

# *Broodthaerskabinet*

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## *Visitor's Guide*











## Content

LE PENSE-BÊTE, 1964	p. 6
Moi aussi..., 1964	p. 8
POÈME - CHANGE - EXCHANGE - WECHSEL, 1973	p. 12
289 Oeufs, 1966	p. 14
MUSEUM - MUSEUM, 1972	p. 16
<i>Atlas, 1975</i>	p. 18
Grande Casserole de Moules, 1966	p. 20
<b>Un Voyage en Mer du Nord, 1973-74</b>	p. 22
Le manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille, 1974	p. 26
<b>Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: Image, 1969</b>	p. 28
TRACTATUS LOGICO-CATALOGICUS, 1972	p. 30
LA PLUIE (PROJET POUR UN TEXTE), 1969	p. 32
<i>PETRUS. PAULUS RUBENS, 1973</i>	p. 34
Miroir d'Époque Regency, 1973	p. 36
Rue René Magritte Straat, 1969	p. 38

# LE PENSE-BÊTE





## **Le Pense-Bête, 1964**

books, paper, plaster, plastic ball, wood

collection of the Flemish Community, in S.M.A.K. since 2008

Prior to 1964, Marcel Broodthaers was a poet. With only moderate success. He stuck unsold copies of his last collection *Le Pense-Bête* (1964) onto a plinth using plaster. In this way he made them not only unreadable or silent, but thereby also transformed them into a sculpture. This signalled both the end of his literary career and the start of his career as a visual artist.

In Broodthaers' own words, this was his very first 'proposition artistique'. To his utter amazement, the general public failed to see the ambiguity of this work, which in essence is both poetry and artwork. It turned out that still no one was interested in the content of the poetry collections.

This, Broodthaers' first artwork, immediately touched on two themes that were to be important throughout his oeuvre. The first was his study of relations between words, images and the artwork: 'pense-bête' means 'a reminder', but can also be translated literally as 'think-animal' or 'think-stupid'. The second was the question of the economic position of the artist: after all, when transformed into a work of visual art that he had created much more quickly, the unsellable poetry collection which he had spent a relatively long time writing suddenly acquired a new economic dimension as a saleable sculpture.

## Moi aussi...

L'idée enfin  
d'inventer quelque  
chose d'insincère  
me traversa  
l'esprit et je me  
mis aussitôt au  
travail. Au bout  
de trois mois, je  
montrai ma  
production à Ph.  
Edouard Toussaint  
le propriétaire  
de la galerie

Saint Laurent  
Mais, c'est de  
dit-il  
et j'exposerai  
volontiers tout  
D'accord  
Qui répondis-j  
Si je vends  
quelque chose  
il prendra 30  
Ce sont, par  
des conditions  
normales





## Moi aussi...

invitation for Marcel Broodthaers' first solo exhibition  
at Galerie Saint-Laurent, Brussels (10.04 – 25.04.1964)  
collection S.M.A.K.

One of the core themes of Marcel Broodthaers' oeuvre is the economic position of the artist. This is the invitation to the opening of his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels, on which he wrote the following: *"I too have wondered whether I might not be able to sell something and succeed in life. For some time now I have again been good for nothing. In the meantime I have reached the age of forty ... In the end I had the idea of inventing something insincere and I immediately got started. Three months later I showed the result to Ph. Edouard Toussaint, the owner of the Galerie Saint-Laurent. Hey, that's really art, he said, and I would like to exhibit it all. Good, I said. If I sell something, 30% goes to him. That seems to be the normal rate. Some galleries take 75%. What are they? In fact they are objects."*


With these ironic words full of black humour, Broodthaers summarises his whole oeuvre and his mentality as an artist at a single stroke, both with regard to art itself, and in relation to the art world.



