

# THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

---



---

## AN ANTHOLOGY

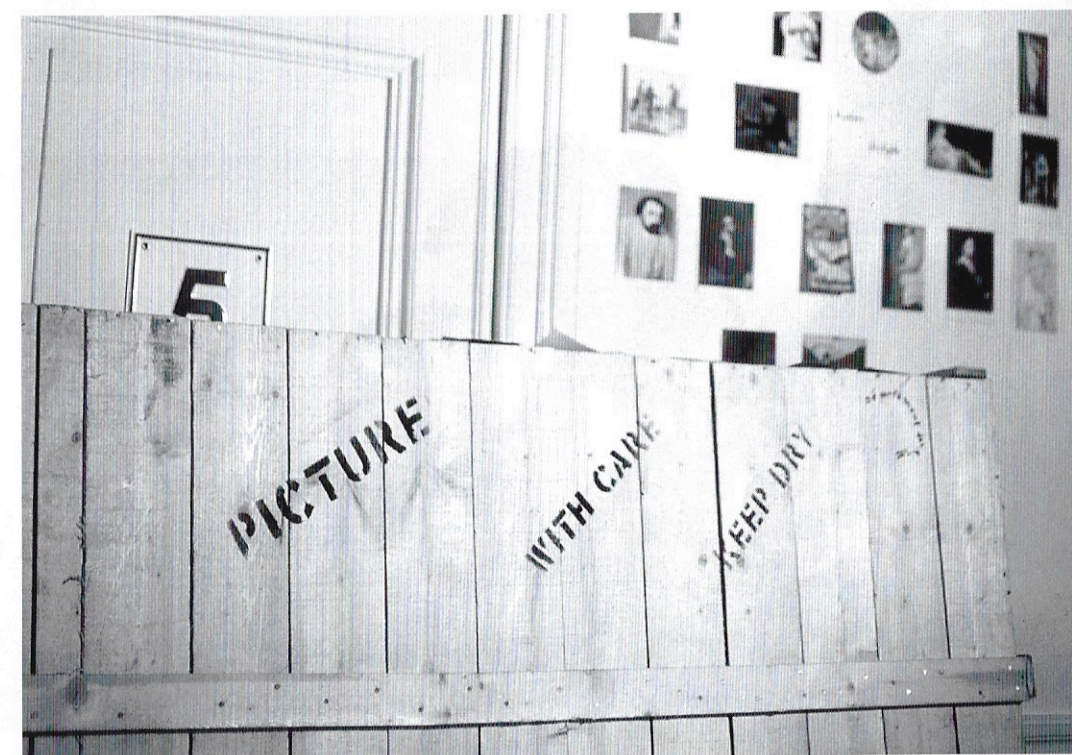
Edited by  
Elena Filipovic



**Marcel Broodthaers,  
Musée d'Art Moderne,  
Département des Aigles,  
Section des Figures, 1972**

*This Museum is a fictitious museum. It plays the role of, on the one hand, a political parody of art shows, and on the other hand an artistic parody of political events. Which is in fact what official museums and institutions like documenta do. With the difference, however, that a work of fiction allows you to capture reality and at the same time what it conceals.*

—Marcel Broodthaers<sup>1</sup>



Detail of *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXème Siècle*, Brussels, 1968

What, exactly, was the “reality” of the museum? What did it conceal, and what parodies did Marcel Broodthaers explore through it in his four-year-long fictionalization of an institution between 1968 and 1972? At a moment when the role of the artist as curator had relatively few precedents, the Belgian poet-turned-artist took that possibility even further, transforming himself into the artist as curator, administrator, press agent, and museum founder, all in one. In fact, he constructed the most convincing of fictions—perfectly miming institutional approaches in the creation of no less than twelve “sections” for his ambitious museum-fiction.

Broodthaers’s museum, carrying the overarching title *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles), was inspired by the 1968 student insurrections and divided into distinct sections—literary, documentary, seventeenth century, folkloric, cinema, financial, figure, publicity, modern art, nineteenth century, nineteenth century *bis*, and twentieth century—staged over four

1. Marcel Broodthaers, “*Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section Art Moderne et Publicité*” (1972), in Gloria Moure, ed., *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 354.





