

PIETER ENGELS

FABULOUS

OLDEST

HITS

Pieter Engels (1938-2019) occupied a distinct place in the post-war Dutch art world. Over a long and varied career, he expressed himself through paintings, photographs, installations, performances, videos and graphic work. In line with the questioning, anti-authoritarian spirit of the 1960s, he created conceptual and ironic works that punctured the seriousness of the art world. He queried the value of art, the commercialisation of the art world and the genius of the artist. In 1963, for example, he quit painting (temporarily) and established EPO (Engels Products Organization) the following year. This was the first of his many businesses, through which he positioned himself not as an artist but as an entrepreneur. As his alter ego, marketing director Simon Es, he issued beautiful posters and brochures to market his products and services. Engels sold furniture that he had broken apart and reassembled, offered bottles of exhaled air, cut-up banknotes for a fee and scratched cars (Engels will damage your car nicely for 100 Dutch guilders). His actions, which he called "wonder events", were steeped in the contrarian humour of Fluxus, the art movement that wanted to close the gap between art and life.

Engels launched a new company in 1967 called ENIO (Engels New Internment Organization), which followed developments in the funeral industry. He made coffins for a variety of sometimes bizarre objects, such as a bag of 'drowned water', and devised several "suicide machines". In 1971, he commenced a series of works for Strike Project, during which he temporarily suspended his activities as an artist. Engels made a proposal to the culture minister at the time, stating that he would cease all creative production, for the rest of his life, in exchange for 25 million guilders. The minister rejected the idea, however. Due to his critical stance towards the art world, it is impossible to separate Pieter Engels' work from the zeitgeist that inspired it, and from the oeuvres of contemporaries such as Piero Manzoni, Lee Lozano, Marcel Broodthaers, Wim T. Schippers and Ger van Elk.

The exhibition celebrates the donation of works from the EPO, in the name of Annemarie Engels, the artist's widow. S.M.A.K. has the largest museum collection of contemporary art in Belgium and is committed to a dynamic acquisition policy, of which donations are a crucial pillar.

With thanks to Annemarie Engels, Galerie Martin van Zomeren, Anny De Decker, Flor Bex, CKV and M.H.K.A.

This exhibition was curated by Philippe Van Cauwelen & Sam Steverlyckx
 Texts: Sam Steverlyckx / Pictures: Dirk Pauwels / Design: Jan en Ransdolf

Movements (1963)
 Acrylic paint on paper
 Series of 8 works, 120 x 100 cm



Pieter Engels made his debut as a painter in 1955. Initially, he painted traditional landscapes, still lifes and portraits. In keeping with the spirit of the times, he gradually evolved towards abstraction and, later still, informal art and matter painting. Engels worked on the Movements series between 1961 and 1964, in which he captured the solidified movement of the painterly gesture. The traces of the cloth with which he dabbed the paper, for example, are still clearly visible. Engels stopped painting in 1963. Although he returned to painting at a later date, his approach was largely conceptual. For instance, Engels blindfolded himself and worked in a pitch-black room to create *Painting piece, blindfolded painting of a blindfolded still-life, painted by a blindfolded painter* (1974).

EPO (Engels Products Organization)
Repaired door (1964)
 Wood, paint, hinges, 220 x 140 x 5 cm