**certaines galeries  
prenant 75%..  
Ce que c'est ?  
En fait, des objets.  
Marcel  
Broodthaers**

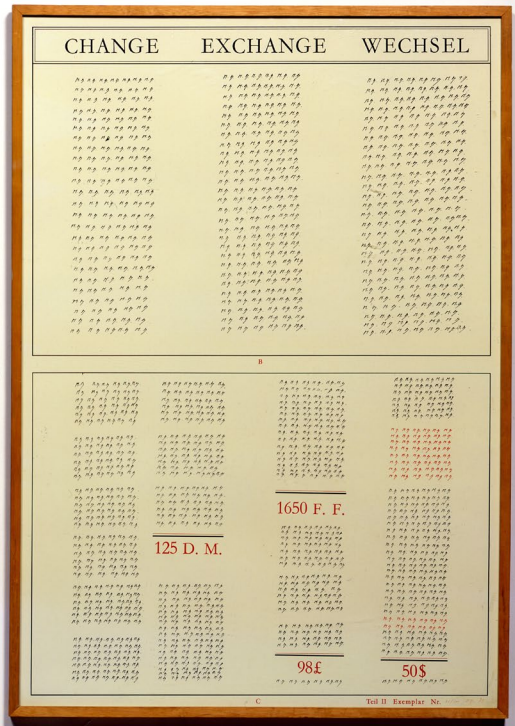
**Galerie St Laurent  
rue Duquesnoy  
Du 10 au 25 avril  
Vernissage  
vendredi 10  
de 6 à 8 heures**



A woman with blonde hair and bangs, wearing a bright red long-sleeved dress, is shown from the chest up. She is looking upwards and to the right with a slight smile. Her right hand is pressed against a green and blue textured background that resembles a wall or a large piece of paper. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**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...**

# POÈME CHANGE EXCHANGE WECHSEL







## **Poème – Change – Exchange – Wechsel, 1973**

silkscreen (ed. 96/100)

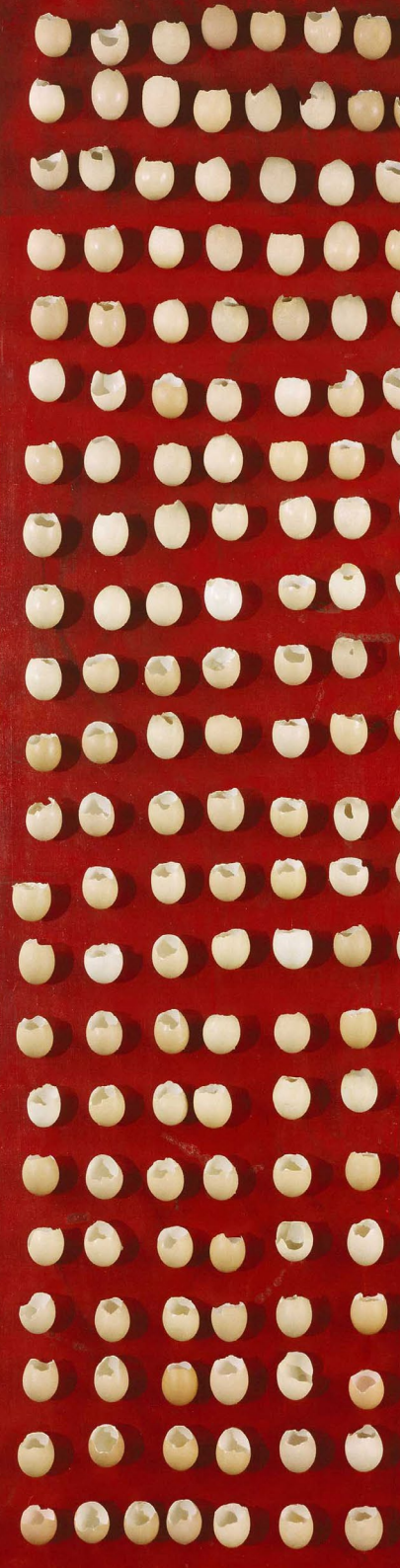
collection S.M.A.K. since 1985

Two documents, several languages, several currencies. Despite the rather drunken-looking columns, this silkscreen appears to represent a business document. It consists largely of words and yet it makes nothing clear. There is an attempt to create order. But in what? What is being 'counted' is the number of times the artist's initials appear: M.B. What is the artist worth? What is (his) art worth? And do exchange rates have any influence on this?

Printed work is very common in Broodthaers' oeuvre. It can be reproduced cheaply and thus widely distributed. The addition of the artist's signature increases its value. But in this work Broodthaers reproduces his signature so many times that it loses its uniqueness and thus also its value. *Poème – Change – Exchange – Wechsel* not only undermines the relationship between language and meaning, but also illustrates Broodthaers' critique of the commercialism of the art world.

## 289 OEUFs

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## 289 Oeufs, 1966

eggshells, oil on canvas

collection S.M.A.K. since 1977

In his early years as an artist, Marcel Broodthaers created a number of works in which he arranged everyday objects, which often seem typically Belgian, in series: these included mussels, coal and eggshells. This was his way of reacting to what he saw as the overly commercial American Pop Art and consumer society and of representing the Belgian identity, or the very lack of one.