Marcel Broodthaers opening his Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXème Siècle, Brussels, September 1968





Installation view of Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle, Antwerp, 1969

2. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," in *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 45–56. See also Michael Oppitz, "Eagle, Pipe, Urina," in *Marcel Broodthaers, Museum Museum, Section des Figures* (Der Adler von Oligosen bis Heute), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972.

3. The entries of the audience and the press clippings are reproduced in volume 2 of the catalogue. They show both contemporary opinions and reactions by mainstream commentators. A few years later, in 1978, Jürgen Harten organized another large, diachronic and interdisciplinary exhibition on the mythical topic of money: *Museum des Geldes. Über die seltsame Natur des Geldes in Kunst, Wissenschaft und Leben* [Museum of Money: About the Strange Nature of Money in Art, Science, and Life]. For a chronology of crucial avant-garde exhibitions as listed by the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, including its role and programmatic line, see *Prospect/Retrospect, Europa 1946–1976* (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1976).

4. See two essays by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 45–56; "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105–43. Also see the special issue of *October* (no. 42, Autumn 1987) on Marcel Broodthaers that he edited. In addition to Buchloh's sustained readings, there is George Baker, "This Is Not an Advertisement: Marcel Broodthaers' Section publicité," *Artforum* 34, no. 9 (May 1996): 86–89, 124; Douglas Crimp, "This Is Not a Museum of Art," in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers 1964–1976* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Susanne König, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (Berlin: Reimer, 2012).

years across various venues. The museum simulated different registers of institutional discipline and specialization in relation to artistic practice. The nineteenth-century section (staged in Brussels) used the artist's studio–living space as a platform for critical discussion among accidental visitors as well as a place for his art production, much as the cinema section (staged in Düsseldorf) did for his film production.

In 1972, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf director Karl Ruhrberg, together with junior curator Jürgen Harten, invited Broodthaers to do a section of the museum at the Kunsthalle, which resulted in the creation of the *Section des Figures* (Figure Section), the largest and most spectacular of the sections. The artist presented more than three hundred artworks from all eras and geographies, originating from some fifty museums and other collections, alongside a plenitude of vernacular objects and reproductions of various natures, all bearing an image of the eagle, totaling some five hundred "figures" of eagles in all. The catalogue lists nearly three hundred entries, but Broodthaers also included three slide shows of reproductions, adding up to an overwhelming accumulation of artifacts, documents, prints, and artworks spanning centuries and civilizations, from the lofty to the trivial.

The *Figure Section* was subtitled *Der Adler von Oligozän bis heute* (The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present), an informative Kunsthalle-style title that literally announced what its contents presented. To qualify for inclusion, an object, document, or image needed only to carry the image or name of an eagle ("the emphatic exploration of a singular icon, the representation of the eagle"<sup>2</sup>), a romantic, idealistic, symbolic figure. The multiple connotations of Broodthaers's chosen iconic subject were certainly not lost on him or, likely, any of his (German) viewers. The eagle is a symbol of divine wisdom, authority, power, superiority, imperialism, and nation-statehood. In his transhistoric and transcultural cross-section of the history and function of this omnipresent symbol, Broodthaers drew on a widely popular form of institutional exhibition that was not so common among art museums, but frequently seen in Kunsthallen or Palaces of Fine Arts housing temporary didactic exhibitions for large audiences. Especially in German-speaking countries, the genre of the *kulturhistorische Ausstellung* (cultural history exhibition) presents a specific cultural phenomenon or symbolic form (the archetype or gestalt) surveyed from its earliest to its most recent emanation, evoking continuity across eras. Broodthaers's deployment of the *kulturhistorische Ausstellung* in an institution devoted primarily to modern and avant-garde practices must have been a shock to some habitués, but it would have sparked broad recognition among mainstream audiences.<sup>3</sup> The contributions by Jürgen Harten to the "encyclopedia" in the catalogue give an idea of the recognition and enthusiasm this deconstruction of an archetype encountered, in contrast to Broodthaers's other large exhibitions, such as the later *Decors* (1974–75), which were considered cryptic and puzzling.