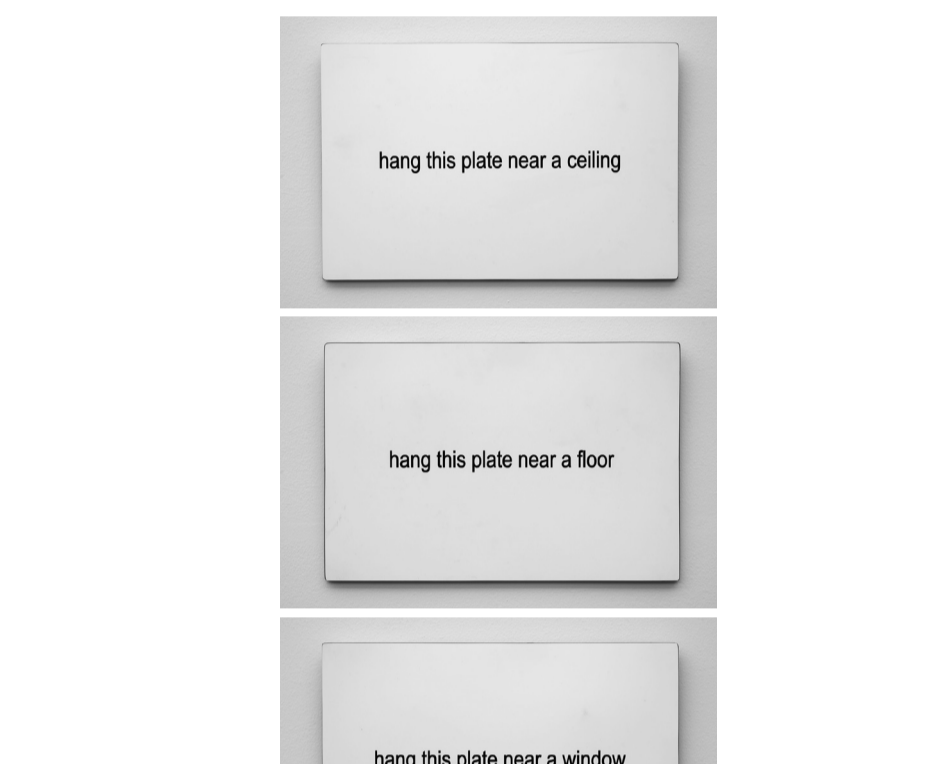


**Opposite-opposite chairs (1964)
 Wood, hinges, variable dimensions**



Engels founded the company EPO (Engels Products Organization) in 1964. It was an ironic way to break the taboos surrounding the commercialisation of art. From then on, he profiled himself not as an artist but as a company director. His alter ego and the EPO's marketing manager, Simon Es, advertised the company's services and products through a wide range of posters, leaflets and brochures. Engels worked around the 'artist as entrepreneur' model long before it became commonplace in the art world. Amongst other things, the EPO made luxurious prototypes in flawless materials, which were later also displayed in the company's showroom. Engels traded the uniqueness of the artwork for mass production. He also sold furniture that he had broken and 'repaired', albeit in such a way that it was no longer functional.

ENIO (Engels New Internment Organization)
Modern death event (1967)
 Coffin for a broken piece of wood, 194 x 12 x 2 cm (1968)
 Coffin for the ashes of a broken piece of wood, 44 x 12 x 2 cm (1968)
 Wood, Formica, metal handles, hinges, knobs



Engels founded his second company, ENIO, in 1967. The acronym stands for 'Engels New Internment Organization'. The business focused on the funeral industry under the slogan 'our funerals are gorgeous and luxurious – so are our prices'. Engels made several corporate designs for coffins, such as this one for a broken piece of wood, and another for its ashes. He also made a coffin for the ashes of one of his artworks, which he had previously burned. Destruction is a recurring motif within Engels' practice.

ENIO (Engels New Internment Organization)
Erotic suicide piece male (1967)
 Formica, metal handles, metal grid, electrical wire, metal vagina, wood, text plate, 240 x 120 x 50 cm



**Erotic suicide piece female (1967)
 Wood, metal handles, electrical wire, dildo, wood, text plate, 240 x 120 x 50 cm**



In addition to coffins, Engels' funeral company ENIO also released a number of Electric suicide pieces, a series of fictional machines in which he combined sexual desires and death drives. *Project for an electric suicide piece (10,000-volt electric shoes, male, size 7)* (1968), for example, comprises a pair of shoes wired together on a platform. The work *Erotic suicide piece male* features a large white background, like a wall, with a metal opening that can be electrified. *Erotic suicide piece female* is similar, but with a dildo that can be charged. Sexual desires and death drives converge in these installations.

