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Magie. Art et Politique

On the nowtime of a book by Marcel Broodthaers published in 1973

Taking hold of the nowtimeⁱ of a past time, by conjuring up a particular memory, in a moment of danger for instance--Walter Benjamin called it a “tiger’s leap into the past”ⁱⁱ – means picking up a scent that allows consciousness and, in the context of art, a consciousness of perception to form that could be of benefit to art today. I should therefore like once againⁱⁱⁱ to draw attention to the presentness of the book *Magie. Art et Politique* that Marcel Broodthaers published in 1973: a little book in which the aporia of art in relation to politics have acquired a form that not only articulates but also parries them. A masterfully formulated riposte, that – by shouldering its own political and artistic responsibility – has taken on a conceptual and poetic form, a critical poeticization and a responsible form of art book that enlists a refreshingly high level of humor to foil not only the contradictions of political art but also the paradoxes that characterize the politics of art.

On 25 September 1972 Marcel Broodthaers wrote a letter to Joseph Beuys that was published soon afterwards (3 October) in the arts pages of the *Rheinische Post* with the headline “Politics of Magic?” (and the subheading: “Open Letter from Broodthaers to Beuys / ‘Our Relationship Has Become Difficult’”). On 3 February 1973, the book *Magie. Art et Politique* was published in Paris. The first part – “Politique” – contains facsimiles of the handwritten letter in French, German, and English along with the letter as it appeared in the newspaper. However, Broodthaers chooses not to use the device of a direct open letter; instead he sends Beuys fragments of a letter from Jacques Offenbach to Richard Wagner, which he claims to have found in an attic in Cologne. He sends this letter as a hand-written document which is meant to vouch for “the authenticity of the letter.”^{iv}

Offenbach’s critique of Wagner’s attitude to the relationship of art and politics mirrors Broodthaers’ own criticism of Beuys, politely and elegantly sublimated in a literary form. He rejects a definition of art that incorporates a definition of politics and adopts an art-induced political magic that has the capacity to change the social fabric, that’s to say, an “extended concept of art” as proposed by Joseph Beuys. Broodthaers regards this as an irresponsible blurring of art and politics, of the kind that already existed in Richard Wagner’s music dramas which were conceived as *Gesamtkunstwerke*. He himself feels a greater affinity with the Cologne-born composer Jacques Offenbach, who wrote operettas of virtuoso and erotic artistry that make a correspondingly profound superficial impact, and with the modesty of a certain Hans H., a specialist in music for the flute, whom the Bavarian King Ludwig II banished from his court because he preferred the dry-ice mysticism of Wagner’s operas. It is in this connection that Broodthaers outlines the fatal structure that essentially links all attempts to short-circuit art and politics—whatever the media used for the purpose—within the framework of a praxis that embraces all creative forms and seeks to change society: these endeavors reproduce exactly what they appear to oppose, they serve the powers that they fondly imagine can be changed for the better through the supposedly magical influence of certain artistic forms, whereas in reality all they do—generally inadvertently and with blatantly self-important naivety—is embellish and beautify these powers in some other way.

The second part of the book – “Art” – contains poetic definitions of four “typical” practices of two not entirely unrelated and perhaps even complementary forms of existence: “Being a Narcissus” and “Being an Artist.” Broodthaers demonstrates the complementary features of narcissism and the artist’s existence by choosing a lexical form whose affinity with Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* additionally evokes a counter-meaning and by undermining this form with conceptually refined word pictures.

This socio-political word-picture is accompanied by magic writing slates, whose principle is explained underneath the reproductions: “The magic writing slate works as follows: writing can be erased simply by pulling out the slate. But it will remain hidden from sight, engraved on a film deep inside the device.” Broodthaers signed the magic writing slates with his initials, placed ever higher from one reproduction to the next. When it comes to the last, the signature has disappeared from the surface, but is invisibly present on the film underneath. In a note for his exhibition “La signature de l’artiste,” which consisted predominantly of variations on signed magic writing slates, Broodthaers reminds readers that Sigmund Freud used this as a simile to explain the “conscious/subconscious mechanism.”^v This is indicative of Broodthaers’ critically poetic deconstruction of the signature as a sign of authorship (that constitutes the art object as art^{vi}), which he causes to appear and disappear in the form of signature compositions and optical puzzles consisting of word-pictures and visual language, only to reinvent them as art figures, caught in a gaze moving between presence and absence, without artificially reviving the signature, and the bourgeois artist-subject along with it, “whose role serves the fabrication of a myth.”^{vii} ...