Over the years, the *Figure Section* in particular has been the subject of widespread interest. It has been interpreted in relation to Renaissance curiosity cabinets and museum histories, the totalization of knowledge and universalist aspirations of the encyclopedic endeavor, the logic of scientific classification, and cataloguing systems in general. In contemporary art discourse, it is recognized as a historic precursor of institutional critique.<sup>4</sup> No grouping of its artifacts is known to remain as an ensemble (each element having been returned to its original lender), and no attempt at partial reconstruction has been made—indeed, it is doubtful whether such an attempt could possibly be pulled off. But the work continues to have a percussive effect, questioning categorizations and definitions related to the institutional paradigm it fictionalized, both during its showing and in its afterlife: a two-volume catalogue and various installation views.



The "Figures" in the title echoes Broodthaers's *Théorie des Figures* (Theory of Figures, 1972) installation in Mönchengladbach, a wall display referring to the cinema section of the museum. The title implies the naming of a form derived from an example: "figurative" means not only "anthropomorphic" but also "derivative" or "imitative"—relating to a concept, an idea, a gestalt, a representation. As a display device, it has antecedents in the Enlightenment's encyclopedic project in that it lists, classifies, and describes all knowable things; it also evokes an encyclopedia by its use of figure illustrations, hence the signaling "fig." followed by a number. In Broodthaers's work, this indication often appeared by itself, not referring to anything in particular, instead being a play on the absence of a signified or an insistence on conceptual art's definition of the tautological nature of art. Broodthaers's reference to certain notions of communication and language served to introduce the apparent systematic and recurrent linguistic sign "fig." as a model for the dual relation between a thing and its definition, an image and its model, an illustration and its theory.

In addition to the *Theory of Figures*, many other works by Broodthaers, such as of the series *Peintures littéraires* (Literary Paintings, 1972–73) or the artist's book *Charles Baudelaire. Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes* (I Hate the Movement That Displaces the Lines of Charles Baudelaire, 1973), call upon the didactic sign of the universal encyclopedic system for connecting image to word and reading to viewing, to deconstruct or separate sign or signifier from its missing signified. In its place, it installs a poetic and graphic visual play between the real and its linguistic and numerical sign in order to stress an abstract or conceptual apprehension of the real or its representations. In this, the very tool for establishing the organization of material for knowledge turns into a diagrammatic shifter, an object/image-related semiotic play on signifiers. The title *Figure Section* thus refers on the one hand to conceptual art's reduction of complex representations and relations to definitions, signs, photographic indexes, and communication modes, and on the other to the sphere of ideas and forms, signifier and signified. As Broodthaers stated in his text on the formation of ideology in the *Figure Section* catalogue (where we also read that the figure of the eagle equals that of art), both definitions are interchangeable in the analytic, experimental exercise he stages. Thus a genuinely comparative and transdisciplinary reading of the fictive as well as factual qualities and connotations of the artifacts can be realized, where the figure—the representation—is stripped of ideological weight and rendered in its poetic singularity.<sup>5</sup>

The installation's accumulative and heterogeneous character proposed another aspect of "alienating" museological display. It seemed to follow a loosely typological order and organization, probably based on the various disciplines and collections the objects were sourced from, such as natural history, cartography, history, art, folklore, and advertisement. The heterogeneity of the formats, materials, degrees of fragility, modes of presentation, and demands of the lenders ultimately helped define the position of the artifacts in the space. The provenances—from fine art and history museums in capitals and provincial towns to postal museums, military museums, museums of applied arts, and Broodthaers's very own *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, Brussels-Düsseldorf—were printed in a classical typeface. The show presented antiquities, such as a gigantic sculpture of pre-Columbian Toltec origin, and contained pieces from all historical periods since, and most of the civilizations since as well, constrained only by what could be borrowed from Western collections. The objects ranged from natural specimens such as eagle eggs of historical provenance, with handwritten labels, to a facsimile of an early scientific guide to birdlife, to many examples of illustrations and propaganda of imperial power manifested in single- or double-headed eagles, demonstrating French, Prussian, German, Austrian, Russian, and American imperialism and expansionism, as well as several caricatures satirizing this aggressiveness.