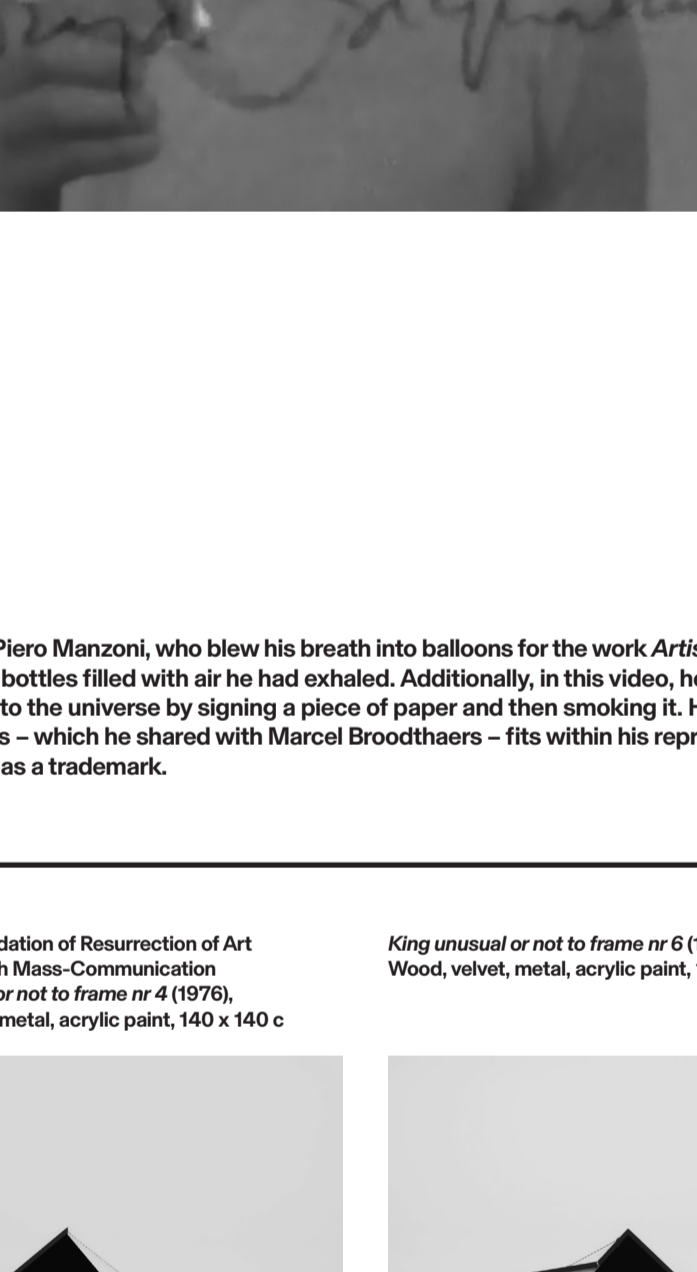
If you are not wearing suicide and need to talk, the suicide hotline can be reached at the 1010 or the website www.1010.nl

ETI (Engels Third Institute for Research in Subcultural Brainbuilding)
Situation plate (1968)
 Formica, 30 x 45 cm



Language and word games played an increasingly important role in Engels' oeuvre, especially in his later works. This comes to the fore in his *Linguimages* objects, in which image and language merge. With this series of situation plates, the artist explicitly refers to exhibition spaces that no longer function as a neutral backgrounds but have, instead, been thematised.

