

THESIS

Supervisor: Prof. dr. C.M.K.E. Lerm-Hayes

Second reader: dr. G.M. Langfeld

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Notions of Silence

Silences in the Works of Marcel Broodthaers

Elsbeth Dekker

5893135

elisabeth.dekker@student.uva.nl

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how notions of silence appear in the visual arts, by examining the works of Marcel Broodthaers, and theories of silence from the ancient rhetoric until the writings of silence by Stéphane Mallarmé, Susan Sontag, Theodor W. Adorno, George Steiner, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and John Cage. This study proposes to regard silence as a concern for the visual arts in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To illustrate this proposal, this thesis demonstrates how silence is visualized within the works of Marcel Broodthaers; and dismantles the manner in which Broodthaers deployed silence as a method to convey his artistic message: as a mode to navigate through various artistic movements, which neutralizes differences and emphasizes on similarities.

KEYWORDS

Silence; Marcel Broodthaers; negative aesthetics; Stéphane Mallarmé; aesthetics of silence.

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This thesis is written as a completion of my Master degree in Art History, and focusses on notions of silence in the works of Marcel Broodthaers: an intricate, yet interesting topic, as both the theory of silence, as well as Broodthaers' works are complex, and bring along many ambivalent layers of meaning.

I could not have found my way to, and throughout, this research without the help of my supervisor: Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes. She guided me towards the work of Marcel Broodthaers; and her advice, considerations, kindness and helpfulness have supported me to face the numerous challenges associated with completing this thesis. Therefore, I would first and foremost like to thank her. Furthermore, I would like to thank dr. Arnold Heumakers for our inspiring and helpful conversation on a notion of silence, and autonomy and commitment within the arts.

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INTRODUCTION

“A taste for secrecy and the practice of hermeticism are one and the same, and for me, a favourite game.” Marcel Broodthaers, 1963.¹

This remarkable sentence constitutes the opening line of Marcel Broodthaers' (1924-1976) last book of poetry *Pense-Bête*: a bundle not known for the content of its poems, but for its transmutation into an eponymous sculpture.² One thing both this book and sculpture emphasize, is the fact that Broodthaers took this “taste for secrecy” very serious. The sculpture *Pense-Bête* made sure that Broodthaers' poetry became unreadable and silenced by its external form as visual art; causing the content of the poems in *Pense-Bête* to remain unknown to the largest part of its audience.

More than any of his artworks, this sculpture bears witness to Broodthaers' tendency to practice a “taste for secrecy” as silence. This kind of silence, however, differs significantly from the traditional meaning in the dictionary, what exists in “the complete absence of sound”.³ Instead, *Pense-Bête* reveals a quest for a visual kind of silence: a silence addressing the eye, rather than the ear. Although this thought initially sounds vague, it is exactly this kind of alternative silence that, as I argue, is present in the art of Marcel Broodthaers. Through references of absence and inexpressibility - themes closely related to a theory of silence - critics of Broodthaers' work even commented on this kind of silence.⁴ Not one, however, has paid particular attention to notions and theories of silence in his work. This thesis will, therefore, focus on the silent aspects within the work of Marcel Broodthaers.

During the twelve years that Broodthaers was an active visual artist (1964-1976) he produced a large and complex body of works. Although Broodthaers' oeuvre is hard to grasp through labels, his work is nowadays categorized by the major art movements of the 1960's and 1970's: “neo-dada”, “conceptual art” with a tendency towards “minimalism” and, most of all, by “institutional critique”. Furthermore, the “décors” Broodthaers made near the end of his career, became a renowned predecessor for “installation art”.⁵ In this research I want to move beyond those categories. I will defend the proposition that silence functions as a

¹ Marcel Broodthaers and Paul Schmidt, "Selections from "Pense-Bête" 1963-64," *October* 42 (1987): 15.

² See page 6 of this thesis for a discussion of *Pense-Bête*.

³ <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>>.

⁴ See for example the introduction to Rachel Haidu, *The absence of work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), xv-xxxv.

⁵ Benjamin Buchloh et al., “The Moment of Marcel Broodthaers? A Conversation,” *October* 155 (2016): 111-50.

constant factor within the work of Marcel Broodthaers; a mode to navigate through these artistic movements, which neutralizes differences and emphasizes on a similar strategy.

In order to understand Broodthaers' use of silence, this thesis provides the reader with a critical investigation of theories on silence and their application to modern and contemporary art. Although there exists a vast volume of scientific writing on the meaning of silence in literature, rhetoric, and music, a comprehensive study on silence in art history appears non-existent. Most studies on art and silence focus on just one aspect, or one artwork, without providing either background, or theoretical framework.⁶ This seems at least remarkable, for silence seems to have had an ubiquitous influence on several levels of art and art criticism. Especially with regards to modern and contemporary art. One simple walk through a museum of modern and contemporary art or a look in art magazines, will attest to this, as these actions will inevitably result in several encounters with silence. Whether it will be in the title of an artwork or exhibition; a seemingly insignificant reference in an art review; or the expected behaviour in a museum - one arguably cannot escape silence.

Despite the absence of a comprehensive overview, the concept of silence has not been unnoticed throughout the discourse of art history. Critical thinkers such as John Cage and Susan Sontag wrote influential pieces about the aesthetics of silence in modern and contemporary art.⁷ Even though these authors raised important questions regarding the theory of silence and visual arts, their writings cannot be understood as a comprehensive research towards the representation of silence in modern and contemporary art. In my view, this is because these studies are not structural and show deficiencies in general assumptions and historical references. Recently, the Dutch writer Joost Zwagerman attempted to provide a general overview of silence and art, in his publication *De stilte van het licht*. Although Zwagerman presents some interesting thoughts in this book, he also avoids theoretical underpinnings and discusses his topics rather fragmented.⁸

⁶ An example of this is the booklet *unheard music: information as material* by American critic Craig Dworkin, which accompanies the DVD on the work of the Czech artist Pavel Bůchler, *making nothing happen*. This booklet presents an overview of almost hundred compositions and performances of silence, all based on John Cage's artistic legacy of 4'33'. Although this overview is interesting and elegantly written, it does not provide the reader with a context of silence, or theoretical underpinnings. Silence is just presented as it is, without providing an insight into all its ambivalences.

⁷ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1967); and Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 3-34. First published in Brian O'Doherty (ed.), *Aspen 5 + 6*, 1967, n.p.

⁸ Joost Zwagerman, *De stilte van het licht. Schoonheid en onbehagen in de kunst* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2015). A theoretical underpinning was probably also not Zwagerman's main concern. Zwagerman explains that he started his research because he was intrigued by a remark he heard from the American artist Robert Ryman, who wanted "to raise the issue of silence" in his art.

This study will, therefore, seek a deeper understanding on the meanings, uses, and iconology of silence in art. In order to do so, it will embrace the thought that there exists a strong connection between silence in literature and music, and silence in modern and contemporary art.⁹ This assumption makes sense within this thesis, as I shall argue, because both forms of silence share the alternative character of an absence, or representation of silence, through visual means. With regard to the work of Marcel Broodthaers, this thought corresponds to his own writings. To borrow Broodthaers' words: "What is painting? Well it is literature. What is literature then? Well, it is painting."¹⁰ Moreover, this supposition provides a feasible theoretical framework. While art history is marked by a certain lacuna of theories on silence, the many studies within the literary field on language and silence testify to a far greater interest into the meanings of silence.¹¹

The question on how to transpose meaning from these literary theories of silence into the visual arts, remains nonetheless a difficult and little discovered territory. How is silence presented in modern and contemporary art, and what meaning does this visualisation of silence encompass? These two questions are fundamental and underlie this thesis. Departing from the above-mentioned assumption and the work central to this thesis, Marcel Broodthaers' answer to these questions will be sought in what I consider to be a satisfactory understanding of the nature of silence in literature, and also (with modifications) in visual art. The research question will be:

What is the meaning of silence in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, and how does he visualize notions of silence?

This question might seem too specific and inadequate for the aspiration mentioned in this thesis: to seek a deeper understanding on the meaning of silence in modern and contemporary art. But, choosing the work of one artist, instead of several, will prevent the analysis in this research from becoming overly extensive, and will provide more opportunity to be precise and thorough. Choosing Marcel Broodthaers, who, as a visual artist, is closely related to both linguistics and concepts of silence, will make a good case to achieve this objective.

⁹ This thought is described by the French literary critic George Steiner in his book *Language and Silence: essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber 1985).

¹⁰ Marcel Broodthaers, "What is painting," (1963) in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 128.

¹¹ For a discussion of these studies within the literary field, see Yra van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt: het typografisch wit in de moderne poëzie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 7-11.

I explicitly do not want to provide the reader with an exhaustive list of the forms and appearances of silence in modern and contemporary art. Rather, I want to reveal ways of perceiving art with the help of notions of silence. In order to achieve this aim, this thesis will show a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, there will be a historical and theoretical aspect: the context of Broodthaers' silence will be researched through the writings of critical thinkers on silence and its position in both literary theory, philosophy, and art history. On the other hand, there will be a more visual and subjective aspect, whereby the writings and concepts of Marcel Broodthaers, will be analysed in addition to his visual work. Broodthaers was quite a prolific writer, leaving behind an extensive collection of critical writings on art and culture. These primary materials provide a rich source to examine how his work communicates with the theoretical framework of silence.¹²

Structure and justification

Before entering into the main chapters, this thesis will start with a short thematic reading of the work that commenced both this thesis and Broodthaers' own career: *Pense-Bête*. This artwork functions as a benchmark and fundamental thread through this research. After this introduction, the first chapter provides a historical overview of the origins of silence. It emphasizes the "unspeakable" in theories of rhetoric and mysticism, and its altered meaning during the centuries. These ancient roots will be discussed together with the work and writings of Marcel Broodthaers and his first gallery exhibition (1964). The discussion will demonstrate how Broodthaers provided himself with a rhetoric of silence to accentuate his artistic message.

The next chapter elaborates on the modern roots of silence, and its reflections in modern and contemporary art. The thought on silence developed significantly during the centuries, especially through the writings of Romanticism. From the eighteenth century onwards the "unspeakable" obtained a more secular meaning, which culminated in an abstract and negative understanding of silence in the twentieth century - coined by Susan Sontag as the "aesthetics of silence". This modern theory will be connected to works of Broodthaers revealing a particular interest in the relationship between word, image and object. Special attention will go to his exhibition *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* (1966) and the displayed

¹² This thesis will include many citations and references to the writings of Marcel Broodthaers and other theorists. Many of these citations were originally published in French or German. I have tried to stay as close as possible to the language in which the original text was published, especially regarding poetry and puns. Most translations into English, however, can be found in footnotes. Regarding longer, or more difficult citations, I have chosen to use the English translation; the name of the translator will be mentioned in the footnotes and bibliography.

works with empty shells. These works will be embedded within the Romantic theory of silence, through the writings of Immanuel Kant, Novalis and George Steiner. At the end of this chapter, the negative understanding of silence and the “unspeakable” in the twentieth century, as revealed in this modern theory, will be related to theories of art by Theodor W. Adorno, Peter Bürger and Hal Foster.

The third chapter picks up on the Romantic roots of silence. It will be a short chapter: an intermission focusing on the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and his influence on the work of Broodthaers. This subject forms an intriguing aspect within this thesis, mainly because Mallarmé’s writings reveal a particular fascination with the expression of silence. The interrelatedness of Mallarmé and Broodthaers is exemplified by Broodthaers’ “literary” exhibition *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblioudebliou/S, Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* (1969), and his reworking of Mallarmé’s last completed poem. Substantiated with an essay by Jacques Rancière, on the shared interests of Mallarmé and Broodthaers, this chapter will demonstrate an expansion of space through poetry, and Mallarmé’s notion of silence.

The fourth chapter of this thesis will demonstrate a divergent perspective on silence. It discusses Broodthaers’ *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigle, Section des Figures* (1968-1972) with theories of silence by Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot; who both emphasized that the craving towards silence created a neutral space in art. This discussion will help to reflect on Broodthaers’ institutional critique, as expressed in this exhibition. Moreover, I believe that this discussion reveals how Broodthaers started to use language in a less explicit, yet omnipresent way. This movement, together with the theory of a neutral space, will be connected to a phenomenological approach towards silence, as put forward by Max Picard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Cage. Their approaches and meanings of silence will be related to one of Broodthaers’ last exhibitions, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* (1974).

The theorists and discussed writings in these chapters are chosen by their contribution to the theory of art and silence, and, what I believe to be, their relevance to the works of Marcel Broodthaers. The selected exhibitions, artworks and writings of Marcel Broodthaers were chosen, because I regarded these events and pieces important within Broodthaers’ career, and exemplary to certain notions and visualizations of silence. As was mentioned above, this study analyses Broodthaers’ method and strategy of silence, in order to seek a deeper understanding on the meanings of silence in art. Therefore, I have tried to select the theorists and their writings on silence, mostly chronological, in accordance with

Broodthaers's own use of silence, and the authors significance to the evolved meanings of silence. The discussed theorists were, preferably, the first to write about a certain notion of silence, or mentioned in the literature as the most influential ones.

In the conclusion, all the discussed artworks and theories on silence are brought together. Hopefully, this will be read as a consistent answer to the main question, and reveal silence as a concern for the visual arts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

MARCEL BROODTHAERS, *PENSE-BÊTE* (1964)

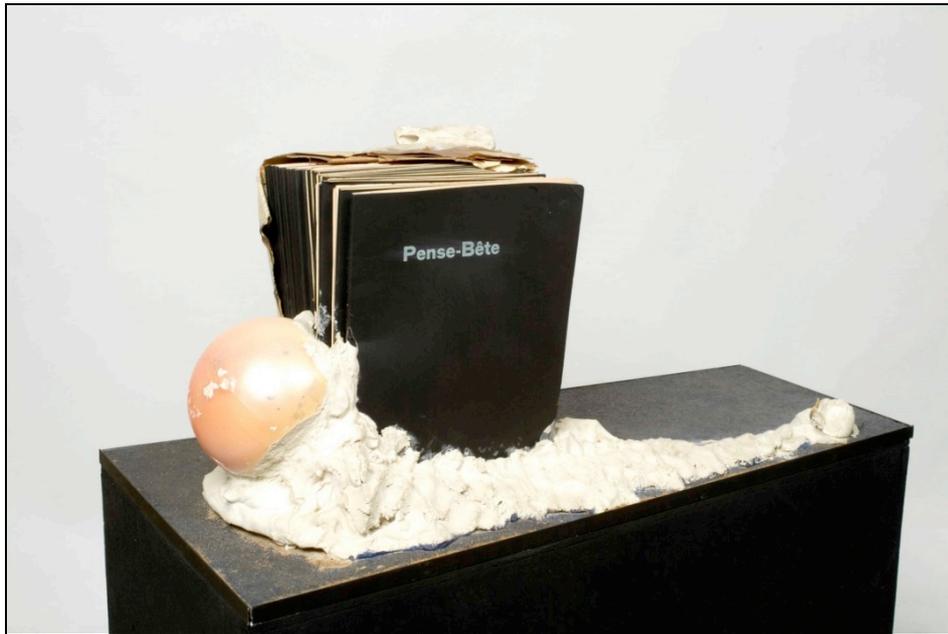


Fig. 1 Marcel Broodthaers, *Pense-Bête*, 1964.

A glance at *Pense-Bête* (fig. 1) reveals nothing more than an awkward and insignificant object. A sculpture on a wooden pedestal, built out of fifty black books with yellowed paper. The bundle of books is held captive by its sculptural setting. They are partially covered in wrapping paper and embedded into a plaster base that occupies a small part of their lower half. The surface of the surrounding plaster is marked with fingerprints, and forms a messy tail, full of globs on the front side of the books. The tail begins with a thick wave of plaster on the left side of the books, and ends on its right side. Both endings are marked with a strange pearlescent plastic sphere on top. Altogether, the sculpture provides the audience with a sense of improvisation, memories of better times, and rudeness towards the original content of the books.

As implied by the introduction, a superficial look does not do justice to the meaning of *Pense-Bête*. The sculpture functions as a benchmark within Broodthaers' life and works, indicating both beginning and end. It comprises the unsold copies of Broodthaers' last book of poetry: published only three months before their casting into plaster, and still wrapped in the original paper from the printing house. Until 1964 Marcel Broodthaers had published three other volumes of poetry; after he had encased his final bundle into plaster he never

published a book of poetry again.¹³ *Pense-Bête*, consequently, bears witness to the burial of Broodthaers' last poetic work, and the silence of the literary career of Marcel Broodthaers, the poet. Simultaneously, it inaugurates the artistic practice of Marcel Broodthaers, the visual artist: a profession Broodthaers would practice until his early death in 1976.¹⁴

Moreover, I believe the sculpture appears to have opened a rhetoric of silence. By encasing his final volume of poetry, Broodthaers silenced his old profession by means of his new; he silenced the content of his books by making his poems inaccessible, and negated the "normal" mobility of books through a transformation into visual art. This rhetoric of silence entails some strong implications, which would reappear throughout Broodthaers' artworks, and throughout this thesis.

¹³ Dieter Schwarz, "'Look! Books in Plaster!': On the First Phase of the Work of Marcel Broodthaers," *October* 42 (1987): 57-60.

¹⁴ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Open Letters, Industrial Poems," *October* 42 (1987): 67-68.

CHAPTER 1. BROODTHAERS' EXCLAMATION OF SILENCE

This first chapter starts with a short biographical overview of Marcel Broodthaers' early life and professions. This will merge into a discussion on his first gallery exhibition, focusing on the accompanying artist statement and the sculpture which elucidates Broodthaers' rhetoric of silence: *Pense-Bête*. The second part of this chapter discusses how Broodthaers deployed silence as a method. The meaning of this method will be researched by connecting Broodthaers' traces of silence to the ancient theories of silence in rhetoric and mysticism. This discussion will lead to a short conclusion of Broodthaers' ancient meaning of silence.

1.1 Marcel Broodthaers' early life and work

1.1.1 Broodthaers' artistic statement and *Pense-Bête*

Marcel Broodthaers was born in Brussels, 1924, as a child of Belgium's middle-class. After he graduated from high school, he enrolled himself for a study of chemistry at the Université libre de Bruxelles in 1942; only to drop out one year later. Broodthaers nevertheless stayed in Brussels and became a well-known participant in the city's intellectual and political currents, dominated mainly by Surrealism and Communism.¹⁵ He forged friendships with Belgian luminaries, among whom the surrealist poet Marcel Lecomte (1900-1966) and René Magritte (1898-1967).

While earning a living as a second-hand bookseller on the rue Notre-Seigneur, Broodthaers published several poems in *Le Ciel Blue*, *La Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* and *Phantomas* - notably all surrealist magazines.¹⁶ From the mid-1950's onwards, Broodthaers broadened this horizon. He made his first film *La Clef de l'horloge, Poème cinématographique en l'honneur de Kurt Schwitters* (1956), and published several volumes of poetry: *Mon Livre d'Ogre* (Ostend, 1957), *Minuit* (Brussels, 1960), *La Bête Noir* (Brussels, 1961).¹⁷ Around the same time, he started to work as a photojournalist and an art-critic, with regular contributions on contemporary art for the *Journal des Beaux-Arts*. In 1964 Broodthaers decided that this - economically unsuccessful - career was over. He turned his artistic endeavours towards the visual arts, and transformed his lifelong profession as a poet, into a visual artist: a shot for the moon, which, as posterity was to judge, was aimed correctly.

¹⁵ Deborah Schultz, *Marcel Broodthaers: Strategy and Dialogue* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 24.

¹⁶ Sam Sackeroff and Teresa Velásquez, "Poetry, Photographs, and Films," in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 52-53.

¹⁷ Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 29.