5. Broodthaers labeled items "fig. 0" in several instances in representations from which the "figure" is apparently absent. See fig. 0 in volume 2 of the exhibition catalogue *Museum* (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972), 15. The accompanying illustration shows an isolated castle in the mountains accompanied by a sentence from an early poem by Broodthaers, which reads in its entirety: "O Tristesse envol de canards sauvages, Viol d'oiseaux au grenier des forêts, O Mélancholie aigre château des aigles. From *Mon Livre d'Ogre*, 1957, Oostende" [O sadness flight of wild ducks, Rape of forest birds in the attic, O melancholy sour castle eagles. From *My Book Ogre*, 1957, Oostende].

Ethnographic representations shared space with artworks by major artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Arnold Böcklin, and Antoine Wiertz; an authenticated reproduction of a Peter Paul Rubens painting depicting the rape of Ganymede; a Nicolas Beatrizet copy after Michelangelo of Phaeton's fall (both Ganymede and Prometheus featured in several works<sup>6</sup>); and photographic reproductions of the Beethoven sculpture by Max Klinger. Two paintings by René Magritte as well as several examples of contemporary aesthetics by fellow artists such as Gerhard Richter, Konrad Klapheck, André Thomkins, Robert de Boeck, and A. R. Penck were in close proximity and correspondence with everyday trivia, vernacular images, and folkloric souvenirs. Among those, one could discover a shirt with a sewn-on eagle patch celebrating the Apollo moon launch by Richard Hamilton<sup>7</sup> and a peace emblem drawn onto a shirt.<sup>8</sup> A point of debate that the exhibition continues to provoke is the touchy question of the absence of Nazi symbols, insinuating censorship or a diplomatic avoidance on the part of Broodthaers regarding the "German problem." As Rachel Haidu has argued in her analysis of Broodthaers's practice:

*Broodthaers consistently judged objects as appearing "too modernist" or "too political." His criteria for his selection of eagle objects were never explained or recorded, and they appear as idiosyncratic as one might expect: he turned down eagles by artists as diverse as Picasso and Sutherland, as well as several German flags and a Nazi helmet, but he included a "Mother Cross."*<sup>9</sup>

The political and ideological weight of the symbol then and now is unavoidable, and Broodthaers arguably hoped to disentangle the propagandist ballast weighing on the animal. A contrasting reference to the "real" scientific-zoological understanding of the bird is part of the letter of curatorial intent he sent the Kunsthalle staff to give them sufficient information to convince important lenders of the seriousness of the undertaking.<sup>10</sup> However, the political ramifications of the provocative choice of an eagle motif in postwar Germany are evident not only in the audience comments in the second volume of the catalogue,<sup>11</sup> but also by the actions of fellow artist Joseph Beuys, who apparently used the Düsseldorf exhibition as a backdrop for a television interview about the German political situation—an intervention that deeply disturbed Broodthaers and was one of the reasons he published an "Open Letter" to Beuys later that same year.<sup>12</sup>

At one point during the run of the exhibition at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, which took place from May 16 to July 7, 1972, Broodthaers was invited by Harald Szeemann to also present this work at Documenta 5. Thus, the end of the exhibition overlapped with the opening date (June 30) of Documenta 5 in Kassel. There, a presentation of two different sections of Broodthaers's fictive museum took place: the *Section Publicité* (Publicity Section) and the *Section d'Art Moderne* (Modern Art Section). The programmatic orientation of the *Modern Art Section* changed midway through and was renamed *Musée d'Art Ancien, Département des Aigles, Galerie du XXe Siècle* (Museum of Ancient Art, Department of Eagles, Gallery of the 20th Century). In press communications, the catalogue, the handout, and the entire *Publicity Section*, Broodthaers referred to the simultaneity of these sections with the *Figure Section* in Düsseldorf. He advertised his exhibition of eagle symbols there, but also publicly announced the closing of his museum after four years of activity.<sup>13</sup> These three sections thus not only functioned as the ultimate manifestations, but also the conscious conclusion of a four-year-long adventure.

At the very moment of public and art-world recognition (participation in the prestigious Documenta being an important sign of that), then, Broodthaers decided to stage the official end of his bureaucratic fiction of a museum. The closure of the project, which had started in the aftermath of the May 1968 upheavals, seemed to imply that

6. *Museum*, exh. cat., vol. 1, 38–39.