ETI (Engels Third Institute for Research in Subcultural Branding)
Engels smoking his signature (1972)
 Wood, Formica, metal handles, hinges, chains, 44 x 44 x 14 cm



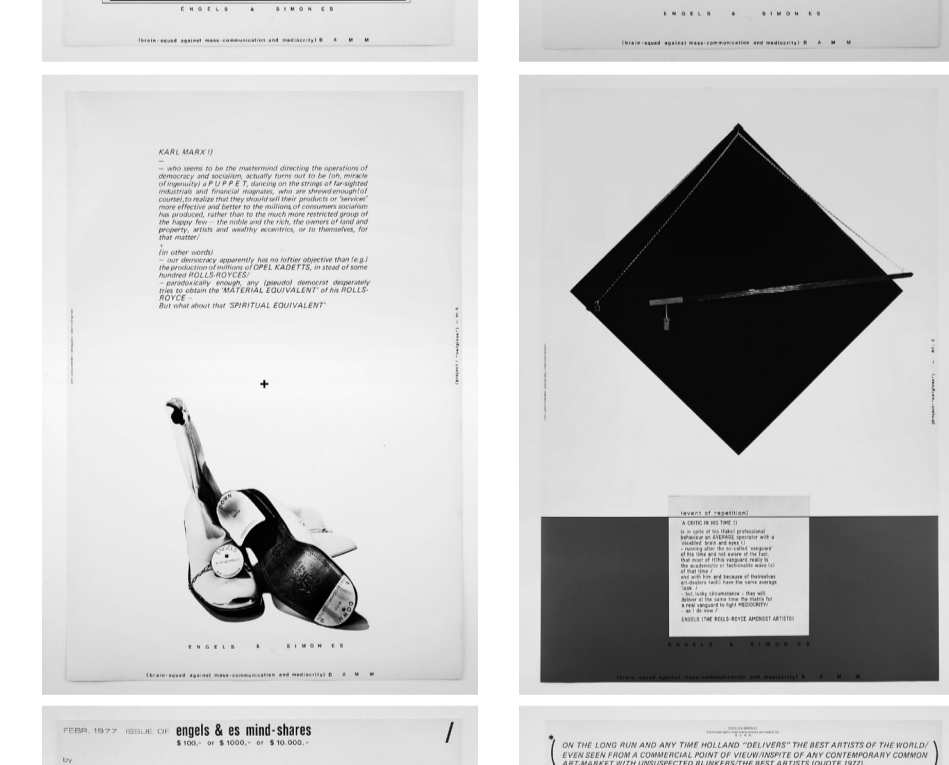
This work, which exists in several variants, is part of the overarching Strike project, for which Engels (temporarily) suspended his activities as an artist and visualised the period of inactivity. *Strike project, March 1971 – December 1971* (1971) comprises a wooden box and a number of cubes that can be used to demarcate a space. The dimensions correspond to a work that the artist could have made during his period of self-imposed inactivity. That same year, Engels offered the Kingdom of the Netherlands a self-timed artistic strike in exchange for 25 million guilders. The culture minister at the time, Marga Klompé, informed him that, much to her regret, she could not accept his offer.

Genesis Foundation of Resurrection of Art and Down with Mass-Communication
Intropective landscape (1972)
 Colour photograph, paper, highlighter, paint, pencil, frame and acrylic plate, 93,8 x 93,8 x 3 cm