Magie. Art et Politique, as a book-form in its own right, has a much wider range of potential meanings than those I have just touched on. In it Broodthaers formulates ideas that are on the margins of things, “at the place where the world of the visual arts and poetry may perhaps, I wouldn’t call it meet, but converge on the exact dividing line that absorbs both.”^{viii} As in almost all his works the presentation of meaning (text) and the presentation of forms (image) undermine each other. Images and word constantly interact, mutually fading in and out. Broodthaers causes the text as image and the image as text to oscillate, to vibrate breaking down all boundaries, accompanied by the high definition of the Distinct,^{ix} precisely marking out an exception. An “art of distraction”^x involving the invention of a new alphabet?^{xi} ... The spaces that Broodthaers opens up evoke mental images of voids, voids in the structure of significant. He sets up a hermeneutics of silence (non-speaking), in which words and forms, the sayable and the unsayable, the visible and the invisible enter into distinct relationships. All this happens—and that is crucial, because opinions differ when it comes to constructing an abstract form^{xii} that encompasses what both art and real life are about. In the case of *Magie. Art et Politique* a book becomes an abstract form. Inscriptions of meaning, of narrative and of critical, analytical thinking and the bald presence of visibilities and mental images that resist sense at all costs, take on the abstract form of a deviation, for instance “the deviation that the material adds to the representation.”^{xiii}

By the mid-seventies Marcel Broodthaers was certain that the immanence of the spectacle had taken on the dimensions of a totality that could no longer be surpassed nor countered by the stereotypes of subversion and the conventions of destruction. He worked in the conviction that from the moment a work of art is received and

subsequently circulated in the art business all artistic activity was the “height of inauthenticity,”^{xiv} to which his answer was art as “an authentic form of questioning art.”^{xv} Such forms of specific negation were characterized, in Broodthaers’ eyes, by the fact that above all “on the level of the work . . . they also contain within them the negation of the situation in which they find themselves.”^{xvi} Neither a painter nor a violinist,^{xvii} he “created for his own use instruments with which to comprehend fashion in art, to follow it and ultimately to seek a definition of fashion.”^{xviii} In doing so he found, amongst other things, the fashion structure of art, the eternal recurrence of the new, within which he came to regard his own critical poetic praxis as “blameworthy within ‘art as language’ and blameless within language as art.”^{xix} In his MUSÉE D’ART MODERNE, which he intended as a museum of meaning, he hung a concave mirror of “antithetical meaning,”^{xx} presenting the eloquent silence of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry in the context institutional critique, in the hope that the viewer would—for just one moment—accept the risk of “not feeling so at home in its meaning.”^{xxi} However, Broodthaers does not answer but ceaselessly investigates the question “as to whether art exists differently and elsewhere other than on the level of negation.”^{xxii} And he does so in this book-form, in which the paradoxes of political art and the politics of art are neither rendered harmonious nor prettified, but are conveyed in their unreconciled state, and in which the two main themes, namely the questionability of art as a politics of magic (Part I) and constitutive aspects of a politics intrinsic to art (Part II) not only materialize as words and images but are also poetically transcended. An abstract book-form, a responsible form, that carries its contents within it as substance, without illustrating or representing them. *Magie. Art et Politique* is a not indifferent immanent transcendence, into which vanishing lines of skeptical negation that critiques both art and institution are inscribed as well as elements of poetic and poetologically insistent, non-affirmative affirmation.

Broodthaers resisted any kind of direct connection between art and message, particularly “if this message is political.”^{xxiii} But precisely because he took into account the essential indifference of art towards real life and its politics, he was himself extremely thoughtful and responsible both in his own political attitudes and with regard to the politics of art. Accordingly, at his last exhibition in Paris, “L’Angelus de Daumier,” he insisted on “manifesting a choice.”^{xxiv} As a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the Democrats in Spain, Broodthaers brought the opening to a close half an hour earlier than usual. The shutting down of an art event, a void in the art business in the name of a political reality. A pleasing, modest political touch in keeping with the impossibility of a political voice within the context of “art.”