7. *Museum*, exh. cat., fig. 88, vol. 2, 45.

8. *Museum*, exh. cat., fig. 135, vol. 1, 7.

9. Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 169. The catalogue does list three objects from the Nazi era that Broodthaers did not include in the display. According to Maria Gilissen, no Picassos or Sutherlands were offered and turned down, and the only objects with the Nazi eagle in the exhibition were two coins (*Reichsmarks*).

10. "To the Director . . ." (1971), in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, 328.

11. The audience was invited to leave comments in a guest book, a practice previously introduced in conceptual art, and one that Broodthaers applied in the *Figure Section* and also in the first showing of *Miroir d'Époque Regency* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts exhibition of seven Belgian artists in 1973. The comments are reproduced in volume 2 of the catalogue.

12. The letter was, in fact, a willful appropriation by Broodthaers of an 1848 letter from Jacques Offenbach to Richard Wagner criticizing the latter's views on art and politics. Broodthaers first published his open letter to Beuys in the *Rheinische Post*, October 3, 1972, and later in *Magie, art et politique* (Paris: Multiplicata, 1973). It is reproduced in *Marcel Broodthaers, Collected Writings*, 383–88. The initial German article also connects Broodthaers's letter to Beuys's refusal to withdraw from a Guggenheim exhibition after the institution tried to censor, and subsequently canceled, Hans Haacke's solo show there (which was to include the controversial *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System*, as of May 1, 1971).

13. *Marcel Broodthaers, Collected Writings*, 354–55.



the space for discussion or critique initiated in those contentious days had shifted and would progressively gain the safer ground of institutional and academic validation. The fact that the artist effectively closed the project at the moment it gained acceptance and notoriety—when it went from only drawing the attention of a relatively small coterie of those interested in avant-garde practices to attracting mainstream audiences and public opinion—suggests that Broodthaers was aware of the potential for instrumentalization and spectacularization, which he wished to avoid. Documenta 5 was historically the moment of the public breakthrough and acceptance of conceptual art, and the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, where Broodthaers was having his “solo” exhibition (disguised as an artist-curated thematic group exhibition), was then one of Europe’s primary contemporary art spaces.



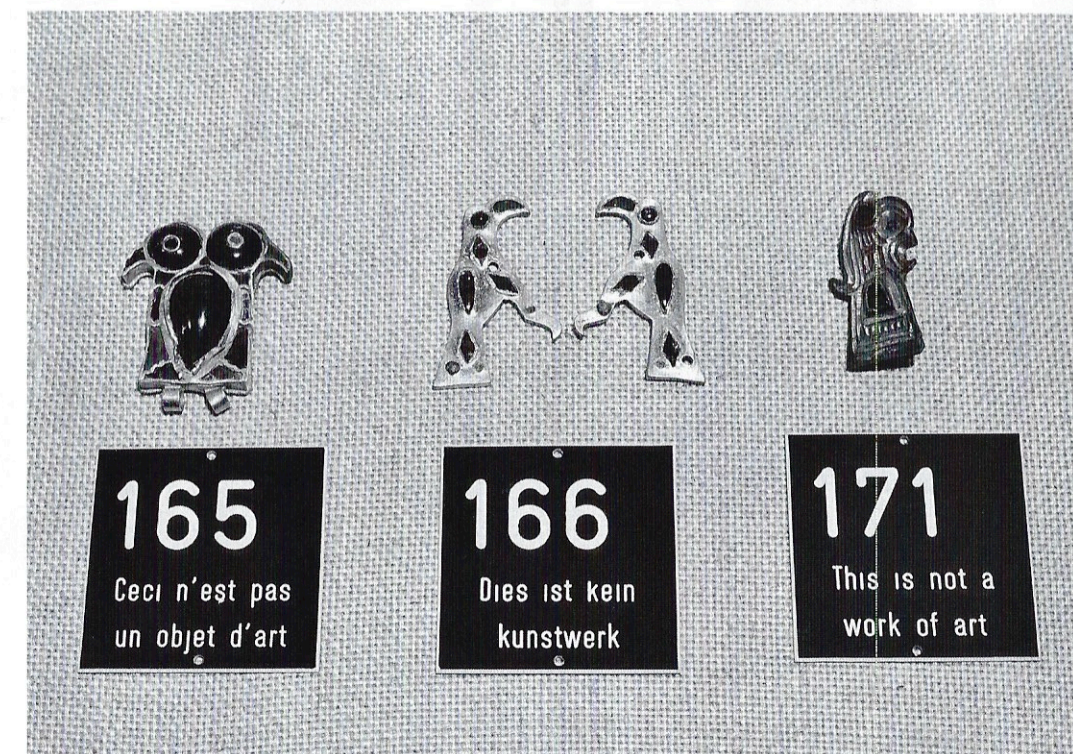
Detail of Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972