Broodthaers' held his first gallery exhibition in 1964, at Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels. This exhibition was accompanied by a short statement, presented as an invitation on the front door of the gallery. The text of this statement had a bold type and was printed on the folio's of a contemporary women's magazine (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Marcel Broodthaers, Invitation to exhibition at Galerie Saint-Laurent, 1964.

Translated and read together, the recto and verso page of this invitation contained the following artistic statement:

I, too, wondered if I couldn't sell something and succeed in life. I had for quite a little while been good for nothing. I am forty years old... The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work at once. At the end of three months I showed what I'd done to Ph. Edouard Toussaint, the owner of the Galerie Saint-Laurent. "But this is art," he said, "and I will gladly show it all." If I sell something he'll take thirty percent. These, it seems, are normal conditions; some galleries take seventy-five percent. What is it? In fact, only some objects!

This statement can be regarded as a faux-naïve one, humorous and not a little cynical. While Broodthaers hinted at his lifelong *failure* as a poet, he implied that *selling* artworks might make him successful in life. At the same time he announced that it took him only a short time to produce these artworks: "only some objects" which were regarded art because the gallery owner believed so. Hereby, Broodthaers suggested that the value of contemporary art was created and sustained by an economic system. He alluded to the commonly held suspicion that all art is intrinsically related to *commodity culture*: "something insincere" and commercially driven. He proclaimed that from now on he would make "something insincere", that foregrounded this deception and dishonesty. The printing of these words on

advertisement, furthermore, corresponded to this message, as it drew on the connection between commerce, language and the image.

Most of the artworks Broodthaers exhibited at his first gallery were closely intertwined with this artistic statement; especially *Pense-Bête*.¹⁸ The title of this work is a portmanteau combining the French words for “think” and “beast”, homonym for “stupid”. It evokes an *aide-mémoire*: an earmark or string around the finger ordering oneself not to forget.¹⁹ In accordance with this title, the poems in *Pense-Bête* reflected the ancient tradition of the *bestiarium*: a genre where natural history and mythical creatures were described and depicted, accompanied by moral lessons and reflections on human society.²⁰ Broodthaers’ own bestiary, however, describes no fabulous stories, but merely some insignificant aspects of natural history. The poems in *Pense-Bête* discusses the index finger, blue stockings, clouds, and some animal species, which were all part of the lowest ranks of zoology: spiders, fleas, cockroaches, jellyfish and mussels.²¹

As was mentioned, Broodthaers never published an autonomous collection of poems after the transformation of *Pense-Bête* into a physical artwork. The immurement of this bundle, consequently, signifies multiple burials: of Broodthaers’ *profession* as a publishing poet, of his *last bundle* and of the *ancient genre of the bestiary*. Through the sculpture Broodthaers emphasized his personal failure to make a living as a poet, and the societal failure of his audience to recognize the wealth of an ancient tradition. At the same time it revealed that his audience was interested in *Pense-Bête* from the moment it corresponded to the conventions of art: the assemblage incorporating real objects from contemporary life, which was abundantly used by artists affiliated with Pop-Art and *Nouveau Réalisme*.²²

The relatively quick transformation of the collection of poems into the art of his time, initiated Broodthaers’ career as a visual artist - with many successive exhibitions. His artistic endeavours only brought him recognition after he followed the conventions of the art of his time; after he had transformed poetry into something the gallery owner could sell. The bundles of *Pense-Bête* were an ignored piece of merchandise until they obeyed the language of commodity culture. Contrarily, the sculpture of *Pense-Bête* also testifies that this language

¹⁸ For a thorough description on the objects displayed at the first exhibiton at Galerie Saint-Laurent, and their relationship with the artistic statement, see Rafael Garcia and Fransesca Wilmott, “Objects,” in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 2016: 76-79.

¹⁹ Haidu, *The absence of work*, 50.

²⁰ Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 31. Broodthaers was inspired by this genre through the writings of Jean de la Fontaine, who wrote many fables of noble, mythical or fabulous animals.

²¹ Broodthaers and Schmidt, "Selections from "Pense-Bête," 14-29.

²² Haidu, *The absence of work*, 27-29.

of commodity culture can be used to make significant statements. *Pense-Bête* reveals that Broodthaers regarded art as a manner to convey a message of personal, societal or artistic relevance; art enabled Broodthaers to deliver his critique on commodity culture and the art world from within, providing “something insincere” with a certain seriousness.

Hence, *Pense-Bête* facetiously communicates ambivalent messages of failure and success, of sincerity and insincerity.

1.1.2 “Something insincere” and “something silent”

Most authors have taken the above-mentioned intertwining of Broodthaers’ artistic statement and *Pense-Bête* to another level. They argue that Broodthaers’ whole oeuvre is intrinsically connected to this statement, causing this declaration to function as a manifest characterizing all of his artistic practices.²³

Two critics who emphasized this thought, are the art historians Benjamin Buchloh and Rachel Haidu. Both of them reflected on the statement, and particularly focused on the implications of “something insincere”. According to Buchloh, Broodthaers’ definition of art as “something insincere” marks his future investigation as “[...] a continuous reflection on the status of the (art) object under the universal reign of commodity production, once the object had lost the credibility of its modernist, utopian dimension”.²⁴ Haidu on the other hand, argues that “something insincere” should be read in view of Broodthaers’ act to quit writing poetry.

[...] before Broodthaers began making art - or “something insincere,” as he called it - he was a poet. After he began making art, he didn’t publish any more poetry [...] Broodthaers art happens in the aftermath of what had always been his true “work” [...] His art was always taking the place of something else, something that has disappeared and is generative through that disappearance, and much of his art - however brilliant it is - reflects this belittled, contingent, self-disdaining status.²⁵

Probably unintentionally, Haidu touches on the effects of silence, as she relates “something insincere” to the silence of Marcel Broodthaers - the poet. Rather bluntly, she relates this silence to a negative aspect in his artworks. I believe, however, that Broodthaers’ silence as a poet had stronger and more positive implications than Haidu mentions in this citation.

²³ See for example Glenn D. Lowry, Manuel J. Borja-Villel, and Marion Ackermann, “Directors Foreword,” in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villel and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 2016: 7-9.

²⁴ Buchloh, “Open Letters, Industrial Poems,” 72.

²⁵ Haidu, *The absence of work*, xv.

As was demonstrated by *Pense-Bête*, Broodthaers' poetic silence, his removal of supposedly "true" words, opened up on new manners of artistic expression. It inaugurated his profession as a visual artist and revealed a certain rhetoric of silence: a sophisticated method where silence is used to reify an artistic message. Broodthaers' gesture of silence, moreover, contained an allegorical strategy to play with ambivalences. This is shown by the fact that Broodthaers attracted much more attention by silencing his poems, than through publishing his poems. Silence was used to reinforce the meaning of his bundle, and Broodthaers' (ambivalent) message of failure and "something insincere"; it transformed these objects into art and "something insincere", while at the same time the message of *Pense-Bête* was neither silent, nor insincere. It is a critique of the belief one could say anything "true". In order to understand this delicate method of silence better, the second part of this chapter elaborates on the theory of silence.

1.2 The classical roots of Broodthaers' silence

The Western theory of silence has a long history, originating from ancient theories on rhetoric and mysticism. These ancient theories describe some foundational reasons for not speaking, or the inadequacy of words, which are still relevant for the comprehension of silence: even in modern and contemporary art. In the present subchapter these reasons for silence, and its accompanying ambivalences, will be connected to *Pense-Bête*. This connection will provide interesting material for a statement on Broodthaers' work and position.

1.2.1 A rhetorical silence in *Pense-Bête*

The effects of silence have been described in texts on rhetoric since the ancient times.²⁶ Two writers who were influential for the Western thought on silence, were the Roman rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilian (35-100 AD) and the Greek literary critic Longinus or "pseudo-Longinus" (1st century AD).²⁷

Quintilian contributed to this thinking with his thoughts on the rhetoric figure of *aposiopesis*; which basically denotes the absence of words because the speaker is unwilling or unable to state what is on his or her mind. *Aposiopesis* is, therefore, regarded as a rhetorical device to communicate an "entirely silenced content".²⁸ In his ninth book of *Institutio*

²⁶ Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 8.

²⁷ C.M.J. Sicking, introduction to *Het sublieme*, by Longinus, trans. Michiel op de Coul (Historische Uitgeverij: Groningen 2000), 7-8. Longinus is nowadays referred to as both Longinus or 'pseudo-Longinus', since scientific research pointed out that his real name is actually unknown.

²⁸ Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 127-129.

Oratoria (95 AD) Quintilian shortly defines this figure as an “audible unfinished part of speech”, for which he distinguished several reasons: as an expression of passion or anger, but also as an expression of scruples or political anxiety. According to Quintilian this verbal strategy of silence, this not telling in words, would play on the imagination of the audience and consequently create compassion.²⁹

Longinus on the other hand, focused on the effects of an elevated style of rhetoric; in which silence played a small, but remarkable role. In his short treatise *On the Sublime*, he argues for a sublime style of writing and eloquence.³⁰ Although Longinus does not explicitly clarify his definition of sublimity, he asserts that the sublime consists in “a certain loftiness and excellence of language”. According to Longinus, sublimity in literature would convince the reader of the conclusion desired by its author. Moreover, he assumes that the “imperious and irresistible force” of the sublime, is an enthralling way to lift the reader above his or her own reason.³¹

Longinus describes five sources of the sublime, and provides his reader with examples of eloquence. When he describes the first source of the sublime - according to him the most important one - he touches upon an instant of silence. He defines the first source as “a lofty cast of mind”: a human capacity to be gifted with “greatness of soul”.³² Longinus exemplifies this capacity of genius, with a reference to silence:

[...] sublimity is, so to say, the image of greatness of soul. Hence a thought in its naked simplicity, even though unuttered, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity; for instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey* is great, and grander than anything he could have said.³³

Through this reference Longinus alludes to the idea that the silence of Ajax expresses nothing but the “greatness of mind”; as such it functions as a perceptible experience of sublimity.³⁴

²⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, book 9, chapter 2, paragraph 54. Accessed October 20, 2016, <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/quintilian/9/chapter2.html>.

³⁰ Longinus, *Het sublieme*, 15. Although the treatise of Longinus seems to focus on literature and the art of writing, his concern was mostly on eloquence in rhetoric. In the time Longinus wrote his piece the concept of literature as we know it today, did not yet exist. Literature in those days was only read aloud and followed the pursuit of public lecture and the cultivation of the spoken word. The ideals and categories of rhetorical eloquence were therefore closely related to literary activities.

³¹ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 2006, paragraph 1. Accessed October 20, 2016, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17957/17957-h/17957-h.htm>.

³² *Ibid.*, paragraph 2, 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, paragraph 2.

³⁴ Centuries later Edmund Burke would elaborate on this relatedness of silence and the sublime, in his famous study *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (1757). Burke argued that the sublime should be distinguished from beauty; he regarded the sublime as a “delightful horror”, which was closely connected to the impossibility of knowledge. Following Burke certain kind of absences, “privations” as

Although both Quintilian and Longinus emphasize on the *amplifying force* of silence, their thoughts obviously diverge at a level of effects on the beholder. To Quintilian silence merely functioned as a figure to strengthen an emotional or political message - evoking empathy - while Longinus stressed that silence reinforced the spirit and enlightened his audience. Taken together, their writings reveal some overarching traits of silence: the need to theorise distinct kinds of silences. Notably, a silence for emotional reasons, a “psychological silence”, a silence for societal reasons, a “political silence”, and a silence for the reason of elevating something, a “metaphysical silence”.³⁵

All these kind of silences appear to return in *Pense-Bête*. The sculpture bears witness to a “psychological silence” as Broodthaers is unable to speak through poetry: he regards himself unable to state what is truly on his mind. The encasement of his own book of poetry into plaster, amplifies his statement of personal failure: he is “forty years old” and has been “good for nothing” during these years. The reasons for his silence, however, are not exclusively emotional. Through *Pense-Bête* Broodthaers allegorically reflects on society, especially on the politics and economics of the art-loving public. The burial of the remaindered copies of his last volume proves that this audience was unable to recognize the value of a poetic profession. The audience would rather discern a poetic work as a sculpture, concealed by methods which advocate the power of advisement and commodity culture; which enhances Broodthaers’ statement of art as “something insincere”.

The metaphysical strand of silence appears to be more complicated, for *Pense-Bête* does not explicitly contribute to the thought that Broodthaers used silence as a manner to elevate his statement, nor his audience. Notwithstanding, I consider the metaphysical kind of silence as important for understanding *Pense-Bête*, and Broodthaers’ further strategy of silence. The writings of Longinus appear to provide too little guidance on the topic of metaphysical silence. However, this theory is much more comprehensive: it only started to develop after Longinus, through the writings of the Christian mystics and their ideas on truth and the unspeakable. Their writings will enable us to fathom Broodthaers’ ambivalent strategy of silence.

he called it, notably vacuity, darkness, solitude and silence, are so great and terrible that they touch on this impossibility of knowledge. Therefore, they are a source of the sublime. See Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Simon and Brown 2013), 36-37, 65, 67.

³⁵ For an overview of writers who made these distinctions see Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 62.

1.2.2 The mystical addition of silence

The mystical thoughts of silence were first described by St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE) in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. In this text Augustine connected the thought of classical rhetoric with Christian Scripture; for he believed that linguistic knowledge of Scripture could lead towards wisdom and truth.³⁶ The trope of silence received special significance in *De Doctrina Christiana*, because Augustine associated silence with spiritual development.³⁷

Important aspects of silence in Augustine's theory, are described by Joseph Anthony Mazzeo in his article "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence" (1962).³⁸ Mazzeo emphasizes that Augustine made some important distinctions between words and things, signs and things (synonymous for realities), and eloquence and truth. Mazzeo elaborates on these distinctions of Augustine, by describing two kind of things and signs: those that were man-made and conventional, temporal, and those that were eternal and unchangeable, derived from God.³⁹ According to Mazzeo, Augustine believed that this technique of reading could lead to knowledge of eternal things: towards a Christian truth.⁴⁰ Mazzeo stresses that Augustine presupposes a movement from words to silence, from signs to realities, where words - as temporal signs - are insufficient for expressing truth. He concludes that within Augustinian theory, "true rhetoric culminates in silence, in which the mind is in immediate contact with reality."⁴¹

Another important strand of silence in *De Doctrina Christiana* can be found in the "inexpressibility of God". When Augustine speaks about God, he comes across linguistic difficulties and concludes that he has actually not spoken about God:

Simply because God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable. For this reason God should not be called unspeakable, because even when this word is spoken, something is spoken. There is a kind of conflict between words here: if what cannot be spoken is unspeakable, then it is not unspeakable, because it can actually be said to be unspeakable.⁴²

³⁶ Roger P.H. Green, introduction to *On Christian Teaching*, by Augustine, trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xiv-xvii.

³⁷ Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 13.

³⁸ Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 2 (1962): 175, 191-192. Mazzeo traces the thoughts of Augustine on silence - and also his theory about truth and realities - back towards both Platonism and Christianity, because these ideologies include a strong philosophical theology of silence.

³⁹ A 'thing' can be understood in Augustine's text as - later described by Immanuel Kant - a thing in itself, a 'Ding an sich', not mediated through perception. See Green, introduction, xi-xii.

⁴⁰ Mazzeo, "Rhetoric of Silence," 178-181.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴² Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

This thought about the inability to speak properly about God, culminated in a negative theology of Medieval mystics - such as Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and Hadewijch (13th century).⁴³

The theological thinking of these mystics revolved around the thought that the world of the living was nothing compared to the divine. For that reason, the early mystics constantly searched for the experience of unification with God.⁴⁴ Along the same line of Augustine's thoughts, the mystics believed that words can never adequately express divinity, wherefore they regarded language "[...] as at best wanting, at worst profane, compared with the truth it would express".⁴⁵ Within the mystical discourse, the negative assertion of what language cannot say, is regarded as a means to designate the divine and eternal: the realm beyond words. This assumption shows an ambivalence towards language, for words are necessary, but insufficient to the aim pursued. Only silence could express this ultimate realm.⁴⁶

1.2.3 The ambivalence of silence

Meister Eckhart set out a theory where language, slowly but surely, draws into silence: where the human experience is moving towards transcendence, unity and infinity.⁴⁷ For Eckhart the trope of silence meant several things. First of all, the unification with God, and the understanding of his words could only be experienced through silent circumstances: "We cannot serve this Word better than in stillness and in silence: there we can hear it, and there too we will understand it aright - in the unknowing."⁴⁸ Furthermore, Eckhart mentions that those discovering the divine truth, those who experience the unity with God, are tongue-tied and cannot speak of this experience, because there are no words or images, to express an experience "so vast and so sublime".⁴⁹

According to Steven Katz, these ideas of the mystics reveal an evident contradiction. Although the mystic pursuit, described above, is marked by silence it is simply impossible to communicate this very same silence without language. Katz argues that the mystical

⁴³ Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 13. This negative theology was also influenced by the writings of John of the Cross and Pseudo-Dionysius.

⁴⁴ Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995), 5-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

⁴⁷ Karmen, MacKendrick, *Immemorial silence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 90.

⁴⁸ Maurice O'C Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad Herder, 2009), 43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 452 .

experience is not withdrawn from language, but shaped through linguistic styles and forms.⁵⁰ Silence and language are interdependent within the mystical thought: both concepts do not exist separately. It is exactly this ambivalence, between language and silence, signs and realities, the human experience and something higher, that developed itself through the eighteenth century in a more secular thinking on silence within modern culture.⁵¹

It is this use of ambivalences that appears characteristic for *Pense-Bête*. The sculpture incorporated poetry, as an allegorical expression, to convey a statement or message which refuses a straight forward reading. Broodthaers touched on some of these ambivalences when he reflected on the sculpture in an interview he carefully designed and edited in 1974, "Ten thousand francs reward: an interview with Irmeline Lebeer". In this interview Broodthaers uttered some lofty ideals, but also a great disappointment in the effects *Pense-Bête* had on its audience:

The book is the object that fascinated me, since for me it is the object of a prohibition. My very first proposition bears traces of this curse. The remaining copies of an edition of poems written by me served as raw material for a sculpture... Here you cannot read the book without destroying its sculptural aspect. This concrete gesture returns the prohibition to the viewer - at least that I thought it would. But I was surprised that viewers reacted quite differently from what I had imagined. Everyone so far no matter who, had perceived the object either as an artistic expression or as curiosity: "Look! Books in plaster!" No one had any curiosity about the text: ignorant of whether it was the burial of prose or of poetry, of sadness or of pleasure. No one was affected by the prohibition. Until that moment I had lived practically isolated from all communication, my life was fictitious. Suddenly it became real, on that level where it is a matter of space and conquest.⁵²

This citation reveals Broodthaers' ambivalent position towards the work, and its characteristic silence. He emphasized on the fact that the books in *Pense-Bête* were not completely unreadable, but rather suspended from reading. They still revealed something that could, or even should, be read. The fact that Broodthaers only put a small part of the lower half of the books into plaster, allowing them to be removed with ease, bears witness to this wish. Broodthaers had transformed his books into art, silenced his poetic work, yet he wanted people to read his poetic work: he wanted them to destroy its "sculptural aspect" and break through the insincerity of art.

⁵⁰ Steven, Katz, "Mystical speech and mystical meaning," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3-5.

⁵¹ Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 62-63.

⁵² Marcel Broodthaers and Irmeline Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," *October* 42 (1987): 44.

Put differently, Broodthaers used silence in order to communicate allegorically, as in poetry, but realized that this method embodied some great ambivalences: of silence and the expression of a message. These ambivalences are actually enhanced by the fact that the transformation of *Pense-Bête* had occurred in two stages. Before Broodthaers had silenced his last volume of poetry by means of plaster, he had pasted small geometric cut-outs of coloured paper on its pages. As a result of this, the words were covered with small rectangles and squares. These forms, however, could be lifted, making the poems only partially erased or precluded from the reading.⁵³ An active attitude of the reader, or spectator, was required in order to understand the poems in *Pense-Bête*.

