoux (1921-1988), the founder and director of the Belgian film museum and library (known today as CINEMATEK) which is to this day housed in the *Palais*, also received an inscribed volume, a sign of Broodthaers's connections with the film world.⁷³

The *Palais des Beaux-Arts* remained an important anchor for Broodthaers. In the autumn of 1956, he was enthralled by a retrospective exhibition of the German Dada artist Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948).

Schwitters's artworks, made with found objects, inspired him to create his first film, titled *La Clef de l'horloge* (*Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters*) (1957), which premiered at the *Festival du film expérimental* during the 1958 World's Fair. Broodthaers was given permission to access the exhibition rooms at night and, with the help of a couple of *Palais* employees, filmed Schwitters's artworks in the darkened rooms with a flashlight.⁷⁴ The resulting film, which runs for about 8 minutes, is an almost still, black and white movie, in which movement mostly comes from the camera or the moving flashlight. Among the objects that appear on screen are a rope, a chain, and a wheel that is first motionless, then starts moving. This shift from immobility to motion echoes Broodthaers's earlier prose poem, "Projet pour un film", in which an "immobile landscape" is set in motion by a fly. In the second half of the film, certain images reappear, but in negative. The film is accompanied by a soundtrack made of everyday noises (a ticking clock, the sound of clanking saucepans) and Broodthaers's voice reading a poetic commentary, interrupted by the voice of a woman telling him that dinner is ready. By creating a film that is essentially motionless and that experiments with the medium of film (e.g. the negative images), Broodthaers's first foray into film was a subversive one that, as Bruce Jenkins argues, can be interpreted as a first form of institutional critique.⁷⁵ This experimental play with the essence of cinema is also found, years later, in his movie *Une seconde d'éternité* (*d'après une idée de Charles Baudelaire*) (1970). This film, which was once again inspired by Baudelaire, contains 24 images and lasts exactly one second, the minimum running time for a film.

69. CONSTANTIN BRODZKI, GEORGES THIRY quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, "Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers", 21; BERNARD GIRON quoted in PIERRE GHÉNE, *Inédits de René Magritte*, 67.

70. 78 oeuvres. *Collection Gustave Van Geluwe. 78 werken. Collectie Gustave Van Geluwe* (auction cat.), Bruxelles, 2015, 10-12.

71. CHARLOTTE VERHEYDEN, "Verzameling Gustave Van Geluwe", in TANGUY EECKHOUT et al., *Maisons d'art moderne. Privéverzamelingen in België. Private Collections in Belgium 1945-1980*, Gent, 2020, 105-114; HUBERT PEETERS quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, "Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers", 22.

72. Two volumes dedicated to Pierre Janlet and Constantin Brodzki are reproduced in *De la collection Marie-Puck Broodthaers* (auction cat.), Paris, 2023, 23-24.

73. *Marcel Broodthaers. Dichter und Künstler. Die Sammlung Schmidt* (exhibition cat.), Eindhoven-Bremen, 2015, 50.

74. MANUEL J. BORJA-VILLET & MICHAEL COMPTON, *Marcel Broodthaers. Cinéma*, 20.

75. BRUCE JENKINS, "René and Marcel at the Movies. Preliminary Remarks", in STEVEN JACOBS & RAF WOLLAERT (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers and Film. A Second of Eternity*, Leuven, 2024, 67.

The *Palais des Beaux-Arts* helped to expand Broodthaers's cultural horizons, including into photography. In 1956, he probably visited the record-breaking photography exhibition *The Family of Man*.⁷⁶ This international exhibition, curated by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, reflected the growing trend of humanist photography by showing scenes of daily life from around the world. A couple of months later, in early 1957, Broodthaers met the photographer Julien Coulommier (1922–2014) at Claude Vermeyleyn's house.⁷⁷ When they met, Coulommier was already a renowned photographer and the only Belgian photographer to have participated in Otto Steinert's landmark exhibition *Subjektive Fotografie 2* in Saarbrücken (1954–1955). He was an enthusiastic proponent of subjective photography, creating photographs that sometimes bordered on abstraction. He quickly became Broodthaers's mentor in the field of photography. The novice photographer began by photographing his immediate surroundings: people wandering the streets of Brussels, children playing. His burgeoning photographic style was closer to the documentary and humanist traditions (as seen in *The Family of Man*, or in the photographs of Brassai and Henri Cartier-Bresson) than to Coulommier's more experimental approach. He documented, for example, various shows and activities taking place at the 1958 World's Fair. Some of these photographs were reproduced in leaflets published by the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* to promote its cultural program during the fair.⁷⁸ These leaflets are further proof that Broodthaers could count on his robust networks at the *Palais* to help him circulate his work.