It was perhaps for precisely this reason that Broodthaers organized a layer of demystification for Kunsthalle visitors in the form of a declaration inscribed onto each of the 266 individual identification labels that accompanied every artifact and image in the exhibition, stating a number and the phrase “This is not a work of art / Ceci n’est pas un objet d’art / Dies ist kein Kunstwerk” (in the three main languages of the art world at the time) engraved into Bakelite. The plates didn’t follow a normal order, since the numbers followed the logic of the catalogue, where objects were listed according to an alphabetical list of places of provenance. Making this the only way to find out what the artifacts were—from their title, year, and description, plus a subjective additional comment on their background—stressed even more the early scientific apparatus of princely collection catalogues and didactic disclosure. Apart from the intertextual relations, these “Shifters of Organization repeated 266 times”<sup>14</sup> provoked in the overall structure a supplementary level of negation of mythological reading, questioning the very foundation of judgment (the declaration: this is a work of art).

Although paradoxical as a proposal, the statement “This is not a work of art” constituted the third common ground (public judgment) on which to read the

14. Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 195.

installation in Broodthaers’s triadic exercise of eagle-ideology-public. The semiological, textual operation of his negative proposition invokes, in the Magritte-ian sense, the deconstructing of the relation between a concept and its translations as image or as language. Broodthaers explained his gesture, which he called the “Magritte-Duchamp Method,” in the catalogue essay that accompanied the exhibition. By the late 1960s, there had been innumerable arguments about the meaning and consequences for art and museum practice of Duchamp’s readymade paradigm; in its place, the counter-authoritative declaration “This is not a work of art” synthesized Broodthaers’s mythoclast intentions. These labels and his catalogue text have become, as a result, a privileged reading topic for institutional critique, almost shadowing the eagle exhibition itself. The labels and their apparently illogical distribution throughout the exhibition—contradicting the obvious convention that any object or image included in a museum exhibition space should be considered a work of art—questioned not only the internal functioning and authority of an institution, but also the functioning of a sign/image. The art museum’s authority, Broodthaers tells us, is too often uncritically taken for granted, whereas it should be a space for performing critical judgments by the public.<sup>15</sup> His “fiction,” which had started out as a solitary, melancholic initiative in his private home, had transformed from an experimental project of speculative critical discussion into another form of speculation by integrating a real-life structure—that of the museum—which defines art. This project contrasted with what so many other artists of his time were focused on, which is to say, applying “the definition of what art is to the definition itself—to the language of the definition,” as Joseph Kosuth put it.<sup>16</sup> Broodthaers turned instead from linguistics and communication to an empirical verification of the mechanisms that structure the symbolic, by dissecting the symbol/figure of power, validated by museal consecration.



Detail of Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972

15. *Ibid.*, 196.

16. *Ibid.*, and Marcel Broodthaers, *Collected Writings*, 339.

Broodthaers did not omit any aspect of institutional bureaucracy during the four years in which he developed his “museum”—from starting as an impulsive, home-spun initiative (literally, opening in his 30 rue de la Pépinière, Brussels, home) to inserting it in more public situations where discussion on the relations of art and society





Installation view of Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972



faced the rhetorics and routines of established political discourse. As was typical of much of his oeuvre and posture, Broodthaers adopted anachronistic forms and aesthetics from the nineteenth century, when modern museology helped in the establishment of a civic, bourgeois sphere and institutions such as the museum, in opposition to an aristocratic-authorial regime and its representational modes: the princely collection and its precursors, the studiolo and curiosity cabinet, in which accidental and arbitrary choices by an individual regulated the presence and organization of collections of things. The modern museum was to be a site of rational consideration, where a new classification of objects into rationalized, commonly accepted categories replaced a heterogeneous collection of objects assembled based on private, obscure criteria.