Overall, the sculpture reveals Broodthaers used silence as a method. In the world of Broodthaers it was not the divine that made him tongue-tied, but the circumstances of a poet in Belgium's post-war society. Broodthaers could not address these circumstances better than through poetic silence. Hence, he played with the mystical ambivalences of silence: he wanted to speak through not speaking and stumbled upon a fertile negative strategy. He negated the normal mobility and legibility of *Pense-Bête*, while he wanted to speak through his poems.

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter made an attempt to reveal a notion of silence in the work of Marcel Broodthaers: silence as a form of diplomacy. As was argued by Buchloh and Haidu, Broodthaers' work demonstrates a peculiar stance towards his artistic statement. *Pense-Bête* subsequently showed that Broodthaers deployed a method of silence to articulate this statement.

The ancient theories of rhetoric and mysticism demonstrated that silence was used as a strategy to amplify and identify certain matters, which could not be put into words: matters beyond words. Only silence would do justice to these "unspeakable" or "unrepresentable" matters. The reasons for this method of silence appeared to fall into three different categories: a psychological silence, a political silence, and a metaphysical silence. All of these silences returned in *Pense-Bête*. The visual silence in this sculpture, made sure that Broodthaers' statement of failure, and his message that art is closely related to the economic system was amplified. At the same time, it reveals Broodthaers regarded art, and a method of silence, as a manner to convey this message.

⁵³ Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 59-60; Haidu, *The absence of work*, 55-56.

Moreover, this sculpture bore witness to some strong ambivalences that were characteristic for a metaphysical kind of silence: of the expression of silence and its message. Especially the theorists of mysticism struggled with the ambivalences of this metaphysical silence, as it proved that the unspeakable was always subjected to language: it could only be communicated through language - both written or spoken. This ambivalence developed itself through Romanticism in the modern thinking on silence. The next chapters will focus on this modern thinking, and demonstrate that Broodthaers' later works reveal some particular modernist and contemporary notions of silence.

CHAPTER 2. A SILENCE BY MATERIALS AND COMPOSITION

This second chapter will elaborate on a modernist notion of silence in the work of Marcel Broodthaers. It will focus on the exhibited artworks and the catalogue of the exposition *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* of 1966. I will start with a brief note on the relevance of this exhibition, and an investigation on Broodthaers' linguistic choice of materials. This will merge into a discussion on these materials, and the Romantic and modern theories of silence. Subsequently, the second part of this chapter will describe a notion of silence in the exhibited works, through Broodthaers' compositions and negative aesthetics.

2.1 A shift of poetics

Broodthaers' early career is characterized by works with three dimensional qualities: assemblages containing utensils, advertisement and a multitude of empty shells.⁵⁴ Most of these works were made a few years after Broodthaers' transformation of *Pense-Bête*, and exhibited in *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* at the Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp.⁵⁵ As suggested by the exhibition's title, Broodthaers primarily used deviant materials, such as mussels, eggs, fries, pots, and coal in this exhibition. With regards to notions silence, Broodthaers peculiar choice of empty shells, demonstrated in works as *Triomphe de moules* (fig. 3) and *Cabinet blanc et Table blanche* (fig. 4), forms an interesting research topic.

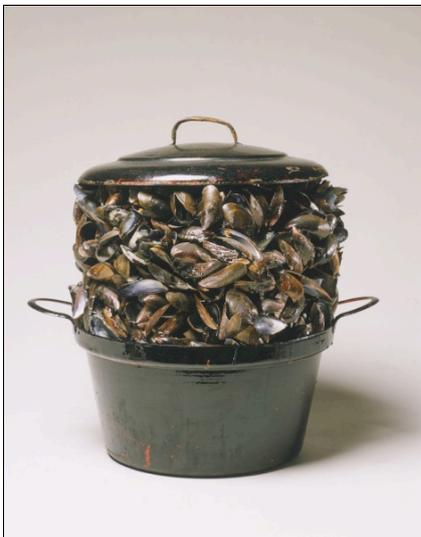


Fig. 3 Marcel Broodthaers, *Triomphe de moules*, 1965.



Fig. 4 Marcel Broodthaers, *Cabinet blanc et Table blanche*, 1965.

⁵⁴ Schwarz, ““Look! Books in Plaster,” 58.

⁵⁵ The works at this exhibition reveal a method of repetition and reproduction of objects from everyday reality, through which Broodthaers tried to reflect on the art of his time and inscribe himself within, but also apart from, artistic movements such as *Nouveau Réalisme* and Pop Art. See Schultz' discussion on the somewhat troubled relation between Broodthaers, Pop-Art and *Nouveau Réalisme* in Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 101-128.

In these works, Broodthaers covered objects from the household with the empty shells of mussels and eggs: detritus. Both Rachel Haidu and Sam Sackeroff commented on this re-use of materials, and argued that these empty shells constituted a linguistic game and a shift from the verbal into the visual.⁵⁶ Sackeroff clarifies this thought by arguing that Broodthaers' use of mussels and eggs demonstrates how he "[...] transformed poetic text into something that could be pushed past the page into the physical space of the gallery and beyond."⁵⁷ Following Sackeroff, Broodthaers' last volume of poems, *Pense-Bête*, can actually be regarded as a point of departure for this visual expansion, as it included the influential poem "La Moule" - which initiated an ongoing play with shells, form, containment, and hollowness:

La Moule
Cette roublarde a évité le moule de la société.
Elle s'est coulée dans le sien propre.
D'autres, ressemblantes, partagent, avec elle l'anti-mer.
Elle est parfaite.⁵⁸

The poem is based on a French pun: while "la moule" refers to a mussel, "le moule" refers to a cast or mould. A mussel is an organism which is said to create its own shell and creates itself, "coulée dans le sien propre". It avoids external pressures, "le moule de la société", and creates its own containment. Their shells, however, show a great resemblance towards each other: all of them are also "l'anti-mer", they are both form (a positive) and hollowness (its own negative, as well as a pars pro toto for the sea and the "anti-sea"). Therefore, the mussel "est parfait".⁵⁹

The artworks Broodthaers made with shells all emphasize this linguistic play with "mould". They reveal that Broodthaers sought a reunification with his old profession as a poet, and that the themes Broodthaers introduced in *Pense-Bête* were not buried into plaster, but rather reinvented through the visual arts. The following paragraphs will continue on this thought and will demonstrate two things; first, that the gesture of silencing *Pense-Bête* ushered a movement through which linguistic themes were made visual in art. Second, that

⁵⁶ Haidu, *The absence of work*, 11-12; Sam Sackeroff, "Literary Exhibitions," in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 135-136.

⁵⁷ Sam Sackeroff, "Literary Exhibitions," 136.

⁵⁸ Translation in Broodthaers and Schmidt, "Selections from "Pense-Bête," 14-15. The Mussel | This clever thing has avoided society's mould. | She's cast herself in her very own. | Other lookalikes share with her the anti-sea. | She's perfect.

⁵⁹ See also Rachel Haidu's discussion of this poem and her reference of mussels towards Freudian jokes on "elle" and female genitalia, in Haidu, *The absence of work*, 11-12.

this visual expansion brought along new notions of silence; this time through references of hollowness, absence and negation.

2.2 The silence of empty shells

In order to understand these references, Broodthaers' work will be related to a modern theory of silence. The theory on silence had changed considerably after its description in the ancient texts of rhetoric and mysticism. Especially from the eighteenth century onwards: within the Romantic thought on art.⁶⁰ Broodthaers' use of silence is embedded within this Romantic context and its aftermath in the twentieth century. This sub-chapter will demonstrate this assumption by providing a short discussion on the Romantic theory of art, and the perception of silence within this theory. Subsequently, this theory will be connected to a discussion of Broodthaers artworks exhibited at *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon*, which will focus on the linguistic and silent qualities of his materials.

2.2.1 A Romantic silence and its aftermath

2.2.1.1 The Romantic theory of art and silence

The Romantic roots of art are important for the conception of silence within the arts. Not only because the Romantics expanded the thought on silence, but also, as argued by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, because contemporary art is historically determined and marked by a Romantic legacy.⁶¹

Our perception of art, and writing on art, still depends on the Romantic thought.⁶² This conception stems from the eighteenth century, when the traditional system of the mechanical and liberal arts (*artes*) had to clear the path for a modern system of arts: the independent discipline of art and aesthetics.⁶³ Within this modern system, art became autonomous and inextricably intertwined with beauty, originality and the genius of the artist. No longer was art a means of conveying moral, religious or political lessons, rather it could devote itself to the mere fact of being art and a material artefact.⁶⁴ Inevitably, this proclamation of autonomy led

⁶⁰ Maarten Doorman, *De Navel van Daphne: over kunst en engagement* (Prometheus, 2015, 71); Frank vande Veire, *Als in een donkere Spiegel: de kunst in de modern filosofie* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij SUN: 2005), 31.

⁶¹ Peter, Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013): 11, 37-46.

⁶² Vande Veire, *Als in een donkere Spiegel*, 56.

⁶³ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 514-527.

⁶⁴ Vande Veire, *Als in een donkere Spiegel*, 56-58; Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 44.

the arts towards a quest for purpose and a problematization of its own autonomy, an ongoing discussion about autonomy and a need for societal relevance: commitment.⁶⁵

This modern sense of art is closely related to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). In this treatise Kant elaborates on the judgement of taste, and the idea of aesthetic autonomy, defined by Kant as “reinen uninteressierten Wohlgefallen”: a domain without practical function through which the beautiful and the sublime could be analysed.⁶⁶ Although Kant predominantly wrote about natural phenomena, his manner of thinking on aesthetic autonomy echoed through the arts by the writings of early Romantics, as Novalis (1772-1801) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829).⁶⁷ These early Romantics emphasized the autonomous position of art, and the fact that art could disclose something beyond our comprehension, an Absolute beyond what we can perceive: the un-known, or noumenon, which was intangible and unnameable. Novalis described this as followed:

Der Sinn für Poesie hat viel mit dem Sinn für Mystizismus gemein. Er ist der Sinn für das Eigentümliche, Personelle, Unbekannte, Geheimnisvolle, zu Offenbarende, das Notwendig Zufällige. Er stellt das Undarstellbare dar. Er sieht das Unsichtbare, fühlt das Unfühlbare.⁶⁸

According to Novalis, poetry or art was able to express this inexpressible or unrepresentable: a Romantic equivalent of the mystical unspeakable. The “Undarstellbare”, beyond regular words, became the secular unspeakable, for which the word ceased and silence appeared.⁶⁹

It is within this line of thought that Romantic poets searched for silence in their work. Both Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) for example, believed that the poet was a magician, who could reach for this intangible *Idée*, or Absolute,

⁶⁵ This tension between autonomy and engagement is regarded by Arnold Heumakers as the main characteristic of our modern concept of art. In *De Esthetische Revolutie* (2015) Heumakers argues convincingly for the influence of many thinkers for these concepts in art. An author who also wrote about this conception of art after the Romantics, is Jacques Rancière. He calls it the ‘aesthetic regime’ in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004). Moreover, an interesting project on contemporary art and the Romantic discussion is found in the ‘Autonomy Project’ of the Van Abbemuseum, held from 7 September 2011 till 9 September 2011. Sven Lütticken recently published the article “Neither Autocracy nor Automatism: Notes on Autonomy and the Aesthetic”, based on the discussions of this symposium on *e-flux*. Accessed November 7, 2016. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60614/neither-autocracy-nor-automatism-notes-on-autonomy-and-the-aesthetic>.

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Verlag, 2012), 46; Arnold Heumakers, “Aesthetic Autonomy and Literary Commitment. A Pattern in Nineteenth-Century Literature,” in *Aesthetic Autonomy. Problems and Perspectives*, ed. B. van Heusden and L. Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 25.

⁶⁷ Heumakers, “Aesthetic Autonomy and Literary Commitment,” 26-28. Following the early Romantics, the modern age was characterized by rationalism of Enlightenment, causing a fragmentary development of humanity and a division between nature and the human mind. Through its autonomous position art was able to unite this division.

⁶⁸ Gerhard Schulz, *Novalis: Leben Und Werk Friedrich Von Hardenbergs* (München: Beck, 2011), 203.

⁶⁹ Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 62; Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence”, 30.

through poetic language - “un langage universel”.⁷⁰ While Rimbaud became disenchanted by this thought, Mallarmé maintained that the poet could reach for this ‘Idée’ with words that constituted silence: words that were motivated - not arbitrary like everyday language - and marked by absence, the *Néant*.⁷¹ In his essay “Mimique” (1886) he emphasized this pursuit by stating: “Silence, the sole luxury after rhyme itself, an orchestra only marking with its gold, its brushing of thoughts and dusk, it presents meaning like a silent ode, and it is the poet's task, roused by the challenge, to translate it.”⁷²

According to Mallarmé the poet should translate silence in his work, through words which destroyed reality, or marked the absence of perceptible reality. Only then the “Idée” behind reality could appear.⁷³ To Mallarmé this thought was quite clear, and he exemplified this by his famous “absent flower”: when he spoke the word flower (*Je dis: une fleur!*), it would create a pure idea of a flower, absent from all bouquets, in the mind of the reader, or listener.⁷⁴

2.2.1.2 The failure of language: a Romantic aftermath

In his book *Language and Silence* George Steiner (1929) argued that the Romantic poets were among the first to address a literary silence: a “retreat from the word” and an “enter into silence”.⁷⁵ Although Mallarmé implicitly still expressed a strong confidence that language was able to reach for the Absolute, Rimbaud had given up on this quest and literally fell silent.⁷⁶ According to Steiner, both these poets addressed a growing suspicion towards the word and its meaning. Each in their own way, they argued that language had some evident

⁷⁰ See Rimbaud's poem “Adieu” or “Lettre du Voyant” (1871) in which he expressed the supposition that the poet could reach for the inexpressible or un-known: “La Poésie ne rythmera plus l'action; elle sera en avant”. Mallarmé emphasized the same sort of thought in his introduction to “Un Coup de Dés”. Chapter three will elaborate on this topic.

⁷¹ Roger, Pearson, *Mallarmé and the Circumstance: The translation of Silence* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-5.

⁷² Translated from original text: “Le silence, seul luxe après les rimes, un orchestre ne faisant avec son or, ses frôlements de pensée et de soir, qu'en détailler la signification à l'égal d'une ode tue et que c'est au poète, suscité par un défi, de traduire!”. Stéphane, Mallarmé, *Œuvre complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 310.

⁷³ Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 62; Dianna Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word: The Limits of Language and the Uses of Silence in the Poetry of Mallarmé, Rilke, and Vallejo* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 36.

⁷⁴ “Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calice sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets.” See Mallarmé, *Œuvre complètes*, 310.

⁷⁵ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 47, 66-67.

⁷⁶ Walter Strauss, *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 99. According to Walter Strauss nineteenth century poets had to choose between “either a poetry of silence or a silence without poetry”. Rimbaud choose the latter: he abandoned his profession as a poet, to start a career as a salesmen and trader in Africa.

limitations: only Mallarmé believed the poet could triumph these limitation, and Rimbaud did not.

Following Steiner, this suspicion towards language was part of a tendency by which the meaning of words was slowly falling into disgrace. The thought emerged that words were inadequate and imperfect: language had no fixed meaning and was always subject to change.⁷⁷ According to Steiner this movement culminated in the linguistics of Ferdinand De Saussure; his distinction between *signifiant* and *signifié*, and his idea that words do not refer to things themselves, or Absolutes, but only received meaning within the entire system of language.⁷⁸ Steiner subsequently concluded that the “retreat from the word” resulted in what is most famously characterized by Ludwig Wittgenstein as: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen” (1922), which basically meant that words could never suffice for the un-known or whatever exists beyond our consciousness.⁷⁹

Obviously, silence obtained a more abstract and hollow meaning within the modern context: first of all by referring to a secular concept of something higher, and second through the common belief in the incapacity and failure of language.

2.2.2 Broodthaers’ material silence

2.2.2.1 A hollow rhetoric of shells

Through his remarkable choice of materials, Broodthaers played with a Romantic notion of silence, and its disappointing aftermath. As was mentioned above, the materials of the empty shells, were all linguistic and served as rhetorical device: a visual reference to the hollowness of language.⁸⁰ Broodthaers revealed this thought in the catalogue of *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon*. On the first page of this catalogue he showed a photograph of a glass jar containing mussel shells, with a drawing of a mussel on the label. Above this photograph Broodthaers published his vision of rhetoric:

Ma rhétorique

Moi Je dis Je Moi Je dis Je
Le Roi des Moules Moi Tu dis Tu
Je tautologue. Je conserve. Je sociologue.

⁷⁷ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 38-39.

⁷⁸ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 111-112; Michel Leezenberg and Gerard de Vries, *Wetenschapsfilosofie Voor Geesteswetenschappen* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 234-235.

⁷⁹ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 112; Leezenberg and Gerard de Vries, *Wetenschapsfilosofie*, 223, 256.

⁸⁰ Jean-François Chevrier, “Rhetoric, System D ; or poetry in Bad Weather,” in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 24.

Je manifeste manifestement. Au niveau de mer des moules,
J'ai perdu le temps perdu.
Je dis, je, le Roi des Moules, la parole des Moules.⁸¹

In this poem the subject, “Je”, is the king of “Moules”. A king of empty shells: connoting both form and absence, according to the poem “La Moule” in *Pense-Bête*. The subject speaks, “manifeste”, but appears to have lost. His words are only an expression of absence and hollowness. Moreover, Broodthaers’ rhetoric points out that a subject is structurally incorporated in language. In order to say something about itself, the subject is represented by and dependent on words. In other words, the subject is empty outside the system of language.⁸² Broodthaers’ rhetoric appears to be a circle, characterized by words as empty as a hollow shell.

With this statement and explanation in mind, the exhibited artworks of *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* visualize the hollowness of language: they communicate the “retreat from the word”. His series of *Panneaux de moules* (fig. 5) demonstrate this thought. These wooden panels are simply painted, and decorated with masses of empty mussel shells glued to the surface. Nothing but empty creatures. Through the presence of these absent creatures Broodthaers visualizes his rhetoric; he demonstrated that the limitations of language in “Ma rhétorique”, the hollowness of language and the troubles with the subject, can be shown in art.⁸³



Fig. 5 Marcel Broodthaers, *Panneaux de moules*, 1966.

⁸¹ Translation in Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 115. My Rhetoric | Me I say I Me I say I | The King of Mussels Me You say You | I tautologue. I conserve. I sociologue. | I manifest manifestly. At the sea-level of mussels, | I have lost the lost time | I say, I, the King of Mussels, the word of Mussels.

⁸² Birgit Pelzer, “Marcel Broodthaers: The Place of the Subject,” in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), 188.

⁸³ Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 13. Haidu touched on this thought, but interpreted it differently. According to Haidu, the panels of mussels only refer to themselves, and their linguistic qualities. She argued that these panels communicate nothing: “the effect is that of a silencing, mute presence: the shells, emptied of their bodies seem to say nothing to us, and here is very little response from us that is obvious - except perhaps a chuckle”.

2.2.2.2 Œufs: “le moule” or “la moule”?