In this work, Broodthaers not only alludes to all this, but also reflects on the status of painting and sculpture. *289 Oeufs* (1966) consists of exactly this number of broken eggshells on a deep-red background. On the one hand this intense and striking colour emphasises the painterly nature of this work in contrast to the pale, sculptural presence of the eggshells; on the other hand it puts this quality into perspective by literally shifting the painted element into the background.

By sticking such a common object as an egg onto a painter's canvas in such large numbers, Broodthaers appears to be putting the importance of art into perspective. But he counters this by means of the symbolism he attaches to the eggshells: he views them as sculptural moulds, forms. So in this work he literally places sculpture above painting. He also points to the fragility of art and through this meticulously arranged series of eggshells expresses criticism of, among other things, museum's urge to collect.



# MUSEUM - MUSEUM

## Museum – Museum, 1972

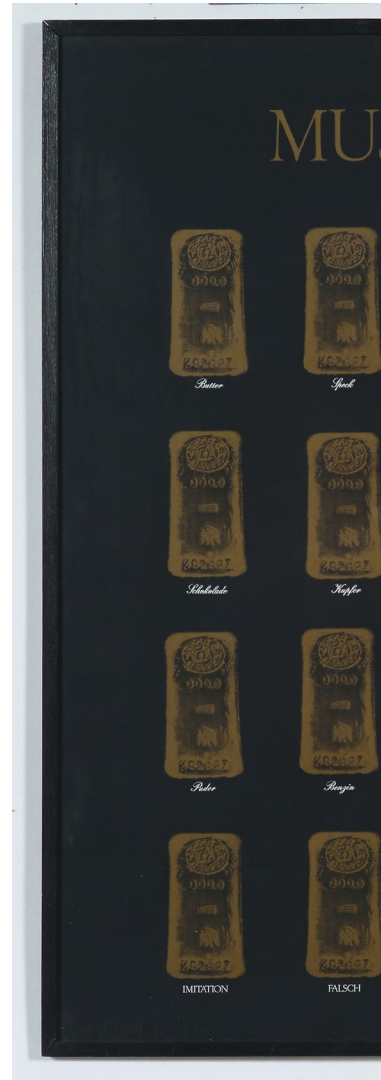
silkscreen

collection S.M.A.K./VMHK since 1972

*Museum – Museum* (1972) is a diptych that shows series of identical gold bars, all stamped with an eagle, a reference to Marcel Broodthaers' *Département des Aigles*. This Département is a section of his *Musée d'Art Moderne*, an imaginary museum he launched in 1968, in part as a critique of museums and other art institutions.

In one of the panels, the names of various artists have been added below each gold bar, written in letters with decorative flourishes; below the bars in the other panel we see the names of foodstuffs. This system does not however apply to the bottom row. There we read such words as 'imitation', 'falsch', 'kopie' and 'original' in austere capitals.

By introducing these words associated with the sale of art, Broodthaers raises questions about the reduction of artworks to banal merchandise. What is more, he also attacks the role played by museums as the treasurers of artistic capital and as a party involved in the valuation of art.



# SEUM



*Konno*



*Fisch*



*Zucker*



*Blas*



*Sell*



*Tied*



KOPIE



ORIGINAL

29/100 17 p. 2

# MUSEUM



*Montoya*



*Bellini*



*Longino*



*De Cuervo*



*Canard*



*Wine*



*David*



*Syria*



*Smitten*



*Wine*



*Lechman*



*Myrica*



IMITATION



KOPIE



KOPIE



ORIGINAL

29/100 17 p. 2

# Atlas





## **Atlas, 1975**

offset print

collection S.M.A.K.

*Atlas* is an uncut and unfolded print of the pages in Broodthaers' miniature atlas, *La Conquête de l'Espace. Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires*. This 1975 publication consists of a booklet measuring 38 by 25 mm that was presented in a box. Four copies of this miniature book can be made from this printed sheet. Broodthaers decided to reserve 50 copies of the print and to publish it as an edition.

The first few pages of the booklet show the northern and southern hemispheres. The following pages contain black silhouettes of various countries, surrounded by the white of the paper. 32 countries are shown, in alphabetical order. This explains their unusual geographical arrangement. Nor are the countries all to the same scale. The choice of countries also seems to be random, but on closer consideration they are linked mainly to Europe and its former colonies.