For the *Figure Section*, Broodthaers, in fact, acted as a real as opposed to a fictive museum curator by assembling, displaying, cataloguing, and commissioning all the different artifacts that composed the sweeping exhibition. He actually performed the roles and formal activities that he had previously only mimed: the opening ceremony, the distribution and transportation of artworks from collections, the dissemination and reproduction of artworks for consumption and didactics, financial contracts, communication bulletins, inscription in the local context and history, and the development of new thematic and historic departments. Indeed, as Haidu says:

*It is the publics themselves who are the subject of this prank-that-is-not-one. . . . What publics does it pretend to invent (as a fiction) or imitate inventing (as a faux-museum)? To the degree that it imitates actual museum practices, the "Section des Figures" represents a break with earlier "Sections" of the "Musée." It uses well-funded accessories like catalogues and identifying labels to accompany its museum-like display; it shows that it operates just like a museum (asking for real loans from other institutions, keeping regular opening hours, etc.). . . . Broodthaers's audiences in 1972 are no longer collaborators in a limited and well-rehearsed discussion of contemporary topics such as "the relations Art-Society." . . . Mimicry had grown into something else by 1972: the "Musée" has not simply been sanctioned by the art world but actually inserted into its most mainstream venues.<sup>17</sup>*

When, in his foreword, Broodthaers explicitly thanks the then-president of the German Republic, Willy Brandt, for allowing him to benefit from the artistic freedom of expression for which "the limits are established by the political authority of the country,"<sup>18</sup> this can be understood as a play on the notion that a museum is a place for freedom of expression through the bias of a pluralism of symbolic and sensible images. Thanking the relevant government and institutional officials conforms to the usual exhibition protocol, and also underscores the ambivalence Broodthaers wanted to create in operating as a real exhibition curator, not just the artist-founder-of-an-artist's-museum—as Documenta 5 suggested by devoting an entire part of its exhibition to the phenomenon.

The hundreds of objects and images in the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf were aligned on walls or sitting on pedestals, hanging from the ceiling, or organized in neat rows in glass vitrines. In addition to these material artifacts, there was the installation of three slide projectors, each accompanied by the famous identifying label carrying the negative definition; in total, an overwhelming accumulation of highly heterogeneous objects and images.<sup>19</sup> Several stately Belgian institutions played key roles as examples for issues of classification (typological or chronological), cataloguing, and traditions of display, and participated also in a reflection on the initial purposes and roles of the museum in nation building and the constitution of a common civic space

17. Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 173.

18. *Museum*, exh. cat., vol. 1, 4, reprinted in Marcel Broodthaers, *Collected Writings*, 337.

19. Apart from the two-volume catalogue and the poster, three of the slide projections from the exhibition were shown at the 1992 exhibition *Marcel Broodthaers Projects* at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Descriptions are featured on pages 78–83 in the catalogue of the same title.

by means of illustrating a common history. The patina and very un-contemporaneity of Broodthaers's display methods explicitly connected those methods to the values that regulated and organized the first public museums. The rationale behind his selection of objects, given the absurdity of its *parti pris* in relation to eagles, marks the questionable common ground of rational judgments, the process of scientific objectification, and control of knowledge, but also clearly affirms a personal, romantic, singular stance—one of autobiographic or idiosyncratic identification with the figure of the eagle.<sup>20</sup>



Detail of Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 1972

The question of reification, one of the central issues of Broodthaers's work and a topic of Marxist debates in his generation, provides us with a scheme as to how to interpret the homogenizing and objectifying quality of the various glass vitrines the artist overwhelmingly used throughout the exhibition. If the reflections in the glass disturbed the immediacy and presence of the artworks, it was their capacity not just to protect but to serve as empty containers that can be charged up with the most heterogeneous materials and substances, including texts, publications, photographs, and letters, and organize them into an apparently coherent logic, that seemed to interest Broodthaers. Their ability to absorb and organize the most different things echoes how the museum itself functions, as a transparent container with clearly defined borders and limits, observed inside and outside.