Broodthaers further elaborated on this rhetoric and silent presences, through his use of eggs. Right next to Broodthaers’ photograph of the glass jar with mussels and “Ma rhétorique”, the catalogue of *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* depicted a photograph of a work with eggshells, stuck onto a board in the shape of an egg. Above this depiction, Broodthaers printed part of a text he published in *Phantomas* (1965), entitled “Evolution ou l’œuf film”, in which he declared:

Tout est œufs. Le monde est œuf. Le monde est né du grand jaune, le soleil. Notre mère, la lune, est écailleuse. En écailles d’œuf pilées, la lune. Poussières d’œuf, les étoiles. Tout, œufs morts et perdus. En dépit des gardes, ce monde-soleil, cette lune, étoiles de trains entiers. Vides. D’œufs vides.⁸⁴

In this text Broodthaers stresses his symbolic preoccupation with eggs. Not because of the simplistic claim that all life stems from eggs, but because of the fact that within Broodthaers’ universe the empty eggshells symbolize the same kind of containment, or mould, as mussels. Just as mussels, eggs demonstrate that although the content was missing, the shells remain: both are form and absence at the same time.

In *L’Erreur* (fig. 6) Broodthaers revealed his play with “le moule”, “la moule” and empty eggshells in *optima forma*; as this work displays a grid build out of five rows of empty shells along the bottom of a dark monochrome panel.

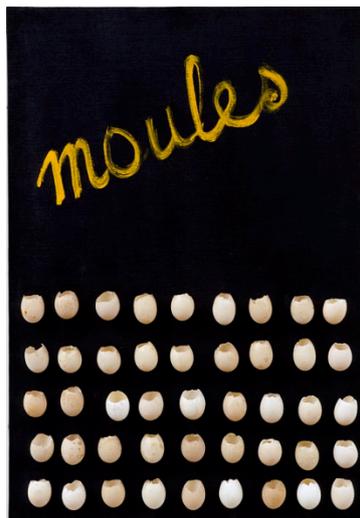


Fig. 6 Marcel Broodthaers, *L’Erreur*, 1965.

⁸⁴ Translation in Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 114. All is eggs. The world is an egg. The world is born of the great yolk, the sun. Our mother, the moon is shellish. Of crushed eggshells, the moon. Of egg dust, the stars. All, dead eggs. Despite the guards, this sun-world, this moon, stars, whole trains of them. Empty. Of empty eggs.

Although the title of this work, combined with the diagonally yellow painted word of “Moules”, alludes to a linguistic mistake between eggshells and mussels, Broodthaers’ own lexicon suggests otherwise. Following the poem of “La Moule”, the eggshell is a kind of “moule”, only in the sense of containment or mould. Thus, the mistake is not so obvious at all, or maybe not even a mistake. From this perspective, *L’Erreur* can best be understood as a semiotic game with meanings: a visual play with the doubt towards words, image and things.⁸⁵

Through this game Broodthaers went a step further than the above-mentioned theory of silence and Steiner’s “retreat from the word” had just taken us. Broodthaers’ doubt towards language was actually influenced by the work of René Magritte. In the interview “Ten thousand francs reward”, he stated:

I was haunted by a certain painting by Magritte, the one in which words figure. With Magritte, you have a contradiction between the painted word and the painted object, a subversion of the sign of language and that of painting so as to restrict the notion of the subject.⁸⁶

Magritte had examined this relation between the “painted object” and “painted word” - the thing and the name it is known for - in both painting and writing. An acclaimed artworks revealing this investigation is *La Trahison des Images* (1929) (fig. 7), depicting a painted pipe followed by the words “Ceci n'est pas une pipe”.⁸⁷



Fig. 7 René Magritte, *La Trahison des Images*, 1929.

⁸⁵ Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 13.

⁸⁶ Broodthaers and Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," 39.

⁸⁷ For a discussion on this work by Magritte and its influence on the work of Marcel Broodthaers see Thierry de Duve, “Figure Zero,” trans. Jill Ramsey, in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 30-39.

In his essay “Les Mots et les Images” (1929) Magritte had elaborated on his interest regarding the relationship between the word, image and object. He stated that an object was not intrinsically linked to the name it carried: “Un objet ne tient pas tellement à son nom qu’on ne puisse lui en trouver un autre qui lui convienne mieux”.⁸⁸ To illustrate this thought, he labelled the image of a leaf with the name of a fire weapon.⁸⁹

L’Erreur resembles a similar quest for a more suitable name and investigation into the thing and its name. Unlike Magritte, however, Broodthaers demonstrates that the given name could possibly correspond to the thing: although eggshells were ostensibly far removed from “la moule”, they were of a certain kind of “le moule”. *L’Erreur* demonstrates that Broodthaers did not completely refute the name, he simply exploited the possible meaning of the word. He questioned the supposed inadequacy of language by visual means. Could it be that language was not so hollow after all? Broodthaers certainly provides us with no answer. *L’Erreur*, *Panneaux de moules*, and the catalogue of *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* do provide us, however, with the thought that Broodthaers used mussels and eggs for their linguistic and ambivalent qualities: empty shells symbolize both form and absence; substance and hollowness. Consequently, these materials are able to address the difficulties of language after all: the ongoing search for meaning and its supposed hollowness.

Silently, these materials communicate questions of language. Empty shells not only visualize the “retreat from the word”, they embody it. At the same time, these materials demonstrate that language is crucial for the understanding of the work: language and the “retreat from the word” appear to be two sides of the same coin.

2.3 A translation of silence through negative aesthetics

Although the previous sub-chapter accentuated a notion of silence through Broodthaers’ materials, a silence for the eye with mussels and eggs, most writers have argued for a visualization of silence through structure, composition and a negative attitude towards representation. This sub-chapter will, therefore, focus on this broader sense of silence. It will commence with a reflection of silence in the visual arts following the theory of George Steiner, which will merge into a discussion of Theodor W. Adorno’s article “Commitment”. His aesthetical theory will be related to the breach of representation by the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, as described by Peter Bürger, Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster.

⁸⁸ Translated as “An object is not so linked to its name that we cannot find a more suitable one for it”, see René Magritte, “Les Mots et les Images,” *La Révolution surréaliste* 12 (1929), 32–33.

⁸⁹ Translated as “An object is not so linked to its name that we cannot find a more suitable one for it”, see René Magritte, “Les Mots et les Images,” *La Révolution surréaliste* 12 (1929), 32–33.

Subsequently, these theories will be related to the above-mentioned works of Marcel Broodthaers.

2.3.1 The “retreat from the word”: from the verbal to visual

Steiner touched on this broader sense of silence, when he proclaimed that the “retreat from the word” and the distrust towards the range of verbal language had a “tremendous” effect on modern art.⁹⁰

According to Steiner, pre-modern art demonstrates a substantive relation between language and the representation of reality, which coincides with a period where language constituted “the center of intellectual and emotive life” and reflected the belief that “words elicit a specific graphic equivalence in the mind”.⁹¹ Modern art on the other hand reveals a rupture with regards to the representation of existent reality, and a rebellious attitude towards verbal equivalence:

What is seen can be transposed into words; what is felt may occur at some level anterior to language or outside it. It will find expression solely in the specific idiom of colour and spatial organization. Non-objective and abstract art reject the mere possibility of a linguistic equivalent.⁹²

Steiner asserts that modern art discloses the same suspicion towards language as poetry and literature. In the visual arts this became discernible through an enduring tension between the possibilities and impossibilities of representation: a depiction of reality that was splintered, shifted, or simply disappearing.⁹³ He implies that the rejection of “a linguistic equivalent” was not only the result of the distrust towards verbal language, but also a possible escape from the limitation of language. Abstract art might be more suitable to represent existent reality, and whatever is beyond our perception, because of its focus on materiality.

Steiner argues that this process was strongly affected by the political inhumanities of the Second World War. The systematic war crimes and slaughter of millions of people had deprived language of its humanity, causing a new impulse to the “retreat from the word” and a necessity for different manners of expression.⁹⁴ Following this line of thought, a notion of

⁹⁰ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 31.

⁹¹ Based on Steiner’s line of reasoning, he understands “modern art” to be an umbrella term for all art after the impressionists, see *ibid.*, 40-41, 43, 108-109.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117-122.

silence would be present in modern art through a negative conception towards the representation of reality: emphasizing on rejections of both language and image.

2.3.2 Adorno's cultural critique

These thoughts appear to be interwoven with the writings on art by Theodor Adorno, and his well-known dictum of 1949, "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch".⁹⁵ This dictum has been widely quoted, and treated as a reference point for post-war art and culture: as such it has been regarded within Adorno's wider frame of cultural criticism, as well as taken out of its context.⁹⁶ According to Michael Rothberg, Adorno's dictum is embedded within his dialectical method, and his problems with a progressive vision of history: the modernists believe in a constant movement forward that breaks with the past.⁹⁷

Adorno assigns Auschwitz a critical point in history, "the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism."⁹⁸ He regards this dialectic to have collapsed, causing a disappearance of the opposition between art and barbarism. Following Adorno's line of thought, Auschwitz does not make art impossible or commands complete silence, but rather demands a radically different manner of representation. This thought appears to shed a different light on the work of Marcel Broodthaers, for his work alludes to the limits of representation; a game with words, images and objects; and a visualization of silence. The sculpture of *Pense-Bête*, inaugurating Broodthaers' rhetoric of silence, could even be regarded as a direct visualization of Adorno's dictum: it made poetry silent and signified a break with the past.

The plastification of *Pense-Bête* revealed a same sort of difficulty and ambivalence towards expression - of silence and speaking, autonomy and engagement - as described in Adorno's essay "Commitment" (1962). In this essay, Adorno clarifies his thoughts by arguing that his dictum questioned the possibility of deriving aesthetic pleasure from artistic representations after Auschwitz. The aesthetic principle of stylization could provide "an unthinkable fate" with meaning, and transfigure the horrors of the Holocaust into something consumable. At the same time, he stresses the necessity of artistic representation after Auschwitz, because only in art "suffering can still find its own voice."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 34.

⁹⁶ For an extensive discussion of this dictum and the influence on different critics, see Michael Rothberg, "After Adorno: Culture in the Wake of Catastrophe," *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 72 (1997): 45-81.

⁹⁷ Rothberg, "After Adorno", 48-50.

⁹⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 34.

⁹⁹ Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. Francis McDonagh, *New Left Review* 87-88 (1974): 85-88.

This paradox is constitutive for Adorno's theory of aesthetics, which insists on "the dual character of art as autonomy and social fact".¹⁰⁰ In "Commitment" Adorno relates this belief to his dictum, by stating that it "expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature".¹⁰¹ He argues that art is socially and politically relevant, but not through a content which reveals direct commitment. The political potential of art can be found in its autonomous position, as autonomous works of art "negate empirical reality, destroy the destroyer, which merely exists and by merely existing endlessly reiterates guilt."¹⁰² According to Adorno, both the material content and formal categories of artistic creations originates in the empirical reality; a committed work of art truly breaks free from this empirical reality by abandoning all commitments to the world. This is only possible through its autonomous position and a regrouping of the formal laws of art.¹⁰³

Following Adorno, artists are engaged in a practice, which balances between the tension of autonomy and (direct) commitment. In a subtle manner, they have to exploit the formal laws of art, and play with the ambivalence of art as both autonomous and a social fact, in order to reveal the duality, and disrupt the socio-political reality.¹⁰⁴ Committed art is constantly in the middle of these ambivalences, and searching for manners of expression, which negate empirical reality and break with traditional representational methods.¹⁰⁵ Broodthaers' works with empty shells, his play with materials, meanings and silence, attest to an awareness of representational methods, and, as the next sub-chapters will demonstrate, an exploitation of the formal laws of art.

2.3.3 Silence through negation within the avant-garde

The above-mentioned negative tendency is part of a salient strand within the writings on art and the aesthetics of silence. Especially with regard to the writings on modernist and post-modernist art, negative aesthetics appear to be widely described and closely related to a breach with representational methods, and the status of art.

Peter Bürger underlined the negative aesthetics in his influential study, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), on the historical avant-garde movements. According to Bürger movements such as Dada, Futurism and Russian Constructivism, reveal a loss of faith in the

¹⁰⁰ Adorno, "Commitment," 86. See also the discussion by Peter Osborne who embraces this conception: Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 44.

¹⁰¹ Adorno, "Commitment," 84.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 86-87.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 86. Adorno sees this properly reflected in the prose of Kafka and the plays of Beckett.

social and cultural order, and an urge to destroy, or silence, the conventions of bourgeois art; the aesthetics of Enlightenment.¹⁰⁶ Following Bürger, the historical avant-garde was led by a fierce critique on the institution of art (viz. the autonomy of art) and a revolutionary will to reconnect art with everyday life.¹⁰⁷ He defined these movements as: “[...] an attack on the status of art in *bourgeois* society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of human beings.”¹⁰⁸

This destructiveness was translated into art through a method of silence: techniques of structural and semantic breakdown, which reduced the mimetic depiction of reality to a minimum, and disposed art of some general assumptions on representation.¹⁰⁹ An author who explicitly relates these negative techniques to silence is Rosalind Krauss. In her essay “Grids” (1978) Krauss discusses the character of the grid within the field of modern art, and claims that the grid eminently declared the modernity of art through its emphasis on materiality, and concern about “Being” - as a secular kind of spirituality.¹¹⁰ An important aspect within this discussion is the fact that Krauss recognizes a craving for silence in grids:

[...] the grid announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse. As such, the grid has done its job with striking efficiency. The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language, has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.¹¹¹

Just like Steiner, Krauss pleads for a notion of silence in all modern art, which coincides with a negative approach towards narrative, discourse, representation and the “intrusion of speech”.

In his study on the neo-avant-garde, *The Return of the Real* (1996), Hal Foster, subsequently, argues that historical devices, such as ready-mades, collages, grids and monochromes, enabled the neo-avant-garde to create “new aesthetic experiences, cognitive

¹⁰⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 44-45.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 42-43.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 49. According to Bürger the historical Avant-Garde failed terribly in their mission to attack the autonomy of art, and reconcile art and life. Bürger claims that these movements changed the conventions in art, but not the autonomous position of art. The fact that they were institutionalized by the museum, or repeated by the neo-avant-garde, is indicative for this failure.

¹⁰⁹ Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 31-34.

¹¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 52. According to Krauss grids provided “a staircase for the Universal”: a nonfigurative language of verticals and horizontals that could reach for the Absolute.

¹¹¹ Krauss, "Grids," 50.

connections, and political interventions”.¹¹² Again, these methods initiated manners to criticize artistic conventions and scrutinize the foundations of art; this time through an investigation on the institutions that provided art with value: museums, galleries, etc.¹¹³ Foster proclaims that the methods of the neo-avant-garde reveal a rebellious attitude, and a crisis in representation: another wave of negative techniques and an exclamation of abstraction. Just as with their predecessors, their art is consequently marked by absences: of figuration, colour, forms, and subject.¹¹⁴

2.3.4 The absences in mussels and eggs

The discussed artworks of the exhibition *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* reveal a same kind of method as the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde: of monochromes, grids, assemblages and non-colour. *Cabinet blanc et Table blanche* showed a completely white composition of furniture with eggs; *L’Erreur* a monochrome panel combined with a grid of eggs; and *Panneaux de moules* another monochrome with mussels. Even though Broodthaers’ own writings indicate that he primarily used these strategies in order to criticise the art of his time,¹¹⁵ his method evinces a preoccupation with the boundaries of expression and representation.

Broodthaers’ works constantly pose questions about the relationship between objects, existent reality, and language. His use of materials demonstrates the extent to which he exploited the possibilities of visual means. When Broodthaers was asked in “Ten thousand francs reward” for an explanation behind the masses of empty shells in his work, he responded as followed:

The subject is rather that of the relationship established between the shells and the objects that support them: table, chair, or cooking pot. It’s on a table that you serve an egg. But on my table, there are too many eggs, and the knife, the fork, and the plate are absent - absences necessary to give speaking presence to the egg at the table, or to give the spectator an original idea of the chicken.

¹¹² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 14,21. Contrary to Bürger, Foster does render the historical avant-garde null or void because of failure; he rather points out that the historical avant-garde created new spaces of critical play for the neo-avant-garde.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹¹⁴ Peter Weibel, “Re-presentation of the Repressed: The Political Revolution of the Neo-avant-garde,” in *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics*, ed. Èric Alliez and Peter Osborne (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 128-129; Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 14.

¹¹⁵ Marcel Broodthaers and Jean-Michel Vlaeminckx, “Entretien avec Marcel Broodthaers,” *Degre Zero*, No. 1 (1965).

Thus, in order to evoke a sense of presence - of either an egg or a chicken - Broodthaers accumulated his materials to such an enormous extent that he rejected what was normal: absences were articulated and beginning to “speak”. Through these absences the spectator was led to “an original idea”. It is interesting that this citation resembles Mallarmé’s thought on the “absent flower” and the presence of the “Idée” through words that constitute silence.¹¹⁶ Only with Broodthaers there were no words that constituted silence, but objects.

Moreover, the theories in this sub-chapter, especially the writing of Adorno, demonstrate that the negative aesthetics are intertwined with a discussion on the status of art: on autonomy and social relevance. Broodthaers’ poetic materials of empty shells, combined with monochromes, grids, and assemblages, exemplifies how he played with the formal qualities of art, and possibilities and impossibilities of representation. His artworks reveal much ambivalences and refuse a straight forward reading; as such, Broodthaers discloses his own commitment while focusing on autonomy and methods of silence.

2.4 Sontag and Broodthaers: an aesthetics of silence

One of the few writers, who has related the above-mentioned tendencies in art towards silence, is Susan Sontag. In her essay “The Aesthetics of Silence” (1967) Sontag described that the modern period of art was characterized by a persistent search for myths and justifications of existence.¹¹⁷ The latest myth was a craving for “[...] the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the “subject” (the “object,” the “image”), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.”¹¹⁸

A problem Sontag observes, is that this craving for silence - and allied ideas such as emptiness, reduction and “zero-degree” - clashes with the “material” character of art itself: a same sort of ambivalence towards silence and the medium as expressed by the mystics.¹¹⁹ Interesting in the case of Broodthaers, is that he apparently went along with this craving for silence - through his reflection on the neo-avant-garde - but that his use of mussels and eggs proved he managed to resolve, or at least play with, this clash between silence and the material character of art. The empty shells of *L’Erreur* and *Panneaux de moules*, emphasized

¹¹⁶ See sub-chapter 2.2.1.

¹¹⁷ Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence”, 3-4. Although Sontag does not clearly define her understanding of the term “modern period”, she states that she regards “modern period” to be the period during which the system of “arts” transformed itself into “art”. Based on the discussion of the Romantic theory of art, in sub-chapter 2.2.1, I take this to be from the eighteenth century onwards.

¹¹⁸ Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence”, 4-5.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 11-15.

the same ambivalences and movement towards reduction, as the method of the grid or the monochrome.

According to Sontag this movement of art towards silence, revealed a spiritual aspect, as a zone of contemplation and consciousness of the absolute truth, as well as a provocative aspect, since silence is the furthest extension of a reluctance to communicate. The ability to negate art's relationship with existent reality, with history, and the audience is subsequently regarded by Sontag as one of the most important strands within the aesthetics of silence:

Silence is the artist's ultimate other worldly gesture: by silence he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, consumer, antagonist, arbiter, and distorter of his work.¹²⁰

Following Sontag most modern and contemporary artists, do not carry this gesture towards a permanent silence - a complete renunciation of a vocation as an artist. Even when this happens, as with Marcel Duchamp who decided to withdraw himself from the art scene in order to play chess, Sontag argues that their choice of permanent silence does not negate their work. On the contrary, she argues that this gesture retroactively imparts power and authority to what was broken off, and attests to a truly serious attitude, which invokes reactions and a dialogue.¹²¹ For example, Joseph Beuys' performance *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated* (1964), in which Beuys criticized Duchamp's self-imposed silence, and protested against Duchamp's refusal to engage in the social and political questions that his ready-mades had raised.¹²²

Most artists, however, translated their craving towards silence differently, and continued to communicate with their audience in a manner that disrupted the expectation of the audience: the audience cannot understand the artistic language, for the artists silenced their visual vocabulary.¹²³ Sontag argues that modern art's habit of displeasing and frustrating the audience can be regarded as "a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence".¹²⁴ Broodthaers' own gesture of silence relates to a similar interaction with the audience: first, by his frustration towards the audience, as was shown in *Pense-Bête*, second, by the fact that Broodthaers transformed his poems into visual objects marked by negative aesthetics - grids,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹²¹ Ibid., 5-6.