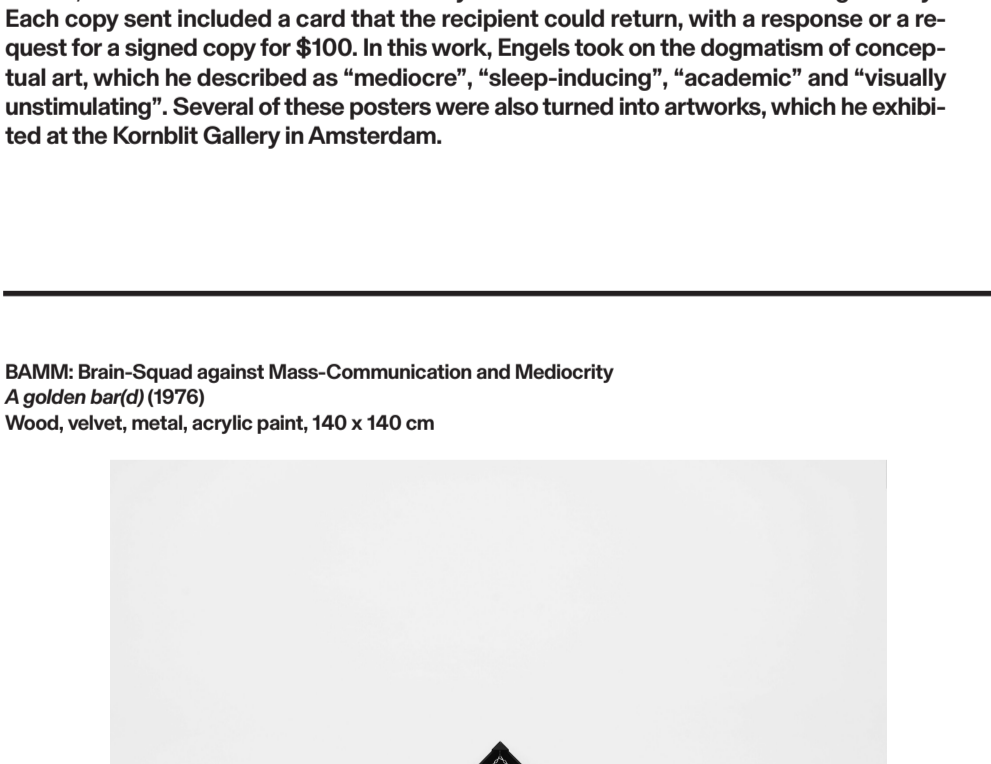
Engels expressed himself in various media and styles throughout his career. For example – and in line with other conceptual artists – he also deployed the medium of photography. In most of his photographic works, he introduces himself through a series of images. They tend to have a narrative progression and are often accompanied by dry captions. *Intropective landscape*, however, is a stand-alone work in which the artist imaginatively evokes the classical notion of landscape. As in the *Situation plates*, he uses language in this work to evoke a different reality. Both works are exemplary of the way in which Engels adopted and adapted both the themes and formal language of conceptual art.

ETI (Engels Third Institute for Research in Subcultural Branding)
Engels signing his signature, signing the universe (1972)
 Black-and-white film, 2'31"