Despite their radically different approaches to photography, Coulommier and Broodthaers devel-

oped a project for a joint publication titled *Statues de Bruxelles*. Coulommier has described their collaboration as “ideal” and “somewhat anarchist”: Broodthaers wandered the streets of Brussels in search of sculptures that inspired him to write poetry, then had Coulommier photograph them, often from a low or distorted angle.⁷⁹ The poems and the photos of the sculptures that inspired them were then to appear side by side. The project was ultimately abandoned as the artists couldn't find a publisher for their book, which was only published after Broodthaers's death in 1987.⁸⁰

Broodthaers continued to explore the combination of words and images in the occasional articles he wrote for weekly journals, which were often accompanied by his own photographs. For example, he used his photographs of the World's Fair construction site as illustrations for two articles published in the weekly *Le Patriote illustré*, in which he reflects on his work as a labourer and on the significance of the World's Fair.⁸¹ In his (mostly poetic) articles, Broodthaers regularly refers to the accompanying photographs to create a dialogue between text and image. From 1961 onwards, he published articles about his trips to London and Paris in the *Palais des Beaux-Arts'* weekly journal *Les Beaux-Arts*. Once again, they were illustrated by his photographs. His frequent trips to London, where his girlfriend (and future wife) Maria Gilissen (b. 1938) temporarily resided, were the subject of a series of articles titled “Un poète en voyage.... à Londres”. The articles focus on his visits to cultural institutions and art galleries such as the Tate Gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Madam Tussaud's, and the art galleries on Bond Street. They perfectly illustrate Broodthaers's growing interest in the visual arts.

76. His wife has said that he greatly appreciated the exhibition catalogue. MARIA GILISSEN, “Ombre/Lumière”, in MARIA GILISSEN & SUSANNE LANGE, *Marcel Broodthaers. Texte et photos* (exhibition cat.), Cologne, 2003, 391.

77. JULIEN COULOMMIER quoted in MARIE-PASCALE GILDEMYN, “Hommage à Marcel Broodthaers”, 34.

78. A couple of these leaflets are reproduced in MARIA GILISSEN & SUSANNE LANGE, *Marcel Broodthaers. Texte et photos*, 76–79.

79. JULIEN COULOMMIER, *Conversation avec/met Ludo Bekkers*, Gerpinnes, 2004, 26; JULIEN COULOMMIER quoted in WILLEM ELIAS & JOHAN SWINNEN, *Fotografie in dialoog. Filosofie van de fotografie: van Walter Benjamin tot Roland Barthes. Fotografie in België: inleiding en interviews*, Kortrijk, 1999, 108.

80. MARCEL BROODTHAERS & JULIEN COULOMMIER, *Statues de Bruxelles*, Ixelles, 1987.

81. MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “Les Confessions du siècle”, in *Le Patriote illustré*, 73/50, 1957, 13–15; MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “Un autre monde”, in *Le Patriote illustré*, 74/10, 1958, 29.

He even describes himself in one of the articles as a “character who haunts artistic circles”.⁸² The articles also show his budding awareness of the visibility and sociability offered by the art world, which stood in stark contrast to the loneliness he often felt as a poet.⁸³

VI. “I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life”

It was also in *Les Beaux-Arts* that Broodthaers published an article on two new emerging art movements that were spreading in Europe in the early 1960s: Pop Art and *Nouveau Réalisme*. After more than a decade in which abstract art dominated the European artistic scene (including on the walls of the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* and the *Galerie Saint-Laurent*), the early 1960s signalled a return to both figurative and object-based art. A series of factors can help explain this shift in the European context. The Paris art market and the abstract artists of the *École de Paris*, which had set the tone in the immediate postwar years, were severely hit by the 1962 economic crisis, which saw American collectors falling back on the American art market.⁸⁴ At the same time, American art dealers, such as the Romanian-born Ileana Sonnabend (1914-2007), were introducing American artists to Europe. In her Paris gallery founded in 1961, Sonnabend showed artists such as Andy Warhol (1928-1987), Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) and James Rosenquist (1933-2017). More and more American artists were participating in exhibitions in Europe, including the newly founded *Documenta* exhibitions. In 1964, the consecration of Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) at the Venice