¹²² Chris Thompson, "Silence and Savant-garde: Beuys, Fluxus, Duchamp," *Performance Research* 7, no. 3 (2002): 15.

¹²³ According to Sontag this goes hand in hand with a tendency of artists to become free from the "enslavement of history", an enter into an ahistorical condition; Sontag 1967: 15.

¹²⁴ Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence", 7-8.

monochromes, and assemblages - which were all but easy to comprehend. Following Sontag, the aesthetics of silence are closely intertwined with a similar interactive and provocative attitude towards the audience. She argues that silence has a performative character: it never ceases to imply an opposite, and exists only by the grace of the audience perception of its opposite.

The notion of silence, emptiness, and reduction sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc. - which either promote a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or confront the artwork in a more conscious, conceptual way.¹²⁵

Silence, therefore, exists through the interplay between the artist's plea for a new vision, a cultural clean slate, and the audience's awareness of this alternative vision: it comprises an attack on the audience, and a strategy to improve their experience at the same time. Consequently, it attests to the statements of Adorno in "Commitment", regarding a breach of representation and belief that "it could be otherwise".¹²⁶

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted a notion of silence in Broodthaers' works through the modern theory of silence. Although it provided a very casuistic and thematic impression of his works - as it solely focused on some of the works exhibited at *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* - it revealed that Broodthaers' works are strongly dependent on language; and as long as language is involved, notions of silence appear not far away.

Broodthaers' excessive use of mussels and eggs proved that even though he had silenced his last volume of poetry, the themes of his poems revived. The page of the poem was expanded to the exhibition space, while taking along some silent aspects. The empty shells symbolized form and absence, and were able to visually address the difficulties of language: the "retreat from the word" and the ongoing search for meaning in language. The second part of this chapter demonstrated that not only Broodthaers' materials revealed a notion of silence, but also his techniques. His reflection on the strategies of the (neo-)avant-garde corresponded to an ongoing search for the possibilities and impossibilities of representation. The combination of grids, monochromes, and assemblages, together with the materials of empty shells, denied a straightforward understanding of his work. Through this preoccupation with provoking, frustrating and creating awareness with the audience,

¹²⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁶ Adorno, "Commitment," 86-88.

Broodthaers attests to the aesthetics of silence, as described by Susan Sontag, and to Adorno's thoughts on committed art.

The last part of this thesis will continue with the performative aspects of silence, the interaction with the audience, through the intertwinement between the work of Marcel Broodthaers and theories of Stéphane Mallarmé, Max Picard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Cage.

CHAPTER 3 UN COUP DE DÉS: WRITING AN IMAGE/THE IMAGE OF WRITING

In this chapter a notion of silence in the works of Marcel Broodthaers will be revealed by his entanglement with the writings of Mallarmé: manifested notably in Broodthaers' "literary" exhibitions of 1968-1969, and his reworking of *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (1897) - Mallarmé's last completed and most discussed poem. While the first part of this chapter focuses on Mallarmé's writings, his thoughts on silence, and reflections in *Un Coup de Dés*; the second part focuses on Broodthaers' appropriation of this poem: his own translation of poetic and visual silence into the visual field alone, evoking poetry.

3.1 Mallarmé and the writing of an image

The first encounter of Broodthaers with Mallarmé was in 1945, when Broodthaers was presented a copy of *Un Coup de Dés* by René Magritte.¹²⁷ This innocent gift initiated a lifelong fascination with the work of Mallarmé, and an enduring reflection on the relationship between words, image and space. Broodthaers even stated that he regarded Mallarmé to be the fountainhead of modern art: "il invente inconsciemment l'espace moderne".¹²⁸ Moreover, he considered *Un Coup de Dés* a treatise for the art of his time, because it acknowledged the importance of both poetry and plastic arts. In order to comprehend Broodthaers' appropriation of Mallarmé, knowledge of Mallarmé's vision of poetry is required. This chapter will elaborate on this topic. It will revert to the theory of the previous chapter, and emphasize on the silent aspects within the poetry of Mallarmé, especially with regards to its reflections in *Un Coup de Dés*.¹²⁹

3.1.1 The modern turn of Mallarmé

Although the complete works of Mallarmé account for only two volumes, the literature on Mallarmé occupies many bookshelves. This is mainly due to the enigmatic and metaphysical character of his work; causing his work to remain open for many interpretations. Notwithstanding the multitude of opinions, most authors are united by the thought that Mallarmé was responsible for transforming the course of modern poetry. According to Malcolm Bowie, Mallarmé's writings function as a hinge: while it developed itself through the Romantic mode of thought, it entails a strong emphasis on materiality and fragmentation,

¹²⁷ Broodthaers recalled this encounter with René Magritte in an open letter dated December 2, 1969.

¹²⁸ Broodthaers in Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 38.

¹²⁹ This chapter will only emphasize on authors who focused on the theory of silence relating to the work of Mallarmé. The conducted research will, therefore, be a thematic reading; it will not aim for a detailed exegesis of Mallarmé's last work.

through which it can be regarded an apprentice within the open-ended tradition of the modern and postmodern thought.¹³⁰

In his own time, the work of Mallarmé was known by just a handful of privileged artists. Only after his death in 1898, the word spread and Mallarmé was hailed as the “herald” of the twentieth century.¹³¹ As described in the previous chapter, Mallarmé’s work evolved around metaphysical questions; foremost it entailed the thought that the poet should translate silence in his work - paradoxically enough by means of words. This thought appeared tightly connected to the nineteenth century perception of verbal language; its critique of the capacities of the word; and the obsession with the limits of expression. Consequently, the emerging distrust of language functioned as an attractive force towards the “retreat from the word”¹³²: a rupture by means of communication, and an opportunity to explore the possibilities of silence.

Most authors emphasized that this negative attitude towards verbal language created an abstract and self-reflexive understanding of modern poetry.¹³³ In his writings on Mallarmé, Jean Paul Sartre reflected on this thought. He recalled Mallarmé’s own words, and vision of poetry becoming utterly self-conscious:

Above all else, the modern poet is a critic. That’s what I observe in myself. I created my work exclusively through a process of *elimination*, and whatever truth emerged in the process only did so with the loss of an impression which, after flaring up for a brief instant, burned itself out.¹³⁴

Unavoidably, this critical stance led to a hermetic method wherein the poetic act became its own subject: a self-conscious poem reflecting on the possibilities and impossibilities of language. According to Roger Pearson, Mallarmé regarded this self-reflexive understanding of poetry as one of the primary tasks of the poet; for he believed it was the poet’s task to overcome the randomness of language and “use language in spite of everything, in spite of its

¹³⁰ Malcolm Bowie, *Mallarmé and the Art of Being Difficult* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978), 4-5.

¹³¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé, or, The Poet of Nothingness*, trans. Ernest Sturm (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 145. The reception of Mallarmé received a great impulse by the Aspen 5+6 issue (1976) dedicated to him, containing 28 items among which the essays “The Death of an Author” by Roland Barthes and “The Aesthetics of Silence” by Susan Sontag. For a beautiful overview of Mallarmé’s influence on twentieth century art and literature, see the article by Robert Greer Cohn, “Mallarmé’s Wake,” in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Greer Cohn and Gerald Gillespie (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 277-295.

¹³² Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 47, 66-67.

¹³³ Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word*, 5.

¹³⁴ Mallarmé in Sartre, *The Poet of Nothingness*, 126.

ultimate uncontrollability, in spite of our mortality, in spite of our ultimate lack of an answer to the mystery of existence.”¹³⁵

3.1.2 Nothingness and a “surrounding silence”

As cited above, Mallarmé deployed a method of elimination to overcome the encountered randomness.¹³⁶ This pursuit ultimately led him towards nothingness - *le Néant*: an abstract concept shaped by a strategy of purification, reduction, emptiness and absence.¹³⁷ Subsequently, he coupled this philosophy of nothingness with beauty: “J’ai fait une assez descente au Néant pour pouvoir parler avec exactitude. Il n’y a que la Beauté - et elle n’a qu’une expression parfaite: la Poésie.”¹³⁸ This “descent into nothingness” entailed some strong implications. It would abolish the arbitrariness of language and all subjectivity of the poem: both the subject of the poem, the “I” of the writer and the “I” in the poem, and the object of the poem, the world defining the perception of the subject, would be destroyed.¹³⁹ Mallarmé regarded this process as a stairway towards the Absolute, demolishing all contingencies relating to our time-bound existence.¹⁴⁰

Through this line of thought, Mallarmé attempted to translate silence in his work. By its negative tendency, and expression of absence and nothingness, the poem became a closed system rejecting direct communication and worldly references. Perceptible reality was silenced, in order to present an image of truth by suggestion. Thereto, the poem came close to the brink of the unspeakable.¹⁴¹ This endeavour was part of Mallarmé’s ambitious and ideal project of *Le Livre*: the book that would end all books. Although this book was never completed, Mallarmé’s manuscripts reveal a preoccupation with writing a book that would function as microcosm of the universe - an “orphyic explanation of Earth”. This book would be freed from all subjectivity, and transcend the limitations posed by the material qualities of a

¹³⁵ Pearson, *Mallarmé and the Circumstance*, 5-6.

¹³⁶ Most commenters relate this method to the philosophy of Hegel, and his believe that the Absolute could be achieved through a dialectic process and a movement of negation. See Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word*, 39; Robert Greer Cohn, *Mallarmé’s Un Coup de Dés: an exegesis* (New York: AMS Press, 1980),10.

¹³⁷ Exegetes of Mallarmé’s work appear divided over the exact meaning of *le Néant*. While some argued for a complete hollow concept, others argued that this emptiness contained a sense of a Platonic idea. Yra van Dijk argued convincingly for something in the middle. According to Van Dijk, Mallarmé’s sentence “Je dis: “une fleur”” and his absent bouquet, implicated that Mallarmé’s absences contained a certain Platonic dimension. At the same time his conception of *Idée* contained a kind of emptiness. See Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 39-40.

¹³⁸ Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word*, 41.

¹³⁹ Strauss, *Descent and Return*, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Many writers, however, underlined that his philosophy designated “poetic suicide”. See discussion in Sartre, *The Poet of Nothingness*, 139.

¹⁴¹ Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word*, 45.

book: the chapters of *Le Livre* would be loosely bound, could be read in any order, and even performed through different artistic forms.¹⁴²

3.1.3 *Un Coup de Dés*: a material and silent vision of text

In many ways *Un Coup de Dés* embodies Mallarmé's plans for *Le Livre*. Not only because the poem incorporates his philosophy of nothingness, but also because it visually complements his thoughts by the positioning of words; varied typography; folds of the page; and use of the blank spaces.¹⁴³

Yra van Dijk had posed an interesting perspective on these material qualities of Mallarmé's work. In her research on the significance of typographic blanks in modern poetry, Van Dijk argues that the emphasis on materiality was part of the nineteenth century devaluation of language. Due to the decline of language, the visual aspects of the verse began to express meaning by a directness that language supposedly lacked: form as content. The modern poem consequently invites the reader to pay attention to typographic blanks: intervals, gaps, and empty spaces.¹⁴⁴ Van Dijk relates this movement to theories of silence in Romantic and modern poetry, and demonstrates that typographic blanks reveal the inability to put things into words: "the blank spaces 'expresses' what the poet considers to be the possibilities and impossibilities of poetry or language itself".¹⁴⁵ Therefore, she understands typographic blanks to be a complex blend of silence and speech: a manner to convey meaning despite, and because of, the shortcomings of language.

In the preface to *Un Coup de Dés*, Mallarmé has elaborated on his particular use of material qualities.¹⁴⁶ He describes his interest in white spaces as an experiment with "espacement de la lecture". The white space encloses words with a "silence alentour"; it would intervene, each time an image had to disappear in order to be succeeded by another: "le papier intervient chaque fois qu'une image, d'elle-même, cesse ou rentre, acceptant la succession d'autres". Mallarmé expands this thought by stating that the loose structure of the

¹⁴² Cohn, *Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés*, 3; Strauss, *Descent and Return*, 82-84; Mary Lewis Shaw, *Performance in the Texts of Mallarmé: The Passage from Art to Ritual* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 185-186.

¹⁴³ William Carpenter, "'Le Livre' of Mallarmé and James Joyce Ulysses," in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Greer Cohn and Gerald Gillespie (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 187-188.

¹⁴⁴ Yra van Dijk, "Reading the Form: The Function of Typographic Blanks in Modern Poetry," *Word & Image* 27, no. 4 (2011): 407-408.

¹⁴⁵ Van Dijk notes that these blanks illustrates a similar sort of ambivalence towards language and the unrepresentable, as seen in mystical texts with regards to the unspeakable: "in the blank spaces the poet is encumbered by the complex desire to speak and simultaneously remain silent"; Van Dijk van Dijk, "Reading the Form," 408.

¹⁴⁶ See also the extensive discussion on the blank spaces within the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé in Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 38-51.

poem, its radical spacing, created a “subdivisions prismatiques de l’Idée”: a kaleidoscopic reflection of abstract ideas. These reflections are suggested by the words of the poem, and imposed through a typography that creates movement, tempo and rhythm. The poem subsequently acquires some performative aspects: images of ideas would appear on the mind of the reader, through a material structure, which occasionally accelerates, or slows down, the way of reading.¹⁴⁷ Because of this material structure, many commentators argued the poem could be read as a musical score or choreography.¹⁴⁸

Un Coup de Dés

All the above-mentioned ideas on “composition” and philosophy are enshrined in the text of *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N’Abolira Le Hasard* (fig. 8).¹⁴⁹ The poem is generally regarded as indecipherable and impossible to paraphrase into a single meaning; nevertheless, a few interpretative elements appear to stand out.¹⁵⁰ *Un Coup de Dés* consists of eleven pages, whereby the verso and recto page form a unit. The title, translated as “A throw of the dice will never abolish chance”, is dispersed over four pages and written in large identical capitals. It can be considered the main sentence, or core, of the poem.¹⁵¹

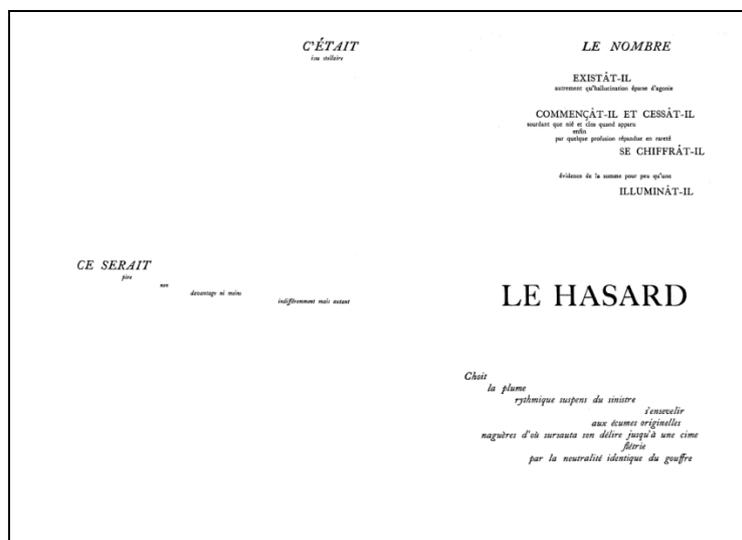


Fig. 8 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup De Dés Jamais N’abolira Le Hasard: Poème*, 1914, p. 9.

¹⁴⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, preface to *Un Coup De Dés Jamais N’abolira Le Hasard: Poème* (Paris: La Nouvelle Revue Française, 1914).

¹⁴⁸ Jacques Rancière, “The Space of Words: From Mallarmé to Broodthaers,” in *Porous Boundaries: Text and Images in Twentieth Century French Culture*, ed. Jérôme Game (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 47.

¹⁴⁹ For a digital edition of the 1914 publication see <https://math.dartmouth.edu/~doyle/docs/coup/scan/coup.pdf>. Accessed November 7, 2016.

¹⁵⁰ For a complete and word-by-word analyses of *Un Coup de Dés* see Robert Greer Cohn, *Mallarmé’s Un Coup de Dés: an exegesis* (New York: AMS Press, 1980).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Around this (repeated) main sentence, words and phrases are organized - grouped by font size, style, and spacing - in branches or twigs, to describe the setting and happenings of the poem. Although each page narrates a different story, namely the development of several sciences, an overarching story is told around the four parts of the title.¹⁵² This story of *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* revolves around a shipwreck at sea. As an ultimate attempt to eliminate chance, and reverse the imminent faith of the ship, the captain had to choose whether he threw the dice or not. He decided to restrain from this responsibility: casting the dice would be pointless following the poem's title; the captain could never control the power of the sea - or the chaos of existence. Consequently, he went down with the ship.

In his study on this poem, Robert Greer Cohn argues that this narrative is a counterpart of *Igitur*, an earlier poem of Mallarmé, in which the poetic personae drank poison in order to die and control the coercive circle of life. According to Cohn, *Igitur* expresses Mallarmé's "notion that the Absolute could be achieved by a supreme throw of the dice": a poetic creation could abolish chance and the accompanying contingencies of time.¹⁵³ *Un Coup de Dés* on the other hand renounces this ambitious belief, as it marks the inability of poetic language to articulate an Absolute. Dianna Niebylski complemented this thought by stating the latter poem reveals that "as long as the poem depends on language, it will be subject to the laws of time". She regards the captain's refusal to cast the dice as a wise decision not to repeat *Igitur*'s foolish gesture: "[...] casting the dice in an attempt to deny chance by affirming it."¹⁵⁴

However, in the last two pages of the poem, Mallarmé alluded to a counterstatement: an escape from the certain tone of "Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard". On these pages he stated in small capitals: "Rien n'aura lieu que le lieu excepté peut-être une constellation"; translated as "Nothing will have taken place but the place except perhaps a constellation". Although these words appear insignificant and doubtful, compared to the main statement, most commenters of *Un Coup de Dés* argue that this exception opens the door to seek the Absolute elsewhere: in the constellation, or material structure of the poem.¹⁵⁵ Through this last exception Mallarmé expresses the believe, or hope, that even though the limits of poetic language were reached, the whimper of defeat might be dispelled by the composition or arrangement of the poem.

¹⁵² Ibid., 11.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word*, 73.

¹⁵⁵ Although it is unclear what Mallarmé exactly meant with "constellation" most authors point out that it is related to the composition of words and material aspects of the poem, for example the ideograms, specifically the Big Dipper, or the whole poem itself. See Van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt*, 46; Cohn, *Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés*, 103.

Throughout his discussion on the poem, Cohn elaborates on this possibility. Firstly, he remarks that this piece of poetry reveals a self-enclosed and circle-like structure: while it begins with the words *Un Coup de Dés*, it also ends with these words. Secondly, he argues that the poem ceases to be governed by the linear and one-dimensional succession of words. Instead, the structure of *Un Coup de Dés* becomes much more spatial: each page begins at the top, mostly of the left page, and ends at the bottom of the right page. It functions as a metaphor for the rise and fall of the sciences, and of course the shipwreck: the fate of the captain, or the poet. Cohn, furthermore, points out that on each page of the poem the reader is able to find an appropriate ideogram: a group of juxtaposed words which represent an idea by a concrete and visual image.¹⁵⁶

The words of *Un Coup de Dés* are organized in a structure that mirrors the Big Dipper; following Cohn the most important ideogram and an image of both the microcosm and the poem itself. According to Octavio Paz this spatialization and visualization of poetry is Mallarmé's greatest achievement. He argues that Mallarmé took the trope of poetic failure, the negation of poetry and language, as a stepping stone to writing a poem open to infinity: although *Un Coup de Dés* denies the possibility of saying something Absolute, it creates a handful of signs, which have become the "archetype of the future poem and the plenary affirmation of the sovereignty of the word. It says nothing and it is language in its totality."¹⁵⁷

3.2 Broodthaers and the image of writing

3.2.1 The reworking of *Un Coup de Dés*

Broodthaers' appropriation of this "future poem" is reflected in the exhibition *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblidouebliou/S, Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* (1969) at the Wide White Space in Antwerp.¹⁵⁸ On this occasion Broodthaers published and exhibited several counterfeit editions of Mallarmé's 1914 edition of *Un Coup de Dés*.¹⁵⁹ In each of these reproductions words are nearly absent: Broodthaers stripped the poem from its linguistic character and emphasized purely its spatial quality.