An atlas is a schematic rendering of the world that establishes meaningful relations between the physical features of different countries and regions. The interpretation of this is based on a prior knowledge of a series of signs and symbols. By making fun of these visual conventions, Broodthaers' purpose is to question them. All countries are presented as isolated islands. Moreover, the fourfold repetition of each country accentuates the decorative quality of the atlas and undermines its normal function.

## **Grande Casserole de Moules, 1966**

metal, mussel shells, paint, wood, glass

collection Vrienden v/h S.M.A.K.

acquired in 2001

As from 1965, Broodthaers made a series of assemblages using eggshells, mussel shells, bottles and bags of chips. In *Grand Casserole de Moules* he combined crucial contrasts that he exploited throughout his oeuvre, such as nature v. culture, the ordinary v. art, functionality v. aesthetics, concrete things v. their meaning, and form v. content. In the case of this pot of mussels, Broodthaers spread confusion between 'la moule' (mussel) and 'le moule' (mould), which led to a wordplay that opened up a wide range of new possible meanings. For instance, the pot of mussels symbolises Belgium and its national culinary culture. It is no coincidence that 'casserole' is also French for 'prostitute' and in this case the mussel also refers to the female sex. Broodthaers considered the mussel to be independent, existing in its own shell, not allowing itself to be shaped in accordance with the whims of society, and in this sense it is perfect.

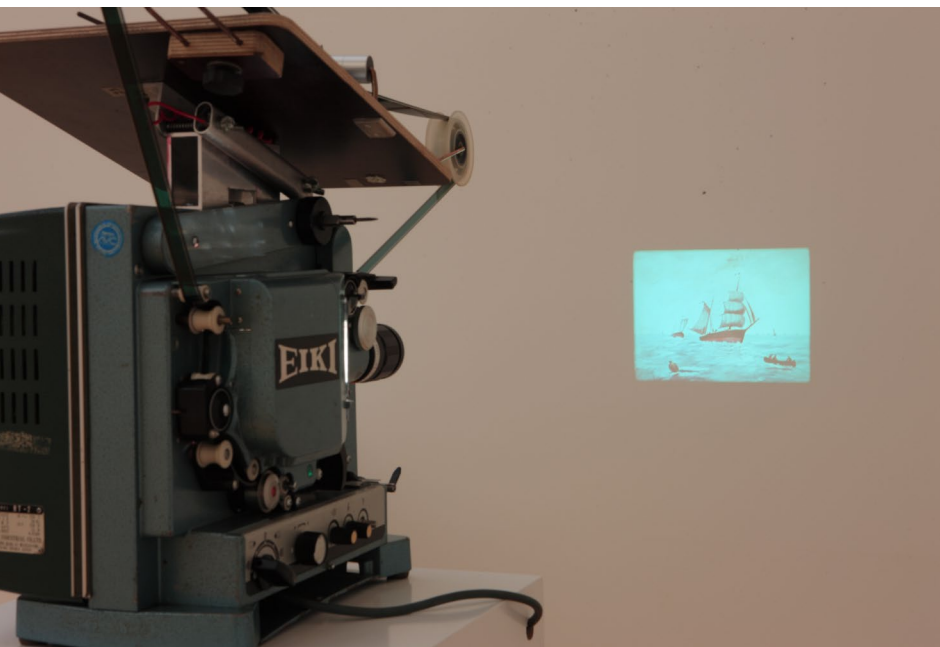
# *Grande Casserole de Moules*

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# Un Voyage en Mer du Nord



## **Un Voyage en Mer du Nord, 1973**

book

collection S.M.A.K.

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## **Un Voyage en Mer du Nord, 1974**

video

collection S.M.A.K.

*Un Voyage en Mer du Nord* consists of a film and a book, both of which Broodthaers published at the same time. The film unfolds in the form of a book: it starts with a title page and is divided up by page headings that separate the individual takes from each other. The takes show, among other things, details from a 19th-century painting of a fishing fleet, and photos that Broodthaers took on a sailing trip in the 1970s. The lack of action and camera movements makes it all look a little like a slide show.

The undisguised old school tricks and deliberate subtle references Broodthaers incorporated into the editing of the film link the pre-studio cinema of around 1900 to the rise of amateur photography and video of the late 20th century. Like the film, the book also contains images associated with shipping, but conceived more like the sort of comparative study one finds in an academic slide presentation.