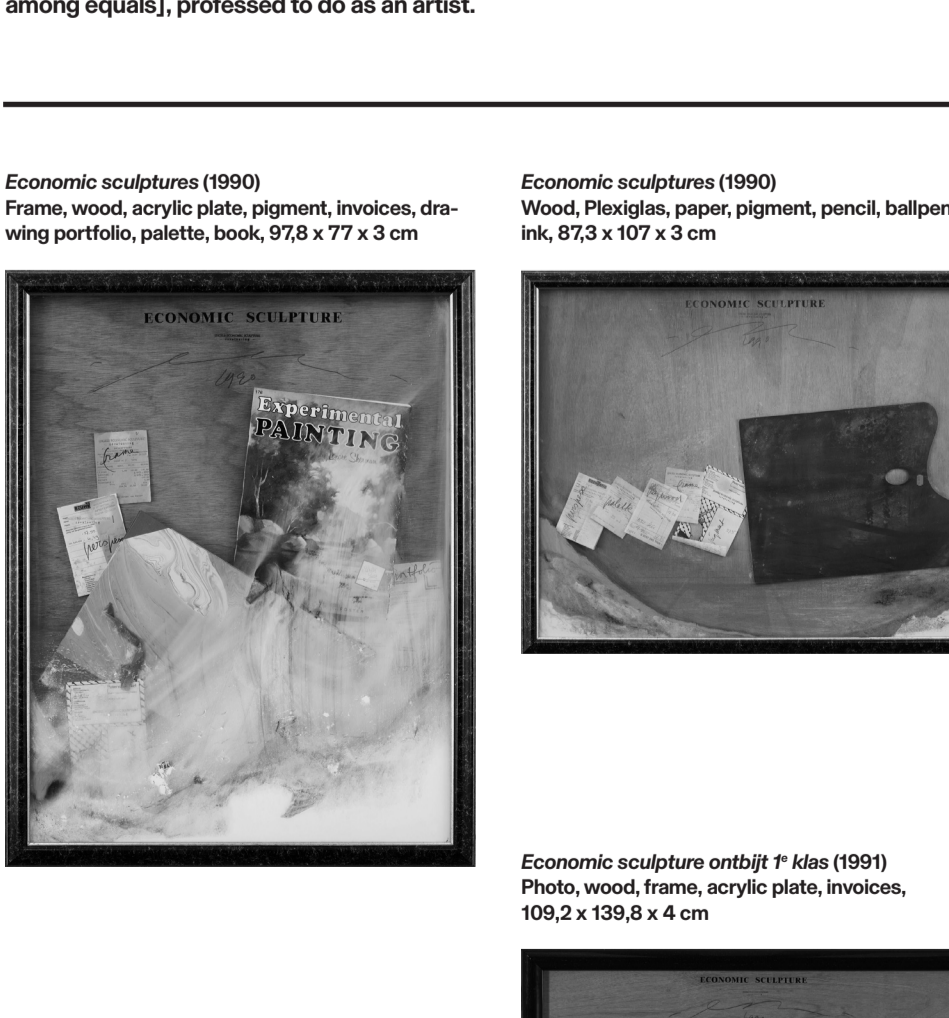
In line with Piero Manzoni, who blew his breath into bottles for the work *Artist's Breath*, Engels sold bottles filled with air he had exhaled. Additionally, in this video, he blows his signature into the universe by signing a piece of paper and then smoking it. His interest in signatures – which he shared with Marcel Broodthaers – fits within his representation of the artist as a trademark.

Genesis Foundation of Resurrection of Art and Down with Mass-Communication
King unusual or not to frame nr 6 (1976)
 Wood, velvet, metal, acrylic paint, 140 x 140 cm



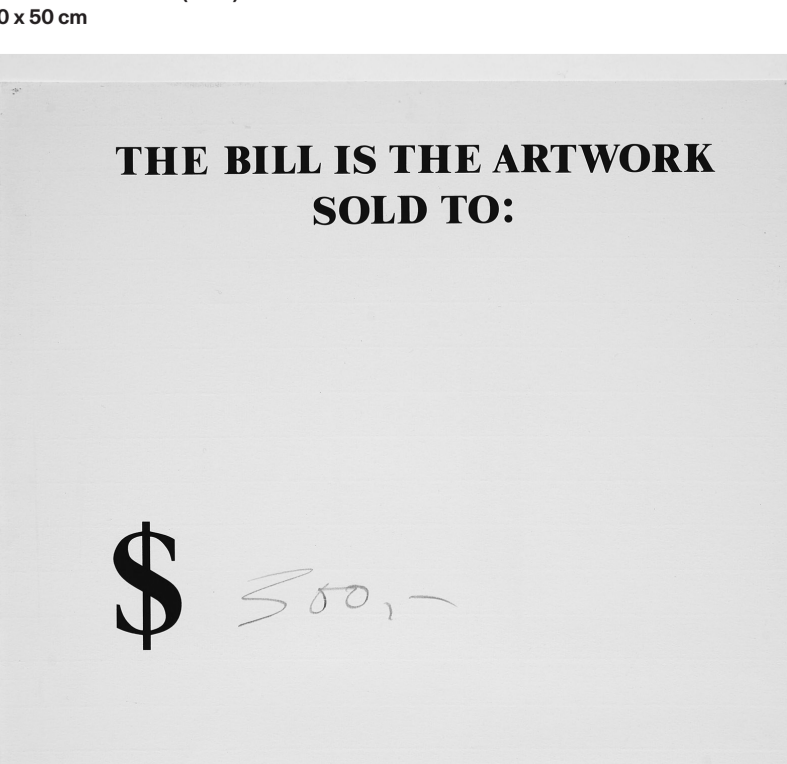
Engels often portrayed himself as a rebel, a provocateur who shamelessly promoted himself and enjoyed colouring outside the lines. The title of this work, which evokes Malevich's black square, refers to the idea that the artist does not want to be 'framed'. In earlier works, Engels often broke out of the canvases and pushed the boundaries of his medium. For example, at documents 4 in 1968, he presented a deliberately poorly constructed canvas entitled *Bad constructed canvas* (homage à Engels) (1967), or he showed the back of a painting in *Beautiful backside of a modern art piece* (1968). Later in his career, he returned to the theme of the canvas in unconventional ways. For instance, the absence of a painting framed by the absence of this painting (2009) consists of an empty frame within an empty frame. In turn, a half-torn canvas draped over the frame is empty entitled *Delowered* (2009).