¹⁵⁶ Cohn, *Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés*, 11, 20-21.

¹⁵⁷ Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre: The Poem, the Poetic Revelation, Poetry and History*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 249-252.

¹⁵⁸ The title of this exhibition was a pun, based on the English pronunciation of the initials of the gallery.

¹⁵⁹ Although the poem was first published in the magazine *Cosmopolis* in 1897; this version was printed in normal page-sequence. Only posthumously in 1914 was *Un Coup de Dés* printed by NFR in accordance with Mallarmé's full and final intentions. Therefore, this edition is generally regarded as the "true" *Un Coup de Dés*. See Cohn, *Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés*, 3.

Broodthaers' most literal reworking of *Un Coup de Dés* comprises an edition of three hundred books printed on white opaque paper.¹⁶⁰ Although these books replicated the 1914 edition, they bore some important modifications. While the front-page corresponds to Mallarmé's edition, Broodthaers replaced Mallarmé's name with his own; the word "Poème" after the title with the word "Image"; and the publishers logo of NRF with the names of Wide White Space and Galerie Michael Werner - who subsidized Broodthaers' experiment. The book's interior, subsequently, features Mallarmé's preface, printed in the same prose form as the 1914 edition, and a plastic reworking of *Un Coup de Dés*. In this reworking Broodthaers replaced words with solid black rectangles, resembling the same spatial arrangement and letter or line dimensions as the poem, thus amplifying its innovative composition of words.¹⁶¹

Broodthaers published two other editions of this adaption.¹⁶² The second edition is similar to the above-mentioned, but printed on translucent paper and issued in only ninety copies (fig. 9). Due to the semi-transparent character of this paper, the black bars appear to communicate with, and through, each other. Taken together the pages and bars form different structures, depending on how many pages are piled up. Moreover, one page could be "read" with the help of a sheet of cardboard attached to each copy.

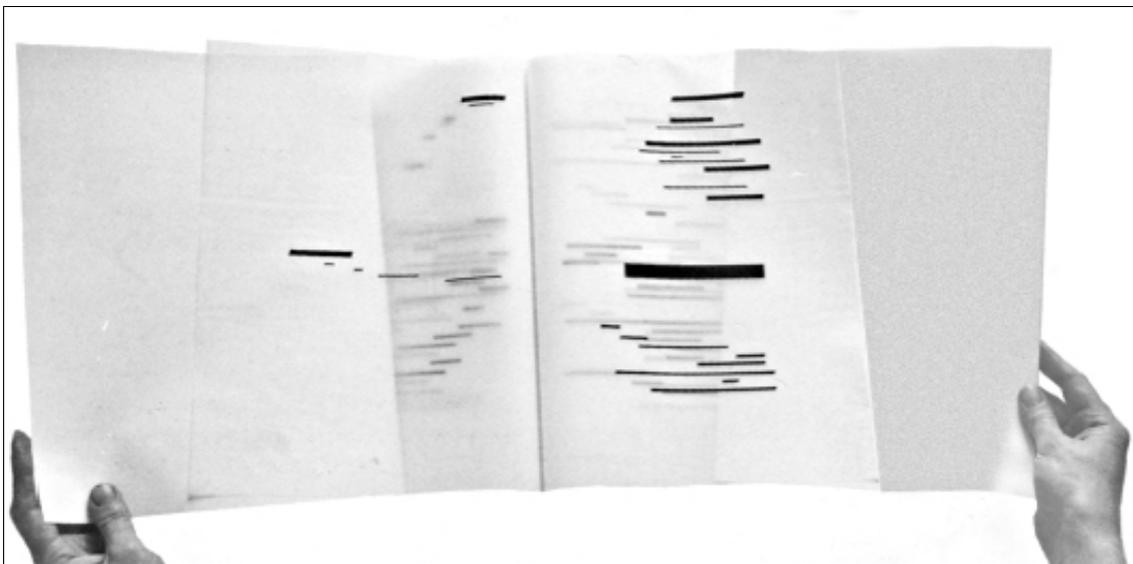


Fig. 9 Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Coup De Dés Jamais N'abolira Le Hasard: Image*, 1969. Edition of transparent mecanographic paper.

¹⁶⁰ These editions were regarded by Broodthaers as an artist's book.

¹⁶¹ Schultz, *Strategy and Dialogue*, 36-37.

¹⁶² Sam Sackeroff, "Literary Exhibitions," 138. The specific number of copies mirrored that of the three different editions of *Un Coup de Dés* issued in 1914.

The third edition picks up on this idea, but differs significantly from the previous editions. It is made out of twelve anodized aluminium folios and issued in an edition of ten. These folios are installed right next to each other, covering the length of the gallery, and display one blank page, symbolizing the preface of *Un Coup de Dés*, and the eleven pages of the poem: again, the words are erased by an arrangement of black bars (fig. 10).

These editions - opaque, translucent and aluminium - reveal Broodthaers' transformation of Mallarmé's poem into an image: an abstract and graphical impression of words. All the adaptations were exhibited alongside the last remnants of Mallarmé's poem: written with chalk on the back of three black shirts, and delivered as a speech through a cassette player with a recording of Broodthaers' recital of *Un Coup de Dés*.¹⁶³ Overall, this appropriation reveals some important and ambivalent aspects. While the black rectangles symbolize the erasure and absence of words, these very same words are highlighted as something to be worn and heard. Moreover, the rectangles amplify the contrast between black and white on the page, and the idea that Mallarmé's spatial experiment is expanded through different media and the actual space of the gallery.



Fig. 10 Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Coup De Dés Jamais N'abolira Le Hasard: Image*, 1969. Edition of aluminium plates.

3.2.2 Broodthaers' own throw of the dice: a reflection of silence

According to Haidu these aspects are of primary importance regarding Broodthaers' dedication to the work of Mallarmé. She argues that there are three ways to read the exhibition. First, as a "critique of conceptual and minimalist's art consolidation of language as the ultimate heroic sign system". Second, as an extension of Mallarmé's endeavour to create *Le Livre*: the microcosm which transcended the material boundaries of poetry. And third, as a

¹⁶³ Sam Sackeroff, "Literary Exhibitions," 137.

reflection on a new generation of philosophers and theorists who entitled Mallarmé as the new “icon” of the modern and postmodern thought.¹⁶⁴ Although these arguments are well-founded, I believe Broodthaers’ appropriation of *Un Coup de Dés* provides more than enough material to take these arguments to another level: that of silence.

Broodthaers’ artistic practice, his mission of creating “something insincere”, once again brought him towards a method of silence. His reworking of *Un Coup de Dés* reveals a familiar erasure of poetry: the black rectangles made the words of the poem illegible and left the spectator with a mute presence of Mallarmé’s last work. Analogously to Mallarmé’s vision of poetry this strategy appears to be inspired by metaphysical reasons: Broodthaers took Mallarmé’s quest for the Absolute; his investigation on the possibilities and impossibilities of language; and his process of purity, elimination and nothingness, just one step further. As was argued in the discussion of Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés* expressed a certain doubt with regards to the ability of poetic language to reach for this Absolute. Especially through this shortcoming of language, the poem obtained its spatial and material character.

In Mallarmé’s poem, this suspicion was mirrored by the importance of typographical blanks - a blend of silence and speech, and a reciprocal delimitation of these concepts - and a prominence of composition. He suggested that the poem could create an Absolute through the intrusion of the white space and the silence surrounding words, “silence alentour”. Only the constellation, or the composition of the poem, could possibly abolish chance and triumph over the contingencies of our time-bound existence. Broodthaers translates this suggestion to his own visual and artistic endeavour. He emptied the poem until there was nothing left but a composition of black bars, a plastic or sculptural construction, that interacted on several levels with the surrounding space and the spectator: as a book, a (semi-transparent) silhouette, and as a sculpture. This construction, however, remained closely dependant on the erased words of the poem, residing in chalk and sound during the exhibition. Similar to *Pense-Bête*, Broodthaers appeared to silence a piece of poetry in order to reinvent and spatialize the meanings of poetry; in his reworking of *Un Coup de Dés* with black bars instead of black covers buried into plaster.

Relying on Paz’ statement that *Un Coup de Dés* “says nothing and it is language in its totality”, it can be argued that Broodthaers appeared to transcend this thought: by erasing the poem - literally saying nothing - he isolated the silence and created a totality of space. Jacques

¹⁶⁴ Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 65-66.

Rancière claims something similar in his short essay on the intertwining of Broodthaers and Mallarmé. According to Rancière the work of these two men evolved around the “knot between writing and space”.¹⁶⁵ He argues that Mallarmé formulated “a certain weaving together of words and space”, which Broodthaers picked up on: both their art reveals an exchange of “[...] procedures and materialities of the arts, where signs become forms and forms become acts”. Following Rancière, Broodthaers expands Mallarmé’s quest towards a spatialized poem, and reveals that the poem could only be a spatial object on the condition that its words and meanings were emptied out through erasure and plastification:

The becoming thing of words is then, more properly, their becoming illegible. [...] the plastification of the poem is strictly the throw of the dice that abolishes chance: the ‘unique nombre qui ne peut être un autre’.¹⁶⁶

Broodthaers’ reworking of *Un Coup de Dés*, his own choreography of black bars, can be regarded as a completion of Mallarmé’s “descent into nothingness”. Broodthaers took Mallarmé’s craving for the Absolute, his negativity and tendency towards silence, to another level, and revealed that poetic failure can only be redeemed by a method of true silence. The arbitrariness of language and subjectivity of the poem is not abolished by words, but by black bars conquering both the printed and the gallery space. Only through erasure could the poem become a constellation demolishing the contingencies of time. With this thought in mind, Broodthaers evoked on Mallarmé’s troubles with the possibilities and impossibilities of language: he silenced the words of *Un Coup de Dés* and revealed its spatialized imprint; a mute presence of poetry disguised as an object of art. Again, this method affirmed the interdependence of both art and poetry, language and silence: couples which appeared to be one side of the same coin in the works of Broodthaers.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter elaborated on the intertwining between Marcel Broodthaers and Stéphane Mallarmé, as expressed in the exhibition *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblidoudebliou/S*,

¹⁶⁵ Rancière, “The Space of Words,” 45-46, 54-56. According to Rancière, both Mallarmé and Broodthaers voiced a critique on the modernity of art, and the accompanying idea that the autonomy of art had led to medium specificity of each art. Mallarmé broke with this rigid conception in *Un Coup de Dés* by revealing that poetry was able to construct space, and illustrate movement and rhythm on the flat surface of the page. According to Rancière, both Mallarmé and Broodthaers investigated the boundaries of the medium (or the surface of art), and challenged the homogenizing forms each medium supposedly brought along. They did not practice any particular medium, and, therefore, they “forged a new *sensorium* against the links of common sense: other perceptible habits”.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 57-58.

Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé. Even though a lot remains to be said about this intertwinement, especially with regards to Broodthaers' later works, this chapter revealed a notion of silence in Broodthaers' reworking of *Un Coup de Dés* through an exploration of Mallarmé's poetic theory and a thematic reading of his last poem.

Broodthaers' editions of *Un Coup de Dés* bore witness to Mallarmé's encounter with the inability of language to reach for something universal; his visualization of poetic failure; and his wish to conquer this failure. Broodthaers' plastification could be regarded as the throw of the dice that abolished chance. Moreover, it appeared Broodthaers elaborated on the performative aspects of *Un Coup de Dés*: Mallarmé's suggestions of ideas, his musical score filled with nothingness and silence, was now transformed into a visual object occupying the space of the gallery. The reader, or spectator, could experience Mallarmé's poem and be surrounded by a visualization of silence: the "silence alentour" for which Mallarmé was searching. Through this expansion of poetic space Broodthaers' investigation approached Mallarmé's striving for *Le Livre*.

Through this intermingling of nothingness, spatialization and experience, this chapter functions like a hinge between the previous chapter, emphasizing the negative aesthetics of silence, and the next chapter, revolving around silence as an experience.

CHAPTER 4. AN INSTITUTIONAL SILENCE

The final part of this thesis will focus on the experience of silence, and Broodthaers' use of the expressive capacities of objects. It will commence with a discussion of Broodthaers' institutional critique and his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968-1972). The curatorial practice Broodthaers applied in this museum will be related to the theory of silence as expressed by Roland Barthes and Maurice Blanchot. Through their writings, Broodthaers' work will be related to a phenomenological approach towards silence, described in the writings of Max Picard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This chapter will conclude with a discussion on Broodthaers' *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* and the description of the phenomenon of silence by John Cage.

4.1 From negative aesthetics to a neutral mode

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, silence signified the limits of language and comprehension; the possibilities and impossibilities of representation; and a certain kind of nothingness. *Ipso facto* it became marked by negation: absence, emptiness, erasure and a reluctance to communicate.¹⁶⁷ This negative approach echoed through the writings of many critics regarding the aesthetics of silence, and found resonance in the work of Marcel Broodthaers. Through his choice of materials and compositions - emphasizing on language, absence and hollowness - his work appeared to be loaded with negation, and, subsequently, notions of silence. The following sub-chapter reveals that Broodthaers even extended this practice to the presentational context of his work: the museum. The discussion will demonstrate that Broodthaers' negative movement of silence, slowly but surely, culminated into something else; a space, more open to the perception and experience of the spectator.

4.1.1 *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*

In 1968 Broodthaers opened the doors to his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, an institution dedicated to the functioning of the museum.¹⁶⁸ In the opening announcement, Broodthaers once again revealed his literary aspirations, as he stated that his museum could, hopefully, show its objects in "all their splendour, hand in hand, poetry and visual arts."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ This negative approach towards the aesthetics of silence was lucidly described in the essay of Susan Sontag - which depicted silence as derivative: it was always depended on the presence of an opposite. See Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," 11.

¹⁶⁸ This museum is a fictitious museum. It played the role of, on the one hand a political parody of art shows, and on the other hand an artistic parody of political events.

¹⁶⁹ Opening announcement by Marcel Broodthaers for *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968), in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 198.

Within a period of four years Broodthaers set up twelve presentations of this museum at different locations in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. In all these presentations, so-called “sections”, Broodthaers defied the traditional nature of the institution. His *Musée d’Art Moderne* was first and foremost a fiction, an idea or artwork in itself, which did not obey the established conventions of a museum: its location changed; a permanent collection was replaced by reproductions or (rented) non-art-objects; and the traditional exhibition methods were supplemented by public manifestations - speeches or open letters.

As a self-appointed curator and director of the *Musée d’Art Moderne*, Broodthaers felt free to question the authority of the museum to classify an object as art. Probably the most spectacular section revealing this quest, was the penultimate edition of the *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigle*, entitled *Section des Figures (Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute)* (1972). Like a *mise en abyme* this section was embedded within a well-respected institution: the Städtische Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf.¹⁷⁰ Broodthaers had assembled more than three hundred different eagles for this exhibition, loaned from over forty museums and several private collectors and art dealers.¹⁷¹ He displayed those eagles in vitrines, on freestanding pedestals, or hanging on the wall (fig. 11); and supplemented the objects with three projectors clicking through hundreds of images depicting the eagle from comic books, advertisements, labels, prints and coins.¹⁷²



Fig. 11 Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigle, Section des Figures (Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute)*, 1972.

¹⁷⁰ It was actually not the first section to be publicly embraced by the institution. Although most sections were held at Broodthaers’ studio in Brussels, *Section XIX^e siècle (bis)* (1970) for example was also held at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, and the last exhibition *Section Publicité* (1972) was even incorporated at the Documenta V in Kassel. See Christian Rattemeyer, “Musée-Museum,” in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 166-169.

¹⁷¹ As the symbol and name of his museum department, the eagle was actually the only aspect that constantly returned throughout his sections.

¹⁷² Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, 163-165.

This relentless parade of objects and images enabled Broodthaers to dismantle the idea of the eagle as a symbol of power. He demonstrated that even though the eagle was just a bird, its historical and cultural context had provided this creature with some mythic and symbolic values. Broodthaers' excessive display of eagles created awareness of these values, and made viewers experience that the power of the eagle was constructed, a fiction. A year before this exhibition, Broodthaers had elaborated on his choice of the eagle, in the three-point statement "Blow the whistle on all ideology" (1971):

1. To baffle every ideology which can be formed around a symbol (it is false)
2. To study objectively these symbols (the eagles) and particularly their use in artistic representations (eagles are useful)
3. To use the discoveries of conceptual art to illuminate objects and pictures of the past.

Conclusion: The eagle is a bird.

Musée d'Art Moderne
Département des Aigles
Curator: Marcel Broodthaers¹⁷³

In the two catalogues accompanying *Section des Figures (Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute)*, Broodthaers elucidates his presentation of eagles.¹⁷⁴ Throughout these books it becomes clear that Broodthaers chose the eagle for its symbolic qualities. The eagle functions as a metaphor for the status of art and art's function to bestow status: the "identity of the eagle as idea and of art as idea."¹⁷⁵ Analogous to the power of the eagle, Broodthaers reveals that the status of art is symbolical, and constructed by institutions.

4.1.2 "This is not a work of art": a curatorial practice

Broodthaers unveiled this power of the institution, as an artist, via a curatorial practice that criticized the status of art. This is well visible in his manner of displaying and labelling objects. Although the exhibition brought together a diverse range of objects, Broodthaers was very careful to ensure that no single item achieved dominance over the other.¹⁷⁶ Whether it

¹⁷³ Marcel Broodthaers, "Blow the whistle on all ideology," trans. Jill Ramsey, in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 330.

¹⁷⁴ Marcel Broodthaers, *Adler vom Oligozän bis heute, Marcel Broodthaers zeigt eine experimentelle Ausstellung seines Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures* [cat.] (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf 1972) vol. 1 and vol. 2. Actually these two books are more than simple catalogues: they are the perpetual artwork revealing Broodthaers' artistic quest.

¹⁷⁵ Broodthaers, *Adler vom Oligozän* [cat.], vol. 2, 9.

¹⁷⁶ Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 20-23.

was a recognized artwork, a decorative object, or a beer bottle: each depiction of an eagle received the same prominence. Moreover, Broodthaers provided all the exhibited objects with a small black token, engraved with one sentence denying the objects their status of art in three different languages: “Ceci n’est pas un objet d’art,” “Dies ist kein Kunstwerk,” or “This is not a work of art” (fig. 12).



Fig. 12 Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigle, Section des Figures (Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute)*, 1972.

Broodthaers elaborates on these labels in the first volume of his catalogue. Page 12 of this volume contains three simulacra of the tokens Broodthaers placed with the artworks, followed by a fourth token - also in three languages - with a warning: “These inscriptions out of plastic are fixed to each exhibition piece. (The inscriptions illustrate an idea of Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte.)” Page 11 had spelled out the following method:

METHOD

Duchamp

Whether it’s a urinal signed R. Mutt (1917) or an objet trouvé, any object whatsoever can be elevated to the rank of a work of art. The artist defines this object in such a way that its future lies only in the museum. Since Duchamp, the artist is the author of a definition.