Broodthaers' complex juggling with painting, photography, book and film opens up a mass of contradictions in which original and copy, word and image, and the 19th and 20th centuries seem both to merge and to drift apart. The artist brought out his films together with a book on several occasions, thus creating an unusual sort of double artist's edition that he called 'book-films'.







## **Le manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille, 1974**

transparent Bordeaux wine bottle, wrapped in white tissue paper (Manuscript),  
in a small cardboard packing  
collection S.M.A.K. since 1979

*Le manuscrit trouvé dans une bouteille* (1974) was inspired by a story of 1833 about a shipwreck by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49). The tale was only assured of survival because one of the crew had thrown a bottle containing the story into the sea.

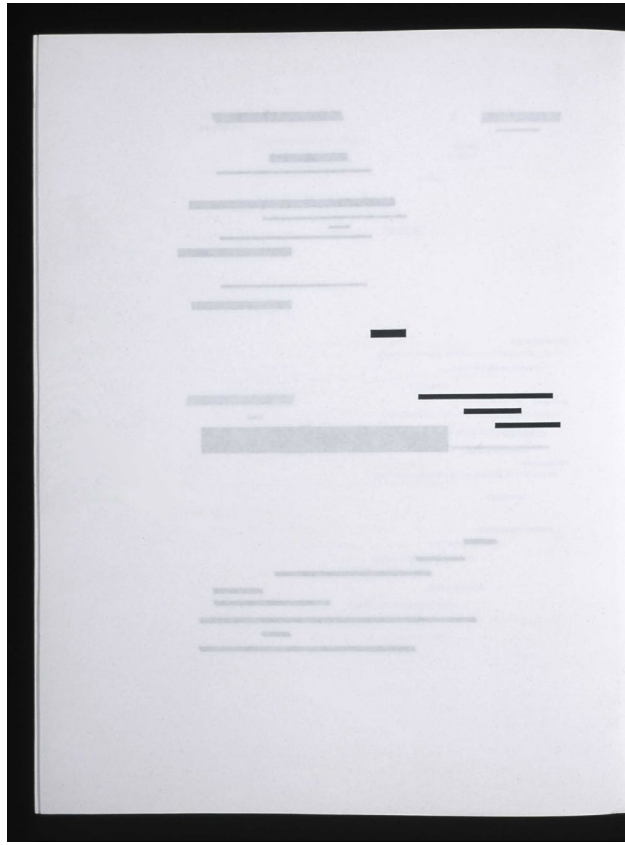
The work consists of three elements: a wine bottle with the inscription *Manuscript 1833*; tissue paper with a text that refers to Poe's story, but also to the manuscript in the bottle; and a cardboard box with the title of the work. By wrapping the manuscript around the bottle instead of putting it inside, Broodthaers 'transforms' the original story. In this way he indicates that art does not proclaim any absolute truth, while also criticising the false value attached to works of art.