BAMM: Brain-Squad against Mass-Communication and Mediocrity
Owlglass (1975-1977)
 8 posters, 78 x 52 cm



With his fifth company, BAMM (Brain-Squad against Mass-Communication and Mediocrity), Engels, together with his alter ego Simon Es, produced *Owlglass*, a literal translation of *Ullenspiegel*. *Owlglass* is a series of eight posters that he initially intended to publish in various art magazines. In this series, Engels mocks conceptual and minimalist artists, critics, and art speculators. The posters were printed in an edition of 1,000 each, folded, and circulated around the world by Simon Es's 'Worldwide Wandering Gallery'. Each copy sent included a card that the recipient could return, with a response or a request for a signed copy for \$100. In this work, Engels took on the dogmatism of conceptual art, which he described as "mediocre", "sleep-inducing", "academic" and "visually unstimulating". Several of these posters were also turned into artworks, which he exhibited at the Korbalt Gallery in Amsterdam.

BAMM: Brain-Squad against Mass-Communication and Mediocrity
A golden bar(J) (1976)
 Wood, velvet, metal, acrylic paint, 140 x 140 cm



This is one of the supporting artworks that arose from the *Owlglass* series. A velvet square, suspended from a corner, forms the background to a crossbar that hangs off-balance. A piece of pure gold in a plastic bag "disturbs the balance of mediocrity". This is precisely what Engels, who often shamelessly portrayed himself as *primus inter pares* [a first among equals], professed to do as an artist.

Economic sculptures (1990)
 Frame, wood, acrylic plate, pigment, invoices, drawing portfolio, palette, book, 97,8 x 77 x 3 cm

Economic sculptures (1990)
 Wood, Plexiglas, paper, pigment, pencil, ballpen, ink, 87,3 x 107 x 3 cm

Economic sculpture ontbijt te klas (1991)
 Photo, wood, frame, acrylic plate, invoices, 109,2 x 139,8 x 4 cm

Engels often focused on the taboo surrounding art and commerce in his work. He liked to expose the underlying market mechanisms of being an artist. For the series *Economic sculptures*, from the 1990s, he included the expense receipts with each artwork, thereby indicating how much it had cost to make. For example, *Economic sculpture ontbijt te klas* [Economic Sculpture 1st Class Breakfast] consists of a framed photo of the artist having breakfast at the Grand Café in Amsterdam, together with the receipts for the meal. The final price of the artwork was the sum of all the receipts plus a hefty markup for the artistic value generated by the artist.

The bill is the artwork sold to (1990)
 Poster, 70 x 50 cm

ENGELS' ECONOMIC SCULPTURE

Within the *Economic sculptures*, Engels also created a series in which the invoice or the amount paid for the piece became the actual artwork. The buyer was free to determine the price. In this way, Engels once again manipulated the mechanisms of the art world.