Originally, Duchamp’s initiative aimed at destabilizing the power of juries and schools; today - having become a mere shadow of itself - it dominates an entire area of contemporary art, with the backing of collectors and dealers: those two aspects are brought to light here.

In order to show that this initiative is still alive, let us point out that in the very recent past some artists have applied the definition of what art is on the definition itself - on the language of the definition – thereby bringing a whole subliterature to life.

Magritte

Read M. Foucault's text
"This is not a Pipe"

M.B.¹⁷⁷

On the next two pages Broodthaers visualizes this method by publishing a picture of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) on the verso side of the page, and René Magritte's *La Trahison des Images* (1929) on the recto side of the page.

Through these references Broodthaers clarifies his method and curatorial practice. He combined Marcel Duchamp's gesture of placing real objects, readymades, in the museum, stating "This is a work of art"; with René Magritte's questioning of the relatedness between image, object and their meaning, as concealed by his statement "Ceci n'est pas une pipe".¹⁷⁸ Through the combined statement on the tokens of "This is not a work of art", Broodthaers structurally denied the eagle objects their status of art. Consequently, he disrupted the circular axiom that appeared so obvious after Duchamp: that a museum was one of art when it contained art, and everything in the museum was art when it was part of the museological collection.¹⁷⁹

This method, the sentence "This is not a work of art" combined with the metaphor of the eagle, enabled Broodthaers to unveil the power of the museum. He revealed that the value of art was constructed by the museum, as they held the power to claim an object a piece of art.¹⁸⁰ As a curator and director of the *Musée d'Art Moderne* Broodthaers, however, had the power to denounce this claim pre-emptively. He demonstrated his museum to be fictitious and constructed; just as every other museum, the eagle, and the power of art.

¹⁷⁷ Broodthaers, *Adler vom Oligozän* [cat], vol. 1, 11-12.

¹⁷⁸ In the interview "Ten Thousand Francs" Broodthaers elaborated on this method and stated: "'This is not a work of art' is a formula obtained by the contradiction of a concept by Duchamp and an antithetical concept by Magritte. It allowed me to decorate Duchamp's urinal with the emblem of an eagle smoking the pipe. I think I underlined the principle of authority that has made the symbol of the eagle the colonel of art." See Marcel Broodthaers and Irmeline Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," 47.

¹⁷⁹ For an extensive discussion on this method see Thierry de Duve, "Figure Zero," trans. Jill Ramsey, in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja Villed and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 30-39.

¹⁸⁰ With this method Broodthaers touched on Magritte's linguistic examination of the relation between the thing, image and name it is known for, as demonstrated in his essay "Les Mots et les Images" (1929). See paragraph 2.2.2.2 and note 86 for a discussion on Magritte's text and its influence on Broodthaers.

4.1.3 A neutral mode of art

In *Section des Figures (Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute)* Broodthaers again negated, or silenced, an object. This time, his mission to make art or “something insincere” was inverted. No longer did he silence a written piece of text, or reveal negative aesthetics within his composition: he noisily silenced art itself. He negated the status of art in advance, reversed Marcel Duchamp’s gesture, in order to expose those artefacts as simple objects once again. Especially, insofar as the objects had already been exhibited as museum objects, Broodthaers robbed them of their mythical status.

Broodthaers commented on this method in the text “The Degree Zero” of 1973. In this short text, he mentions he was provoked to a similar strategy, because “[...] the staging of objects and images is rarely adequate, but that there is, in any exhibition a tendency towards manipulation.” He wanted to introduce the spectator with a critical dimension that neutralizes “the use value of the symbol of the Eagle”, which functions, as demonstrated above, as a metaphor of art, and “reduce it to the degree of zero”.¹⁸¹

This method resembles what Roland Barthes called a “zero degree” and Maurice Blanchot an “authentic mode of speech”.¹⁸² Both these philosophers emphasized that the negative aesthetics in art was influenced by the work of Mallarmé. They maintained that his tendency and craving towards silence, had created something else: a new kind of “space”. Barthes exemplified this thought in *Le Degré Zéro de L’Ecriture* (1953), in which he argues that literature was reduced to an empty carcass ever since it revolved around language. Following Barthes, Mallarmé initiated a movement of negation, which exerted the destruction of language and a neutral mode of writing, called “the zero degree of writing”.¹⁸³ This neutral mode was free from signs of styles of language; from social overtones and subjectivity; and attests solely to an absence of style and transparent form of speech. Therefore, it postulates a silent kind of writing.¹⁸⁴

Blanchot on the other hand, argues in *La part du feu* (1949),¹⁸⁵ that Mallarmé’s movement of negation and endeavour to translate silence in a poem, was an “effort towards

¹⁸¹ Marcel Broodthaers, “The Degree Zero,” in *Marcel Broodthaers: Collected Writings*, ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 351.

¹⁸² Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Cape, 1984), 5; Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 66-67.

¹⁸³ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 5.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2, 75-77.

¹⁸⁵ In this bundle of collected essays on literature, Blanchot insists on a linguistic tendency towards nothingness and silence. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 62-63.

the unrealizable”: an impossibility Mallarmé never managed to extricate.¹⁸⁶ This thought was rooted in Blanchot’s value of the material presence of words. He believed literature to be characterized by a physical dimension: it is dependent on the written word, the ink of a page, and even the white space. As long as silence relied on those material qualities, complete silence of literature was impossible.¹⁸⁷ However, following Blanchot, Mallarmé’s attempt was not in vain: he discovered the complicity of silence and demonstrated that silence was not merely an opposite of language, but an intention, condition, or even virtue - ultimately leading to an authentic mode of speech.¹⁸⁸

Within the walls of his *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigle* Broodthaers revealed a same kind of negative tendency leading to a neutral mode. While Broodthaers’ career bore witness to the fact that he could never completely silence art, nor literature for that matter, his museum reveals that he could create a space (outside poetry, language, or a book) where constructions are erased and silenced: the space of art. Although this neutral space is still dependent on the status and value of art, it is also less burdened. The artefacts could be experienced as simple objects: they speak for themselves, free from the, by Broodthaers voided, authority of the museum.

4.2 Broodthaers and a phenomenological approach to silence

Both the above-mentioned theories of Barthes and Blanchot, as well as Broodthaers’ *Musée d’Art Moderne*, reveal that the negative tendency of silence culminated into something else: a neutral space, that had its own right of existence, respectively a “zero degree” or “authentic mode of speech”. The concept of such a space resembles the idea of silence as a substantive phenomenon - as proclaimed in phenomenological studies on silence. With this idea in mind, the final part of this thesis will investigate a phenomenological approach to silence. This subchapter will start with an introduction to the phenomenon of silence, as described by Max Picard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Subsequently, this knowledge will be related to Broodthaers’ *Décor: A Conquest*. In the next, and last, sub-chapter this exhibition will be related to the writings on the phenomenon of silence by John Cage.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 34-37, 64.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁸⁸ Blanchot related this authentic speech to what he called “*la rumeur*”: a neutral zone, or murmur, that said nothing while opening up to endless repetitions and unlimited interpretations. See Anna Elisabeth Schulte Nordholt and Laurens ten Kate, *Het Wakende Woord: Literatuur, Ethiek en Politiek bij Maurice Blanchot* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1997), 30-31; Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 66-67.

4.2.1 The phenomenon of silence: from Husserl to Picard

The study of silence as a phenomenon, or experience, is grounded in Edmund Husserl's science of phenomena: encompassing his non-empirical approach and general assumption that philosophical research was more fruitful by apprehending phenomena via intentional experience. Husserl had propagated this phenomenological approach in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900), in which he stated that the phenomenologist had to go back to the "things themselves": back to the way things are actually given in experience. In other words, back to how phenomena appear to us.¹⁸⁹

The Swiss writer Max Picard is generally acknowledged as one of the first to relate this approach to silence. In *Die Welt des Schweigens* (1949) he describes the phenomenon of silence, and argues that it had a substantive meaning:

Das Schweigen besteht nicht nur darin, daß der Mensch aufhört zu reden. Das Schweigen ist mehr als bloß ein Verzicht auf das Wort, es ist mehr als bloß ein Zustand, in den der Mensch sich versetzen kann, wenn es ihm paßt. Wo das Wort aufhört, fängt zwar das Schweigen an. Aber es fängt nicht an, *weil* das Wort aufhört. Es wird nur dann deutlich. [...] Es ist also nicht identisch mit der Aufhebung des Wortes, es ist nichts Reduziertes, er ist etwas Ganzes, etwas, das durch sich selbst besteht [...]¹⁹⁰

Obviously, Picard regards silence as an all-encompassing phenomenon: it exists in its own right, yet it is only noticed due to an opposite. Picard, furthermore, emphasizes that the phenomenon of silence is related to the mysteries of existence. Through the word, as an opposite of silence, these mysteries could be unravelled: the word could bring mysteries out of silence, while it also created the silence in which these mysteries could disappear.¹⁹¹ Following Picard, silence unifies what was separated in the modern era: "Glaube und Wissen, Wahrheit und Schönheit, Leben und Geist".¹⁹²

Even though Picard's book was quasi-mystical, his work appeared to initiate further research on the topic of silence.¹⁹³ His research became embedded within the writings of

¹⁸⁹ Within phenomenological studies "things themselves" is, therefore, completely different than the Kantian *Ding an sich*, or true being. Instead, it is the phenomenon. See for a clear overview of Husserl's theory Jenny Slatman, introduction to *De Wereld Waarnemen*, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, trans. Jenny Slatman (Amsterdam: Boom Uitgeverij, 2015), 10.

¹⁹⁰ Max Picard, *Die Welt des Schweigens* (Zürich: Rentsch Verlag, 1948), 9.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 63-64. Picard's thoughts were actually rather theological: he related silence primarily to the divine because he assumed all language derived from God.

¹⁹³ An interesting and full-length study into the experience and nature of silence is written by Bernard Dauenhauer: *Silence, The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (1980). In it, Dauenhauer described the occurrences of silence as "an active human performance": an intentional experience, motivated by the awareness

influential philosophers, who questioned the nature of expression through the relatedness of the world of perception, and the world of language.¹⁹⁴ Among those philosophers was Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His research depends on Husserl's phenomenological approach, but differs significantly from Picard's studies, as Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly describe the phenomenon of silence, but rather touched on a notion of silence, when he interrogated the foundations of phenomenological thinking.¹⁹⁵

4.2.2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the silent Being

In his studies on phenomenology Merleau-Ponty describes that philosophy is not a lexicon that sought to be a "verbal substitute for the world we see", but an attempt to bring into expression "the things themselves, from the depth of their silence".¹⁹⁶ Through this aim, Merleau-Ponty stumbled across the ancient paradox of language and silence. Language interfered each time a philosopher tried to describe the perceived world; it broke the silence of the original and pure meaning of these things themselves, or phenomena. In *The Visible and the Invisible* (1959) Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this problem:

The philosopher speaks, but this is a weakness in him, and an inexplicable weakness: he should keep silent, coincide in silence, and rejoin Being a philosophy that is there ready-made. [...] His entire "work" is this absurd effort. He wrote in order to state this contact with Being; he did not state it, and could not state it, since it is silence.

According to Galen A. Johnson, this problem is constitutive for Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on modern painting - laid down in his essay "Eye and Mind" of 1961. In this essay, Merleau-Ponty argues that paintings functioned as a form of vision, leading the spectator to a pure experience of the lived world: a window to the things themselves.¹⁹⁷ In order to demonstrate this thought, Merleau-Ponty insists on the assumption that the body "simultaneously sees and

of finitude an awe, which provided meaning to certain discourses, human interactions, expressions of speech, and even artistic productions. See Bernard Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 5, 24-25, 81-82.

¹⁹⁴ Although it goes beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that the phenomenon of silence even reached deep into the post-structuralist thought. The phenomenon of silence was discussed within the discourse of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, as a matter of presence and absence, a debate about the possibilities of "silent silences". See for a full-length discussion Eugenie Brinkema, "Critique of Silence," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2-3 (2011): 211-234.

¹⁹⁵ Kristensen, Stefan, "Figures of Silence: The Intrigues of Desire in Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard," *Research in Phenomenology* 45, no. 1 (2015): 92-94.

¹⁹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, trans. Claude Lefort and Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 4-5.

¹⁹⁷ Galen A. Johnson, "Ontology and Painting: "Eye and Mind,"" in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, edited and translated Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 38-39.

is seen”.¹⁹⁸ Basically, this means the body is the centre of perception and a medium of consciousness: things themselves open up to the body, while the body perceives and associates itself with these things themselves. The body is both subject and object.¹⁹⁹

According to Merleau-Ponty, painters were able to unveil the things themselves. Through visual means - colour, form, line, and movement - the “silent Being” of phenomena could reveal their own meaning: they attested to the invisible depth and richness of the visible and showed a complete openness to the world. Art teaches us that we can “touch the sun and the stars” and be “everywhere at once”.²⁰⁰ Johnson argues that this belief in the capacities of art, to render phenomena, was interlaced with Merleau-Ponty’s problem of language. Following Johnson, “Eye and Mind” demonstrates that art was “a disclosure of the world in the form of a heavier, less transparent, less ductile body than language”. He, therefore, states the essay can be regarded as “Merleau-Ponty’s suicide”, for Merleau-Ponty brought “to written expression the silent and mute meanings of prereflective brute Being”.²⁰¹

It can be argued that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy indicates a notion of silence throughout the visual arts, notably at a very basic level. Art is able to express the silence of things themselves: it holds the capacity to render phenomena of the lived world, and in doing so, it appears more powerful and precise than philosophical language. Although this thought remains rather abstract and broad, it appears that Broodthaers was aware of this strong capacity of art. During the last years of his artistic career (1974-1976) Broodthaers experimented with décors - spatial installations of objects and images - that focused on the ephemeral experience of the spectator. Unlike most of his artworks, written language is almost absent from these décors: objects and images are his alphabet.

4.2.3 Broodthaers *Décor*: A Conquest and the potential of silence

Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers (La Bataille de Waterloo) was one of the last exhibitions during Broodthaers’ lifetime. It was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, in June 1975, shortly after the Vietnam War ended.

¹⁹⁸ This bodily aspect was a point of difference between Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. Within Merleau-Ponty’s theory of phenomenology, perception is grounded in the body. How we perceive the world is always caused by a direct awareness of the body itself, as it exists towards and within the world. In a certain way Merleau-Ponty expanded Martin Heidegger’s notion of human reality as Being-in-the-World. See Slatman, introduction to *De Wereld Waarnemen*, 12.

¹⁹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, edited and translated by Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 124-125.

²⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 143, 147-148.

²⁰¹ Johnson, “Ontology and Painting: “Eye and Mind,”” 45.

In two adjoining rooms of the ICA, Broodthaers staged a nineteenth and twentieth century approach to warfare. The nineteenth century room, *Salle XIXe siècle*, presented a group of potted palms, two cannons, two fake whiskey barrels, two Edwardian chairs, a pair of candelabras, a nineteenth century gun, a poster of the Western film *Heaven with a Gun*, a stuffed python and a plastic crab and lobster playing cards. These objects were arranged in a symmetrical layout - on either small Astroturf rugs or pedestals (fig. 13). The twentieth century room, *Salle XXe siècle*, was more casually arranged and featured a canopied picnic table, with four matching chairs and a parasol, as well as two vitrines with fifteen handguns displayed within them, and seventeen automatic rifles atop. On one wall there was a poster attached explaining “How to Load a Luger”, and on top of the picnic table lay a jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo, after a painting by W. Heath (fig. 14).²⁰² Together, these rooms mimicked the museological convention of presenting history through linear succession.²⁰³



Fig. 13 Marcel Broodthaers, *Salle XIXe siècle*, 1975.



Fig. 14 Marcel Broodthaers, *Salle XIXe siècle*, 1975.

Similar to the thought of Merleau-Ponty, these two rooms demonstrate the capacity of art to render phenomena, as it reveals the capacity of objects to be experienced. Words are almost absent in the two rooms, but the nonchalance by which commodities are placed next to objects of war, suggest that the rooms should be experienced as a storyline, or mute choreography. The displayed objects present a parallel narrative on warfare during the centuries: about war as a spectacle, and the striking discrepancy between distant violence and

²⁰² Haidu, *The absence of work*, 266-268.

²⁰³ Natasha Amadou, “Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers, (La Bataille de Waterloo), 1975, ICA, London,” *Rebus: A Journal of Art History and Theory* 4 (2009): 4, accessed November 10, 2016, https://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/research/pdfs/rebus_issue_4/Adamou.pdf.

domestic comfort. The experience of this narrative is strengthened by the form of the exhibition. The rooms were accommodated with several light reflectors, and objects that were rented from a warehouse supplying movie props.

Both these elements, in conjunction with the exhibition's title, allude to the fact that *Décor: A Conquest* functioned as a film set for Broodthaers' last film *La Bataille de Waterloo*. In this film shots of the annual military parade called "Trooping of the Colour",²⁰⁴ actually taking place during the exhibition, were alternated with shots of the two rooms. The ICA is located on the Mall between Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square; an important part on the route of the parade, where the British royalties are escorted by a procession of the senior regiments of the British Army. Broodthaers' cameramen had positioned himself on a terrace of the ICA, and filmed this spectacle as it proceeded past the gallery. In *La Bataille de Waterloo* scenes from this parade were interspersed with scenes from within the ICA: a woman solving the jigsaw puzzle at the picnic table in *Salle XXe siècle*, and images of the objects in *Salle XIXe siècle*.²⁰⁵

On several levels Broodthaers played with associations of "conquest" in this exhibition. First, through the term "conquest" in the exhibition's subtitle, which brings into mind Broodthaers' statement in "Ten thousand francs reward" about his professions as a visual artist: "Until that moment I had lived practically isolated from all communication, my life was fictitious. Suddenly it became real, on that level where it is a matter of space and conquest."²⁰⁶ Rather sardonically, Broodthaers associated his artistic practices with an aggressive kind of communication - a conquest of both space and audience. A second level of conquest, can be found in the content of the exhibition: the objects and their narrative on warfare.²⁰⁷ Broodthaers reveals that war not only entails the conquest of an opponent, but also the conquest of domestic culture. The rooms advocate the invasion and normalization of war into domestic life: furniture mingles casually with weaponry, and war is absorbed by popular culture through artefacts as a puzzle, a film poster, and the objects themselves which were actual movie props.

Although it sounds plausible to understand this setting as a statement of cultural critique, especially since the exhibition opened shortly after the Vietnam War, Broodthaers'

²⁰⁴ "Trooping of the Colour" is a spectacle in which the British regiments reenact before the Queen near sites of political significance, such as Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. Both soldiers and the public are supposed to be inspired to protect and represent their nation.

²⁰⁵ Haidu, *The absence of work*, 270-272.

²⁰⁶ Broodthaers and Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," 44.

²⁰⁷ Maria Gillisen touches on a similar thought in the text which appeared in the catalogue of the restaging of *Décor: A Conquest* at Michael Werner Gallery in 2007, see Maria Gillisen, "Décor," in *Décor: A conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* [cat.] (New York: Michael Werner Gallery, 2007), 35.

work has shown so many ambivalences that such an understanding alone is too shallow. Therefore, I want to extend Broodthaers' critique to a third level of conquest: of art and its systems of representation.