LE MANUSCRIT TROUVÉ  
DANS UNE BOUTEILLE





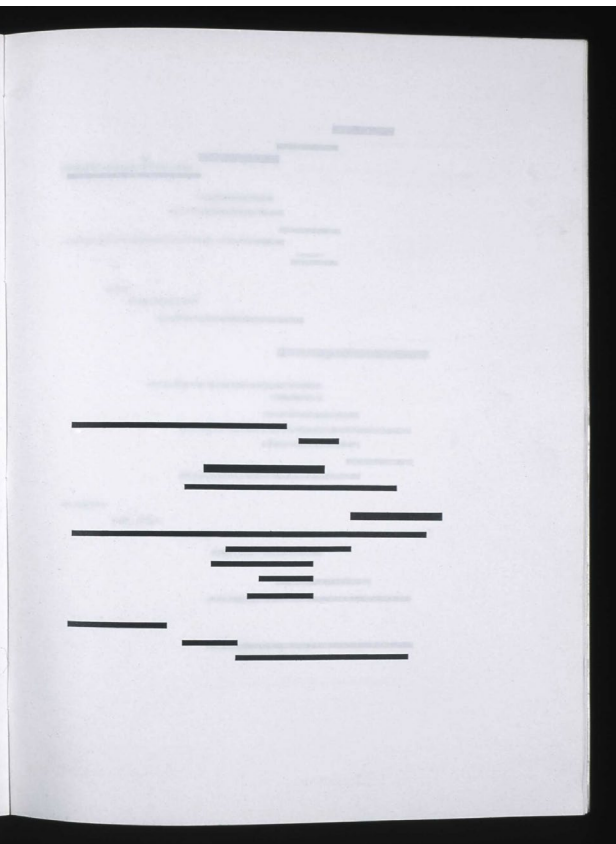


## **Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: Image, 1969**

artist's publication

collection S.M.A.K. since 1989

The word 'image' can be read on the cover of this collection. But on the following pages it turns out there is not a single 'image' to be seen. Marcel Broodthaers was extremely fascinated by the 19th century. And also by the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who in 1897 experimented with the content and above all the form of his poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (A throw of the dice will never counteract fate).



**Un coup  
de dés jamais  
n'abolira le  
hasard: Image**

In this artistic publication, Broodthaers took Mallarmé's formal experiment a stage further. He adopted the poet's typographic positioning, but made the text illegible. This results in pages of type with black bars floating in expressive white spaces; compositions that are almost musical, but which are above all 'images'. This is one of the threads running through Broodthaers' oeuvre: the relationship between word, image and sound.

Through the experimental form of this poem, Mallarmé unwittingly took the first step towards Dadaism and Surrealism, early 20th-century art movements with which Marcel Broodthaers and, among others, René Magritte and Paul van Ostaijen are associated. Mallarmé's visual poetry and Broodthaers' adaptation of it also inspired such contemporary composers as Pierre Boulez and Michalis Pichler.

# TRACTATUS LOGICO-CATALOGICUS

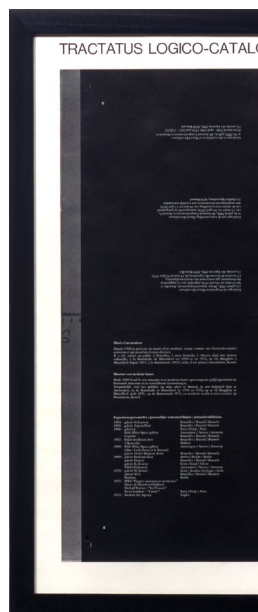
## Tractatus Logico-Catalogicus, 1972

offset print

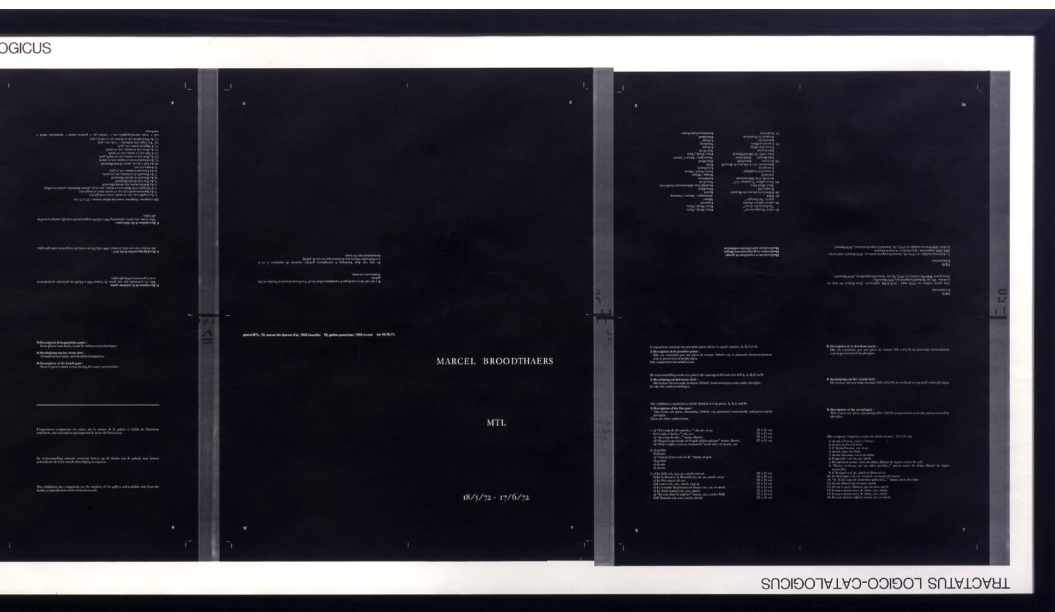
collection S.M.A.K.