Biennial heralded the end of Paris's leadership position on the European art market. The city was supplanted by both the United States and northern European countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, West Germany and Switzerland, where new art galleries, *Kunsthalle* and art fairs attracted international artists and art collectors.⁸⁵ In Belgium, Pop Art and *Nouveau Réalisme* were championed in the *Forum* exhibitions organised in Ghent by the lawyer, art collector and future co-founder of the country's first museum of contemporary art, Karel Geirlandt (1919-1989), and in exhibitions at the *Galerie Aujourd'hui* in the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*, which early on exhibited artists such as Jim Dine (b. 1935) and Arman (1928-2005). However, Belgium stood out among the other northern European countries: unlike their Dutch or German counterparts, Belgian museums were not yet buying contemporary art. Pop Art and *Nouveau Réalisme* entered Belgium through private collections, thus reinforcing the art collector's role as tastemaker in the Belgian art world. Or as Geirlandt ironically put it: “in Holland you have museums, in Belgium you have [private] collections.”⁸⁶

Broodthaers was well aware of the shift occurring in the European art world. The article he published on this subject in *Les Beaux-Arts* in the autumn of 1963 was specifically dedicated to a George Segal (1934-2021) exhibition at the *Galerie Sonnabend* in Paris. Many Belgian artists, collectors and curators visited the exhibition, which has been described as a turning point for the introduction of Pop Art in Belgium.⁸⁷ In his review of the exhibition titled “Gare au défi! Le Pop Art, Jim Dine et l'influence de René Magritte”, Brood-

82. “ce personnage qui hante les milieux artistiques.” MARCEL BROODTHAERS, “Un poète en voyage... à Londres”, in *Les Beaux-Arts*, 931, 1961, 12.

83. DENIS LAOUREUX, “Marcel Broodthaers et (la critique de) la critique d'art”, in STEFAN CLAPPAERT & HANS VANDEVOORDE (ed.), *Creative kunstkritiek. Critique d'art créative 1945-1985*, Gent, 2022, 163. Broodthaers later talked about his loneliness as a poet in an interview with Sélim Sasson on the TV program *Le Monde des formes*, RTB, 5 May 1969.

84. JULIE VERLAINE, *Les galeries d'art contemporain à Paris. Une histoire culturelle du marché de l'art. 1944-1970*, Paris, 2012, 421-425.

85. *Idem*, 465, 487.

86. “en Hollande il y a des musées, en Belgique des collections.” KAREL J. GEIRLANDT, “La Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts a cinquante ans”, in KAREL J. GEIRLANDT & ERNST GOLDSCHMIDT (ed.), *Un demi-siècle d'expositions au Palais des Beaux-Arts*, Bruxelles, 1981, 11.

87. CARL JACOBS, *Pop Art in Belgium! Een/un coup de foudre* (exhibition cat.), Bruxelles, 2015-2016, 25-26.

thaers expresses his scepticism towards Segal's sculptures, which he describes as "common casts of human beings", and towards Pop Art in general, describing it as "an affront to harmony and good taste".⁸⁸ In the same article, he brings up the influence of René Magritte's paintings on American Pop artists. Magritte was indeed quickly embraced by some critics as the "Father of Pop Art", much to the annoyance of the painter himself.⁸⁹ Broodthaers argues that the main difference between the works of Magritte and Pop artists lies in the fact that the latter have failed to pick up on the poetic tenor of Magritte's work. His analysis pleased Magritte, who in a letter to a friend described Broodthaers's article as "very appropriate".⁹⁰

This initial scepticism notwithstanding, Segal's exhibition clearly set Broodthaers's creative juices flowing. According to his second wife, Maria Gilissen, he believed that he could match Segal, or even better him, and immediately set to work.⁹¹ By the end of November 1963, Broodthaers, at 39 years old, started collecting materials to create his first assemblages of found objects, which included *Paternité, maternité, enfance* (1963) and *Huître malade d'une perle* (1963–1968).⁹² The presence of plaster in these first works clearly indicates the influence of Segal's work on the debuting artist.

The advent of Pop Art and *Nouveau Réalisme* came at a particularly auspicious time for Broodthaers. As mentioned above, he had no artistic training and no specific talent as a painter or sculptor. But the general paradigm shift towards object-based art, and

more specifically the assemblage of found objects, removed the requirement of formal artistic training and allowed Broodthaers to start creating artworks straightaway. His career change was facilitated by the years he had spent studying the latest art movements up close, as he himself acknowledged in a text published in *Phantomas* in 1965: "I often meditated in art exhibitions. [...] After about ten years in this comfortable position, I finally became an amateur. [...] then I became aware of the artistic training I had undergone during my prolonged pauses in front of paintings and sculptures."⁹³ It is therefore hardly surprising that, after years of observing and commenting on contemporary art, his first objects blended in perfectly with other Pop and *Nouveau Réalisme* objects exhibited at the time. He admitted as much in a 1965 interview with the artist and poet Marcel van Maele (1931–2009), describing Pop Art as "a loophole through which the poet tries to enter" the art world.⁹⁴