And if the objectifying effect is a crucial result of the display case, its origins nevertheless go back to shrines, the curiosity cabinet, and the *Wunderkammer*, where juxtapositions of containers, envelopes of heterogeneous and marvelous objects and phenomena, from artworks to natural historical species, from minerals to curious creations, from ingenious, virtuosic craft to natural fossils, literally illustrate the process of fetishization. Haidu notes that "the vitrines link order and taxonomy, reading and knowledge, to imperialism and globalization."<sup>21</sup> More specifically, the aesthetics of the *Figure Section* recall the displays of the old Brussels Musée de l'Armée-Légermuseum (Museum of Armed Forces), where artifacts from major historical events rubbed shoulders with objects of obscure, trivial provenance originating from conflicts with historic

20. See the poem labeled fig. 0: "O Mélancholie Aigre Château des Aigles."

21. Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 223.



rivals of the sovereign country and the colonial imperial campaigns, accumulated into rows according to chronological order and typological category. The alignment of emblems, flags, uniforms, documents, weapons, icons, and so on literally constructed similarities between the making of the nation and the construction of history.

Broodthaers's insistence on institutional and political protocol and retrograde formulaic conventions separated him from avant-garde and heroic-messianic models of the artist engaged with society. For it was neither a neo-Surrealist concept nor the "marvelous" of the *Wunderkammer* nor the outright rejection of the institution that he adopted for his museum, but instead the precise installation of codes signaling tradition and museal protocol—and this in the midst of the flourishing postwar avant-garde and a political climate that predominantly rejected all signs of institutions and authority. The first section of his museum in 1968 was set in relation to the Museum of the Dynasty (the museum of Belgian royal family history), with which his house shared a garden wall. Parallels with other Belgian symbols of nation- or statehood, with their direct links to the very beginnings of the notion of public museums in the nineteenth century, such as the Natural History Museum or the then-run-down and endangered Antoine Wiertz Museum in the former Brussels home and studio of the exuberant romantic painter, with their display systems and presentation modes, all directly informed Broodthaers.

If the *Figure Section* was difficult to identify at the time as an avant-garde contemporary art exhibition (despite the labels stating "This is not a work of art"), even for an informed audience, its announcement of itself as a transhistorical "exposé" of the motif of the eagle conversely met with easy recognition by audiences who would have been familiar with its cultural-historical comparative approach from German cultural and historical museums. Broodthaers was partially miming the transdisciplinary mode of this exhibition genre, including its forms of display and didacticism, but distorting it by insisting on a potentially controversial symbol, eventually addressing it not for its ideological or political charge, but for its ambiguous sign function.<sup>22</sup>

In his hands, the eagle ranged from mythological representation to poetic-romantic metaphor, sublime icon to propaganda, advertisement sign to universalist gestalt, and, finally, natural phenomenon. And while we know well that cataloguing and the associative organization according to correspondences and similarities led to Michel Foucault's questioning of taxonomies and categorizations between image and text in the near-simultaneous publication *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), we might read Broodthaers's transhistorical and transcultural accumulation and its monomaniacal persistence regarding the representation of the eagle as a practical application of the popular semiotic reading of advertisements and propaganda Roland Barthes developed in his famous *Mythologies* a decade earlier. Apart from their take on iconic and trivial representations without hierarchical approaches, the ways in which Barthes understood how to deconstruct and analyze manipulative speech shares much with Broodthaers's analysis of the mythical function of the eagle, as well as its second order as museological artwork. The authoritative sign-character of the eagle, and the museum it had come to represent, thus became objects of dialectic analysis for the artist, a continuation of his questioning of the opaque nature of language, speech, ideology, and commitment since his participation in postwar revolutionary post-Surrealism and his activities as a poet, writer, and filmmaker. Just as Barthes described the way myth operates on signs by replacing the notion of historical fact with that of nature, Broodthaers's experimental exhibition project—and, indeed, his taking up of the role of artist as curator—can be understood as an analysis of the expansive ambiguity of myth and the museum's role in the preservation and promulgation of it.

22. As the artist once stated, "I am certain that I would have just as little luck with the serpent, the lion, or the bull." In "Eagle, Ideology, Public," in *Marcel Broodthaers, Collected Writings*, 341.