Whereas in 1970 Marcel Broodthaers published a traditional catalogue for his solo exhibition at a Brussels gallery, barely two years later he undermined the role of catalogues with his *Tractatus Logico-Catalogicus*. In addition to a new edition of six copies of the publication – identical except for the date – he also had a silkscreen print made: a negative image of twelve pages from the book. To do this he used the three printing blocks which were previously used each to print four pages on large sheets before being cut, folded and bound as catalogues. This immediately explains why the pages here are not in the right order and some are even upside down.

The title of this work is a reference to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Broodthaers felt an affinity with his views on the relationship between the world (which he said was composed of facts), thoughts and language. According to Wittgenstein, thoughts expressed in language were a mirror of reality, though an inadequate one. And the notion that language, like every medium, has its limitations when it comes to realistic representation is one of the core ideas in Broodthaers' oeuvre. In the subtitle to this work – *Art or the Art of Selling* – the artist takes a swipe at the art trade, ironically enough in a work that he generated out of an exhibition catalogue, an eminently commercial product linked to art.







LA PLUIE  
(PROJET  
POUR UN  
TEXTE)

DEPARTEMENT DES AIGLES

DEPARTEMENT DES AIGLES

DEPARTEMENT DES AIGLES

DEPARTEMENT DES AIGLES

DEPARTEMENT DES AIGLES

## **La Pluie (Projet pour un texte), 1969**

16 mm film, 2 minutes

collection S.M.A.K. since 1977

Marcel Broodthaers is seated and writing. He has hardly started writing before he is pelted by a heavy shower. The ink dissolves. The written words fade. Yet the artist continues writing imperturbably. The new words he writes down on the paper also vanish instantly.

In *La Pluie*, Broodthaers makes reference to his former career as a poet. He shows that, despite his lack of success in that profession, he will always remain a master poet. Even the vanished and vanishing words from his pen can be read meaningfully between the lines.

The inscription on the wall behind him – *Département des Aigles* – is a reference to the imaginary museum that Broodthaers had founded in 1968 and shows that the film was shot in his own garden. He had borrowed empty crates from the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels for this *Musée d'Art Moderne*, and stuck postcards onto them showing 19th-century works of art from the museum's collection. In this film he is using one of these crates as a writing desk.



# PETRUS-PAULUS RUBENS

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## **Petrus-Paulus Rubens, 1973**

typographic print on canvas

collection S.M.A.K./VMHK since 1974

This work is part of Marcel Broodthaers' series *Peintures littéraires* from 1972 and '73. Each work in the series consists of nine canvases on which he plays with words, their typefaces and the layout, usually involving the name of a well-known poet or writer.

In *Petrus-Paulus Rubens*, the focus is on the 17th-century South Netherlandish painter of that name. On seven of the canvases we read his name and years of birth and death, combined with a key word from his range of images: carpets, clouds, women. On the central canvas the words are repeated in French and the year in which this work was created is given.

On the ninth canvas we read the name of Rubens' North Netherlandish counterpart, Pieter Jansz Saenredam and his years of birth and death. Whereas Rubens painted voluptuous women and sumptuous interiors, Saenredam depicted austere, white church interiors and plain town views. This shows that in the 17th century, images were used in completely different ways in the catholic Southern Netherlands and the protestant Northern Netherlands.

*Petrus-Paulus Rubens*, and by extension all Broodthaers' *Peintures littéraires*, are striking as images because they are not intended to show reality, but rather, like word puzzles, to stimulate our imagination.

## Miroir d'Époque Regency, 1973

convex mirror in frame

collection S.M.A.K./VMHK since 1973

*Miroir d'Époque Regency* (1973) consists of a very large convex mirror in a Regency-style frame (late 18th to early 19th century), topped with an eagle. This highly-charged symbol from our cultural and political history had previously appeared in Broodthaers' well-known *Musée d'Art Moderne – Département des Aigles*. In this imaginary museum, which he set up at his home in Brussels in 1968 and which is a key work in his oeuvre, he himself put several aspects of his discourse on display.