A couple of months after creating his first objects, Broodthaers presented a selection of his artworks to the *Prix Jeune Sculpture Belge*, organised by the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*. To enter the competition, artists had to register between December 1963 and mid-January 1964.⁹⁵ These deadlines are of special interest, since Broodthaers started creating his artworks at the end of November 1963, just a few days before the start of registration. Additionally, the competition was reserved for artists who were under the age of 40 at the time of registration. It was therefore Broodthaers's first and only chance to submit artworks for this important prize,

88. "vulgaires moulages d'êtres humains [...] défi à l'harmonie et au bon goût." MARCEL BROODTHAERS, "Gare au Défi! Le Pop Art, Jim Dine et l'influence de René Magritte", in *Les Beaux-Arts*, 1029, 1963, 9.

89. OTTO HAHN, "Le père du Pop Art", in *L'Express*, 702, 1964, 59; RENÉ MAGRITTE, "Déclaration de René Magritte lors d'une interview de la télévision belge", in *Rhétorique*, 12, 1964, n.p.

90. "très convenable". RENÉ MAGRITTE, letter to André Bosmans, 5 December 1963, in RENÉ MAGRITTE, *Lettres à André Bosmans*, 327.

91. MARIA GILISSEN in an interview with Freddy De Vree for the radio program *In Memoriam* (BRT, 1976) quoted in *Marcel Broodthaers. Soleil politique*, 31.

92. MARIA GILISSEN BROODTHAERS, "A Conversation", 10.

93. "Souvent je méditais dans les expositions d'Art. [...] Au bout d'une dizaine d'années dans cette situation confortable, je me transformais en amateur, enfin. [...] Je pris alors conscience de la formation artistique que j'avais subie durant mes stations prolongées devant tableaux et sculptures." MARCEL BROODTHAERS, "Comme du beurre dans un sandwich", in *Phantomas*, 51–61, 1965, 295.

94. "de pop is voor de dichter een achterdeurtje waarlangs hij poogt binnen te komen." MARCEL BROODTHAERS quoted in MARCEL VAN MAELE, "Mosselen: op en top pop", in *Kunst van Nu*, s.n. (December), 1965, n.p.

95. *Prix "Jeune Peinture Belge" 1963. Règlement* (APBA, JPB JBS 1960–1969, s.n.).

as he was turning 40 on 28 January 1964. These factors, combined with the impact of Segal's exhibition, might help to explain Broodthaers's apparently sudden turn towards the visual arts.

One of the artworks he submitted – an assemblage titled *Monument public n° 4* (1963) made of cardboard boxes, plastic objects, cutlery, and plaster – received an honorary mention from the jury, which included *Palais* stalwarts (and friends of Broodthaers) such as Robert Giron, his son Bernard Giron, and Pierre Janlet, as well as future supporters and collectors of his work, including the banker and collector Bénédict Goldschmidt (1905–1972) and the art critic Léon-Louis Sosset (1913–1994).⁹⁶ According to Bernard Giron, *Monument public n° 4* received an honorary mention thanks to Pierre Janlet's intercession during the deliberations.⁹⁷ This honorary mention allowed him to participate in the group exhibition of the prize laureates at the *Palais* in February 1964. Broodthaers thus exhibited his work for the first time at one of the Belgian art world's most prestigious artistic events.

While Broodthaers was taking his first steps as an artist, he published his last poetry volume, *Pense-Bête*, a few days before he turned 40. As mentioned, he illustrated this volume by covering up certain parts of it with pieces of glossy, coloured paper. At an unspecified point between the publication of the volume, on 25 January 1964, and the beginning of April, Broodthaers seized a pack of unsold copies of the volume and cast them in plaster, creating a new sculpture-object also titled *Pense-Bête* (1964). The object, which is often mistakenly considered his first artwork, was exhib-

ited, along with other objects cast in plaster, at his first solo show at the *Galerie Saint-Laurent* in April 1964 – another important exhibition space that Broodthaers knew very well. It is for this exhibition that he wrote the now infamous invitation card that starts with the phrases “I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life. For some time I have been good for nothing. I am forty years old... Finally the idea of inventing something insincere crossed my mind and I set to work straightaway.”⁹⁸ This cynical, humoristic text might give the impression that Broodthaers decided to abandon poetry for the more lucrative visual arts, but, as mentioned before, this was not the case. By sealing his poetry into an object, Broodthaers quite literally put it at the heart of his artistic endeavours. As the art critic and friend of Broodthaers, Jean Dypréau (1917–1986), wrote in a review of the exhibition: “Marcel BROOTHAERS [sic] has made a happy transition from the poetry of words to the poetry of objects.”⁹⁹