4.2.4 The conquest of art and its systems of representation

In contrast to the second level of conquest, this third level of conquest appears in the form of the exhibition. As mentioned above, Broodthaers exhibited his objects in *Décor: A Conquest* in a manner that adhered to and mocked the museological conventions. He exhibited his objects within an institution; making the objects part of the system of art, and providing them with the qualities of autonomy and aesthetics. At the same time, Broodthaers challenged the objects' status of art, as most of the objects were rented commodities, and only autonomous and aesthetic for the occasion of the exhibition. His use of light reflectors furthermore revealed that these objects of art were, in fact, commodities with a real function: a set-design for *La Bataille de Waterloo*.²⁰⁸

The transition between these different systems of representation (museum versus film set) enabled Broodthaers to unveil and conquer the conventions of art, and its modes of perception. In *Décor: A Conquest* the spectator is confronted with Broodthaers ambivalent position: the objects constantly shift between the sphere of the aesthetic, and the realm of commodity, while neither advocating, or promoting, one sphere over the other. His décor presents itself as both a film set and an exhibition, leaving the spectator trapped in a zone between different representational systems.²⁰⁹ This indecisiveness between the different purposes of the objects, reveals a same kind of proclamation as the tokens with "this is not a work of art". While the location of the objects in the gallery brings them within the representational system of art, their condition as a set design, and part of the annual parade of "Trooping of the Colour", negates this autonomous position and brings them closer to the system of commerce and politics.²¹⁰ Like a vicious circle, these systems constantly expand and collapse into each other, leading the spectator to the conclusion that the perception of objects is based on constructions.

In her short treatise "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss argues that Broodthaers' work, his recognition of heterogeneity

²⁰⁸ In a radio interview of 1975 Broodthaers elaborated on this idea and explained his décors were an attempt to undermined the ready-made: his décors did not transform the objects into a piece of art, but provided the object with a real function: https://ubusound.memoryoftheworld.org/belgian_surrealism/Belgian-Surrealism_1939-1978_16-Marcel-Broodthaers-Apprentissage-Et-Filiation.mp3. Accessed on October 14, 2016.

²⁰⁹ Amadou, "Décor: A Conquest," 4-5.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

of media and different systems of representations, should be considered as the foundation of the “post-medium condition” and “differential specificity” - two ideas that renounce the modernist belief in medium specificity, and recognizes the complexities and conflation of different media.²¹¹ She relates Broodthaers’ unveiling of constructions to his search for the limits of representation and the revelatory potential of the medium. Krauss claims that Broodthaers believed this revelatory potential to be fiction, as he stated himself, “fiction allows us to grasp reality and at the same time what it hides”.²¹² Following Krauss, Broodthaers not only demonstrates that fiction offers a possibility “[...] to unmask reality’s lies, but of producing an analyses of fiction itself in relation to a specific structure of experience.”²¹³ In other words, fiction offers a possibility to analyse experiences, and expose constructions and assumptions as self-illusory.

Elaborating on this thought, it appears the different media and representational systems in *Décor: A Conquest* reveal the different layers of reality and experience. Broodthaers dissects these different layers and demonstrates that the perception of objects is never fixed, but always constructed: a fiction imposed by institutions.²¹⁴ In this exhibition, however, Broodthaers did not use language to convey this message. Unlike his *Musée d’Art Moderne*, the tokens were left out, and replaced by the capacities of the objects. The shift between different representational systems functions as a strategy of fragmentation and erasure: it breaks down constructions of meaning making, and brings the objects back to a neutral mode.

4.3 John Cage and Broodthaers’ delicate critique

By leaving out language in *Décor: A Conquest*, Broodthaers appeared to exploit the potential of silence in a different way than described in the previous chapters. Instead of an emphasis on a method of silence by means of the presence and erasure of language, as was shown eloquently in *Pense-Bête*, this décor appeared to focus on the absence of language and the experience of the spectator.

This divergent approach to silence corresponds to John Cage’s vision of silence, as described in his *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961): a binding of articles in which Cage considers silence not merely as an absence of sound, but as an active experience of

²¹¹ Krauss, “*A Voyage on the North Sea*,” 10, 31-32.

²¹² Marcel Broodthaers in Krauss, “*A Voyage on the North Sea*,” 46.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

²¹⁴ Amadou, “*Décor: A Conquest*,” 14-15.

consciousness.²¹⁵ In this bundle Cage argues that the awareness of silence inevitably led towards the discovery that there was always something to experience - whether this will be in the sound of one's own making (the nerve's systematic operation or the blood circulation) or the sound of surroundings.²¹⁶ In the essay "45' for a Speaker", Cage offers this vision through his widely credited law of silence: "[t]here is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound."²¹⁷

A lucid example of this proclamation is found in Cage's performance "4'33" (1952). Up until today this piece has inspired many artists to write compositions and performances of silence.²¹⁸ Cage himself was provoked to write this piece after an encounter with the monochromatic paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, which he believed to create awareness of surroundings.²¹⁹ The composition of "4'33" became a sonic equivalent of these paintings. It has three movements and remains silent during the whole four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Through this silent piece Cage makes the audience aware of its environment: the ambient sounds of a cough, a scuffling pair of feet, the touching of the concert program, a hart beat. He demonstrates that complete silence does not exist, not in art, writing, nor in real life. Silence, however, does create awareness regarding the meanings of art; its surrounding; and the influence of contingencies.²²⁰

The silence Broodthaers exploited in his *Décor: A Conquest* differed significantly from the absence of sound, described by Cage, as Broodthaers' silence was literate: an absence of written language. Notwithstanding this distinction, the effects are the same. The absence of language - the experience of literate silence - created an awareness of the capacities of objects, its surroundings, and their perception. Cage's law of silence can be

²¹⁵ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1967), 108. In this book Cage provides the reader with his vision on the aesthetics of silence; a vision which was highly influenced by the thinking of Zen-Buddhism. Besides Zen-Buddhism, Cage was also influenced by composers such as Charles Ives (1874-1954), Edgar Varese (1883-1965), and Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) who tried to compose silence in a substantial and 'audible' way - through a silent atmosphere. See William Brooks, "Pragmatics of Silence," in *Silence, Music, Silent Music*, ed. Nicky Losseff and Jenny Doctor (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 99.

²¹⁶ Cage, *Silence*, 13-14.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

²¹⁸ Dworkin, *unheard music*, 1-28.

²¹⁹ Douglas, Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997): 562.

²²⁰ It is interesting to note also, that Cage created a visual equivalent of the theorized silence in his book. The blank page becomes a metaphor of silence, with different kind of typeface, text density and styles of paragraphs causing a dialectic with this silence. Sometimes the essays are filled with blank pages, or few words and gaps; while other times they are completely full of words, without spacing, and including many repetitions. Consequently, the book is quite hard to read, not to say unreadable: a piece of silence. For a discussion on this topic see Darla M. Crispin, "Some Noisy Ruminations on Susan Sontag's 'Aesthetics of Silence,'" in *Silence, Music, Silent Music*, ed. Nicky Losseff and Jenny Doctor (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 133.

transposed to Broodthaers' décor and is telling us: "There is no such thing as (literate) silence. Something is always happening that tells a story." In the absence of written language, Broodthaers' objects reveal their story. His strategy of fragmentation and erasure did not rob the objects of those narratives, but rather revealed its complexities and delicacies.

Broodthaers used the form of his exhibition, the persistent shifts of representational systems, to reveal the perception of objects (as art or commodity) as constructed and unfixed.²²¹ This message can be applied to the content of the exhibition: the objects reveal a narrative on the interrelatedness of conquest, warfare and domestic life. As Broodthaers tries to create awareness about the constructive character of meaning making, this narrative appears to be constructed as well; artificial, just like the fake objects of the exhibition. The shifts between systems, however, suggests that this artificiality is not a problem. Meaning is unfixed, and both fiction and artificiality constitute a large part of reality. Overall, *Décor: A Conquest* reveals that without language, Broodthaers' work remains full of noise and critique. His objects spoke, and maybe even louder than his words.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter treated two of Broodthaers' exhibitions at the end of his career: his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigle, Section des Figures* and *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*. In *Section des Figures* Broodthaers uttered serious institutional critique with his curatorial practice. He displayed hundreds of eagles, because their myth of power resembled the myth of art; and marked all his objects with a label, combining Duchamp's gesture and Magritte's approach towards the image, stating "This is not a work of art". Related to the theories of silence by Barthes and Blanchot, this strategy of deconstruction and erasure, demonstrated that Broodthaers reached a neutral mode to exhibit his objects: free from the authority of the museum, but still within the sphere of art.

The theories of Barthes and Blanchot, as well as Broodthaers' exhibition, furthermore demonstrated that the negative tendency of silence evolved into something else: a neutral space. Silence became something substantial, just as the phenomenological studies on silence had demonstrated. The theory of Merleau-Ponty shed an interesting light on the work of Broodthaers, as it also problematizes the world of perception and language. Following Merleau-Ponty, works of art possess the capacity to render phenomena of the lived world, more precisely than language ever could. The last discussed exhibition, *Décor: A Conquest by*

²²¹ Through this play, the form became more important than the content, just as described in Adorno's, "Commitment," (1974).

Marcel Broodthaers, corresponded to this philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, as it reveals Broodthaers' institutional critique, yet without using language. Broodthaers managed to let his objects speak through references of warfare, conquest and domestic life, and more importantly through different systems of representation - gallery versus film set.

Through his subtle use of different media and representational systems, Broodthaers exploited the phenomenon of silence and revealed many narratives in *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*. Similar to *Section des Figures*, Broodthaers' décor advocates that art, and the perception of objects of art, are based on constructions that are both artificial and unfixed. With regard to Broodthaers' mission to exhibit objects "in all their splendour, hand in hand, poetry and visual arts", I believe *Décor: A Conquest* demonstrates Broodthaers' remarkable accomplishment. The many layers of this exhibition reveal that objects can narrate their own story: their own poetry without words, within the visual arts.

CONCLUSION

This thesis attempted to demonstrate several notions of silence within the works of Marcel Broodthaers, and reveal silence as a concern for the visual arts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This attempt was dictated by the following main question: What is the meaning of silence in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, and how does he visualize notions of silence? In order to answer this main question, this thesis extracted the meaning of silence from literary and philosophical sources and connected this meaning, with modifications, to the works and writings of Marcel Broodthaers. Foremost, this process demonstrated that as long as art is anchored in language, notions of silence are implicitly present as an antithesis, a verso side of language, contributing to different perspectives on works of art.

The theories of silence in the first and second chapter demonstrated silence as a slippery and dangerous slope, which brings the author, or artist, close to the brink of nothingness. While the classical writings of rhetoric focused on the amplifying effect of silence in communicating emotions and thoughts, the mystics and Romantics focused on the elevating and metaphysical aspect. Through their writings silence became connected with something that reaches beyond our consciousness. The early mystics were among the first to struggle with the ambivalences of silence and the troublesome relation between silence and materiality; as their writings reveal the paradox that something, as they thought, beyond our consciousness was unspeakable, yet always subjected to the written or spoken word.

Romantic writers as Novalis, Rimbaud, and especially Mallarmé, developed notions of silence through their writings on art; they connected something beyond our consciousness to something intangible and only visible in art. However, the expression of this beyond became troubled in the course of the nineteenth century by a growing suspicion towards verbal language: a retreat from the word and a silence out of disappointment. This process was enhanced in the twentieth century by the pervasive crimes against humanity during the Second World War. Following the theories by George Steiner and, I believe more profoundly, by Theodor Adorno, these crimes commanded a radical different manner of expression, a negative or silent one.²²² Within the visual arts this became discernible by a focus on the materiality, and an enduring tension between the possibilities and impossibilities of representation: a depiction of reality that was splintered, shifted, and aimed at disrupting the traditional expectations of the audience.

²²² Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 117-122; Adorno, "Commitment," 85-88.

Marcel Broodthaers' work takes a remarkable stance towards, and position within, these theories of silence; as it reveals many ambivalences towards the possibilities and impossibilities of representation, and the process of meaning-making. Broodthaers had inaugurated his career as a visual artist with the exhibition of 1964, displaying *Pense-Bête*: the sculpture build out of remaindering copies of his last volume of poetry. This exhibition was accompanied by an artistic statement, in which Broodthaers declared he abandoned his vocation as a poet in order to become a visual artist; making art, or "something insincere" and closely related to the economic system, would hopefully bring him more success. While *Pense-Bête* - visually - resembles this statement, as it nullifies poetry and announces the visual arts, it also signifies the beginning of a method of silence through which Broodthaers could address the ambivalent meanings of art.

The encasement of *Pense-Bête* enabled Broodthaers to visualize and develop his own notions of silence: he suspended the reading of his collection of poems and facetiously negated its content. This allegorical silence instigated a noise within the visual arts, as Broodthaers deployed silence as a method to convey his artistic message. It amplified his personal statement of failure as a poet, and the failure of his audience - which would rather consume a sculpture obeying the power of commodity culture, than recognize the value of poetry. At the same time, this sculpture indicates that Broodthaers regarded art as a manner to utter his critique; declaring art as a serious matter, and, consequently, his artistic statement as sardonic. Broodthaers' methods of silence, therefore, reveal some elevating aspects: he wanted his audience to contemplate on his critique, and, moreover, reify the value of his poems. The loose structure of *Pense-Bête*, and Broodthaers' own writings, illustrates that he still wanted his audience to gain knowledge of this poetic work; notwithstanding the obstructions presented by plaster or paper cut-outs.²²³

This ambivalent character of *Pense-Bête*, as something in-between poetic silence and voice, resonates throughout Broodthaers' later works; and demonstrates he never abandoned his poetic profession, but rather visually silenced it, and, thereby, expanded his poetry in the space of the gallery. The works exhibited at *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* (1966) attest to this thought as they elucidate Broodthaers' manner to reinvent the poem "La Moule" from *Pense-Bête*.²²⁴ His excessive use of empty shells, in works such as *L'Erreur* and *Panneaux de moules*, introduced a new strategy of silence through a word play with "mould". Mussels and eggs reveal some ambivalent qualities: their empty shells symbolize both form and absence;

²²³ Broodthaers and Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs," 44.

²²⁴ Sam Sackeroff, "Literary Exhibitions," 136.

substance and hollowness. Consequently, these materials visualize and embody the retreat from the word, and communicate the supposed hollowness of language; the ongoing search for meaning; and the relationship between word, image and object. Moreover, Broodthaers' techniques of grids, monochromes, and assemblages, correspond to a breach of representation shown by the (neo-)avant-garde, and an exploration of a different depiction of reality: Adorno's belief that expression could, and should, be otherwise.²²⁵

His works with mussels and eggs, refuse a straightforward understanding, and frustrate the process of meaning making. In accordance with the theory of Susan Sontag this provocative preoccupation constitutes part of the aesthetics of silence, which creates awareness among the audience. Broodthaers never went as far as presenting a complete silence, an absence of work, but eloquently silenced his visual vocabulary.²²⁶ Similar to the tendencies of silence in art, described by Sontag and Cage, Broodthaers' visual silence appears to be something dialectical, insofar as it implies an opposite and depends on its presence. In the case of Marcel Broodthaers this opposite is written language: his own poetry. Broodthaers' plastic reworking of "La Moule" symbolizes this interrelatedness, and denotes a break between the boundaries of poetry and the visual arts.

In the exhibition *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblidouebliou/S, Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* (1969) Broodthaers emphasized on this amalgamation of poetry and visual arts, through his appropriations of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*. In this poem Mallarmé expressed his striving to overcome the arbitrariness and subjectivity of language, and reach for something universal. Following Mallarmé this Absolute could be reached by "a descent into nothingness" and a translation of silence: a method of purification and reduction, demolishing all contingencies related to our time-bound existence, and presenting an image of truth by suggestion.²²⁷ *Un Coup de Dés* illuminates that Mallarmé hoped this aim could be achieved by the material structure, the constellation, of the poem: the positioning of words, varied typography, folds of the page, and use of the blank spaces.

Mallarmé believed that overturning the poetic conventions, the spatialization and visualization of poetry, might enable the poet to overcome the limitations posed by the material qualities of the medium. Broodthaers adopted and modified these thoughts of Mallarmé, and demonstrated, by means of his own appropriations of *Un Coup de Dés*, that the arbitrariness and subjectivity of language could be abolished by a more radical method of

²²⁵ Adorno, "Commitment," 86-88; Weibel, "Re-presentation of the Repressed", 128-129.

²²⁶ Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," 7-8, 13.

²²⁷ Niebylski, *The Poem on the Edge of the Word*, 41.

silence and spatialization: he transformed the poem into works of art; erased its words with black bars; and let bars conquer both the space of the printed word and the gallery.²²⁸ This way, the spectator could experience Mallarmé's poem and be surrounded by Broodthaers' spatial visualization of silence: the "silence alentour" for which Mallarmé was searching.

The last part of this thesis developed a discussion on the last years of Broodthaers' career, and demonstrated that the exhibitions during this period were even more subtle on the position of art and language, and, consequently, on notions of silence. In both *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigle, Section des Figures*, and *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*, Broodthaers uttered his institutional critique by means of morphing his artistic endeavours into curatorial practices. Again, these exhibitions reveal that Broodthaers obstructed the process of meaning making in order to create awareness; this time of the structures behind art. In *Section des Figures*, Broodthaers marked all the exhibited eagles - a metaphor of art - with a Magritte-like token stating "This is not a work of art". In accordance with the theories of Barthes and Blanchot, this strategy of deconstruction and erasure, demonstrates Broodthaers' quest for a neutral space to exhibit his objects: free from the authority of the museum, while remaining in the institution.²²⁹

In *Décor: A Conquest* Broodthaers not only freed his objects from the authority of museum, but also from (direct) interferences of language. Within the phenomenological writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a notion of silence is described as something substantial and opposed to a similar intrusion of language, as Merleau-Ponty believed art held the capacity to render phenomena of the lived world more precisely than language.²³⁰ Broodthaers' décor reveals a similar thought: the exhibited objects told the stories of warfare, conquest, and art itself. Instead of references to language, Broodthaers used objects, different media, and representational systems to leave the spectator trapped between the sphere of the aesthetic and commodity culture, between history and present. This way, the spectator could experience Broodthaers' dissection of different layers of meaning making, and his silent message that the perception of art, objects, and history, is never fixed, but always constructed.

Overall, I believe the above-mentioned works and exhibitions reveal that Broodthaers deployed silence as a method to problematize communication, question the process of meaning making, and overturn artistic and museological conventions. He used silence to reveal ambivalences; amplify his statements; question the meaning of art; reify and expand

²²⁸ Rancière, "The Space of Words," 57-58.

²²⁹ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 5; Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 62-63; Broodthaers, "The Degree Zero," 351.

²³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 143, 147-148.

his poems through space; break through the boundaries of poetry and visual arts; and neutralize constructions and institutions from within the sphere of art. This method of silence was visualized by a skilful play with materials, associations, strategies of erasure, and linguistic devices, such as allegory, irony and metaphor. Broodthaers silenced the content of *Pense-Bête* through plastification of his bundle; revealed the supposed hollowness of language by empty eggs and composition; spatialized Mallarmé's translation of silence; and created a neutral zone where objects could speak for themselves, or be silenced too, through rigorously removing all hierarchies between them.

Even though this thesis was rather thematic and specific, it attempted to provide a backbone to perceive modern and contemporary art with notions of silence. However, a lot remains to be said about silence. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, some strands and aspects of silence were left open for further discussion: for example the theories related to the visualization of the "unspeakable" with regards to the field of trauma and memory studies,²³¹ or the "silent silences", as described within the post-structural writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.²³² Research on these topics and an extension to notions silence within the works of different artists, would be a substantial addition to the writings on art and silence, and still remain a relevant and little discovered territory. Therefore, this thesis functions as a stepping stone and invitation to further research.

As was shown by this thesis, silence can function as a communicative form of diplomacy, that shed a light on an artist like Broodthaers, whose work is uneasy to comprehend and hard to categorize by different art movements. Broodthaers' method and visualization of silence transcends these differences, and bears witness to John Cage's law of silence: "[t]here is no such thing as silence." Within Broodthaers' works and writings, this means there is always something happening, always a message to convey, notwithstanding the differences of artistic movements.

²³¹ See for a discussion on this topic the study on texts and images that attempt to speak the unspeakable by George Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

²³² Brinkema, "Critique of Silence," 211-234.

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