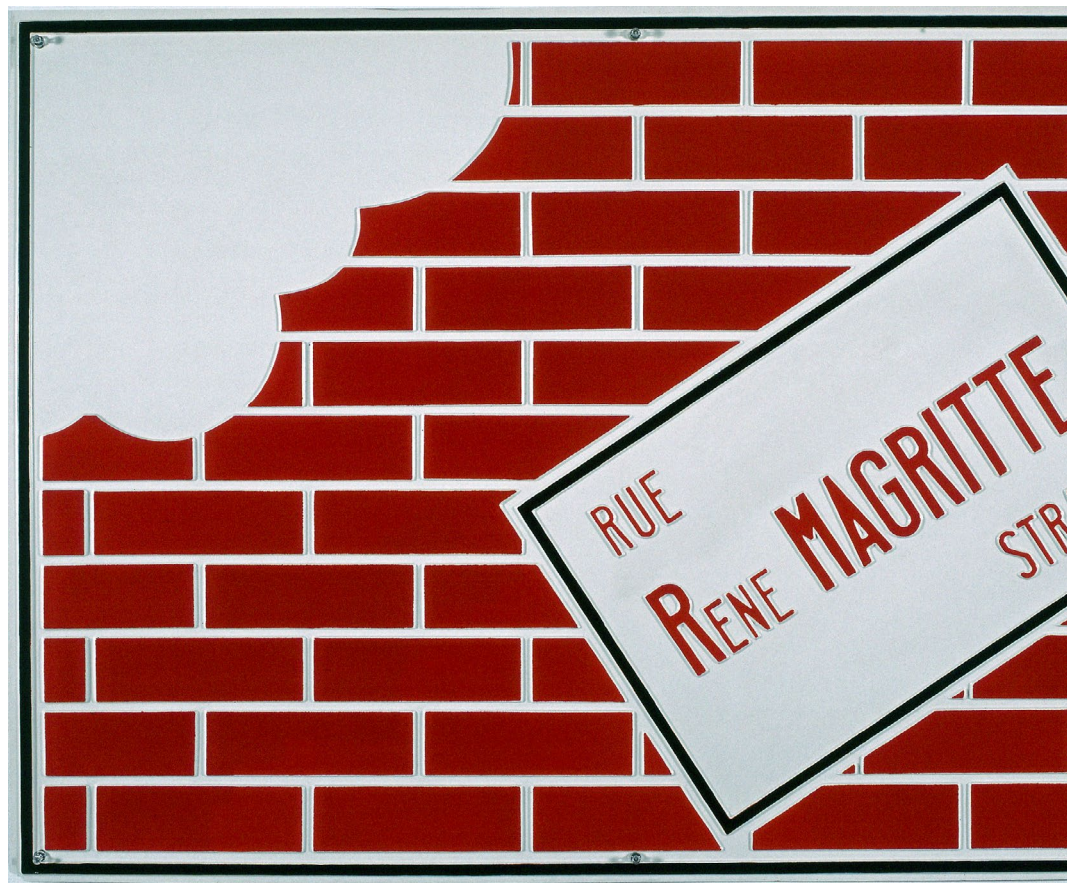
The convex mirror is at least as important. It is what makes this artwork into a 'meta-exhibition', a virtual image (a mirror image) that reflects the real exhibition around it. In this way it is not the artwork itself that is the main thing, but its surroundings, the museum context in which it is shown. *Miroir d'Époque Regency* is a metaphor for Broodthaers' criticism of the museum as an institution: in the same way as the convex mirror distorts reality, in his view museums distort art by imposing their vision and ideas on it and its creators.

# Miroir d'Époque Regency





# Rue René Magritte Straat





## Rue René Magritte Straat, 1969

plastic plate in relief (ed. 5/7)

private collection

What we see is in most cases not what we think we see. And its meaning often lies hidden even deeper. In this case a plastic plate in relief represents a brick wall with a street nameplate. The two languages tell us we are in Brussels, the home city of both Marcel Broodthaers and René Magritte.

The nameplate is hanging at an angle. A bite has also been taken out of the wall, allowing us to see that there is nothing more than a white surface behind the relief. The bricks are merely a front. It is no coincidence that the bite is in the shape of a cloud. Clouds are an important visual motif in Magritte's paintings. They are mysterious, transient and stimulate our imagination.

*Rue René Magritte Straat* is part of Broodthaers' series *Poèmes industriels* (1968-72), which he designed in the style of 1960s road signs. But he undermines their function by playing a rebus-like game with the wall, the plate and the cloud. In this way he avoids any clear and unambiguous message. Is he pointing out that anything is possible in a work of art?

Marcel Broodthaers's work is considered to be a link between conceptual art and Marcel Duchamp – the creator of *Fountain* (1917), more commonly known as 'the urinal' – and René Magritte's Belgian Surrealism. The latter shared Broodthaers' fascination with the connection between word, image and object.

**S.M.A.K.**