VII. Conclusion

This overview of Broodthaers's main artistic and literary projects from 1945 to 1963 clearly shows that the poet's shift towards the visual arts was not a sudden event but had, on the contrary, been years in the making.

Most of the recurring themes in Broodthaers's artworks were already present in his early writings. His passion for French literature, and more specifically the poets La Fontaine, Mallarmé and Baudelaire, appears as a golden thread linking his poetic writings and his artistic works. This is especially

96. *Idem*.

97. BERNARD GIRON quoted in PIERRE GHÈNE, *Inédits de René Magritte*, 67.

98. “Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie. Cela fait un moment déjà que je ne suis bon à rien. Je suis âgé de quarante ans... L'idée enfin d'inventer quelque chose d'insincère me traversa l'esprit et je me mis aussitôt au travail.” MARCEL BROODTHAERS, invitation card for his exhibition at *Galerie Saint-Laurent*, 1964. Translated by RAFAEL GARCÍA & FRANCESCA WILMOTT, “Objects”, in MANUEL J. BORJA-VILLEL & CHRISTOPHE CHÉRIX (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers. A Retrospective*, 76.

99. “Marcel BROOTHAERS [sic] a opéré un heureux transfert de la poésie des mots à la poésie des objets.” JEAN DYPREAU, “Expositions. Belgique”, in *Quadrum. Revue Internationale d'Art Moderne*, 16, 1964, 162. This subject was later developed by researchers, including BERNARD MARCADÉ, “Marcel Broodthaers... la continuation de la poésie par d'autres moyens”, in *Artstudio*, special issue *L'Art et les mots*, 15, 1989, 68–83; DENIS LAOUREUX, “Broodthaers et le moule des mots”.

the case from 1967 onwards, when Broodthaers began to add references to literature and poetry in his assemblages and films. Another theme that runs through both careers is Broodthaers's love of animals. Several animals (including the mussel and the eagle) form the heart of the artist's bestiary.

The most important theme linking Broodthaers's literary and artistic careers, however, is his passion for connecting words and images. This subject was present in the artist's works long before his "literary turn" in 1967. As demonstrated in this article, from the mid-1950s onwards, Broodthaers wove text and images together in his many press articles, in his projects with the photographer Julien Coulommier, and in his four published volumes of poetry. These experiments in combining words and images clearly represent a missing link (or intermediate stage) between Broodthaers's literary creations and his later practice in the visual arts.

Broodthaers's interest in the visual arts was fostered by a particularly dynamic artistic scene in his home city of Brussels. As his old Surrealist and Communist literary circles faded away and restructured themselves, he was able to form new creative relationships. His first experiments in visual art coincided with the publication of his poetry in the journal *Phantomas*, his discovery of the bookshops and galleries of the lively *Saint-*

Jean neighbourhood and, crucially, his employment at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*. He became a keen observer of the art world and saw first-hand how abstract art was supplanted by new forms of figurative, object-based art.

Broodthaers's networks kept growing as he met artists, art collectors, and art dealers, such as Philémon-Édouard Toussaint. More importantly, he managed to befriend key institutional figures at the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*, such as Robert Giron and his son Bernard Giron, Pierre Janlet, and Claude Vermeylen. These relationships would soon prove invaluable to the launch of his artistic career. Janlet's endorsement during the jury deliberations of the *Prix Jeune Sculpture Belge* enabled Broodthaers to participate in one of the most important cultural events of the Brussels and, more broadly, Belgian art scene. This exhibition established Broodthaers as an artist backed by the country's most important institution for contemporary art. His first solo exhibition, which took place immediately afterwards at one of the most renowned art galleries in the city, further helped to establish him as a promising new artist. In the following years, his pivot to the visual arts would take him further than any of his poems ever could have – from the margins of the Brussels Surrealist group to the most important museum collections in the Western world.

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Abbreviations

AACB: Archives de l'Art contemporain en Belgique

AML: Archives et Musée de la Littérature

APBA: Archives du Palais des Beaux-Arts

AULB: Archives de l'Université libre de Bruxelles