The stunning spaces that Broodthaers created towards the end of his life in the name of “décor” breathe an enduringly distinct “poïétique.” The exhibition at the ICA in London in 1975, explicitly titled “Décor. A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers” had an astonishing directness. Broodthaers expressly stated the theme of the exhibition—the relationship between war and comfort. Instead of objects that he had a hand in making, he composed two spaces, consisting entirely of loans. The two rooms—SALLE XIXTH SIÈCLE and SALLE XXTH SIÈCLE—represent the relationship between war and (not only its) accoutrements) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Broodthaers regarded this manifestation as the conquest of a space.^{xxv} The word installation was generally not to his liking. His work was not integrated, it neither fitted nor fitted in. Instead it occupied a space with a form that existed in its own right and critically set itself apart from the situation it found itself in. Broodthaers regarded a piece of this kind not as an independent work of art but as a “décor” that goes beyond

art as art. Broodthaers then used his spatial compositions exploring the relationship between war and comfort as the set for his last film, THE BATTLE OF WATERLOO, about a different successful conquest ... but more than that, with the “esprit ‘décor,’” that Broodthaers introduced into his late rooms, he was pursuing his intention “de restituer à l’object ou à la peinture une fonction réelle. Le décor n’étant pas une fin en soi.”^{xxvi}

“Décor” is about giving the object or the painting a real function again, an attempt to create “useful objects”^{xxvii} and thereby to give art a new weight of reality, a function of the real. This can only happen in a “decor” that is liberated from the function of design, this prettification of capital, the financial director of all speaking and non-speaking, and that serves the establishment of different, fairer conditions ... can’t it? Art committed to such a “spirit of décor” is an art of the impossible, torn between the desire to abolish itself and its insistence on the social function of its a-social autonomy. “Décor” is the implementation of just such contradictory vanishing lines, a way of conquering space that poetically *parries* the broken communication between *desœuvrement* and the form that it takes ... an immanent transcendence of the most beautiful kind.

ⁱ Concerning the translation of *Jetztzeit* into English: Harry Zohn suggests “presence of the now,” others favor the “here-and-now” (e.g., Dennis Redmond, at http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses on_History.PDF). However, there seems to be no real reason not to translate it literally as “nowtime” which has the same ring in both German and English.

ⁱⁱ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 261.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Marcel Broodthaers Box*, ed. by Wilfried Dickhoff, *Taina 9*, Cologne 1994.

^{iv} Marcel Broodthaers, *Magie. Art et Politique*, Multiplicata, Paris, 1973, pp. 7, 9, and 13.

^v Reproduced in *Marcel Broodthaers—Le poids d’une œuvre d’art*, ed. by Wilfried Dickhoff, *Taina 9*, Cologne 1994, pp. 140–41.

^{vi} See *Marcel Broodthaers, Kunst Heute Nr. 12*, ed. by Wilfried Dickhoff, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Cologne 1994, p. 104.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 160.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 151.

^{ix} Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Am Grund der Bilder* (Zurich/Berlin: Diaphanes, 2006). *The Ground of the Image*. Fordham University Press, 2005.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 149.

^{xi} See *ibid.*

^{xii} See *ibid.*, p. 121.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 127.

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 92.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 124.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*

^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 119.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 129.

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 124.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 129.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, p. 122.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 164.

^{xxv} The concept of “conquering space” first appears in the title of the book that Marcel Broodthaers finished shortly before his death. See Marcel Broodthaers, *La Conquête de l’espace. Atlas à l’usage des artistes et des militaires* (“The Conquest of Space: Atlas for Use by Artists and the Military,” 1975).

^{xxvi} Marcel Broodthaers. “Notes sur le sujet,” in *L’Angelus de Daumier* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1975).

Marcel Broodthaers, Kunst Heute Nr. 12, ed. by Wilfried Dickhoff (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994), p. 120.