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## The Aesthetics of Silence: A Matter of Spatial Critique in the Works of Marcel Broodthaers

Elsbeth Dekker

### Abstract

In 1967 Susan Sontag published her essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," on the craving towards silence in artistic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even though it appears that notions of silence are still influential within the visual arts, theoretical writings on silence are nearly absent. This article explores how notions of silence emerged in the early works of Marcel Broodthaers, by scrutinizing his works, related to *Pense-Bête*, together with the writings of Susan Sontag and related ideas from Stéphane Mallarmé and Theodor Adorno. Through a vivisection of these early works of Broodthaers, this article argues how silence is visualized within his works and how Broodthaers deployed silence as a method to convey his artistic message: as an expression of critique; as a mode to navigate through various artistic movements; and as a strategy to disrupt representational methods and transcend the boundaries between different mediums.

### Key Words

aesthetics of silence; Marcel Broodthaers; limits of expression; *Pense-Bête*; Susan Sontag

### 1. Introduction

"Look! Books in plaster!"<sup>[1]</sup>

Even without knowing the full context of this exclamation, the reader notices something unusual about the books that are being described. The encasement of books through plaster would, most probably, negate their normal mobility and make them unreadable. It obstructs knowledge of the written word, transforms its power, and presents a kind of silence that is perceived by the eye, instead of the ear.<sup>[2]</sup>

This exclamation is part of the writings of Marcel Broodthaers (1924-1976) and describes the reaction of his audience in relation to the sculpture of *Pense-Bête* (1964): a wooden pedestal with a bundle of eponymous black books held captive by a messy trail of plaster.<sup>[3]</sup> Notwithstanding the improvised and nonchalant appearance of this sculpture, *Pense-Bête* actually functions as a benchmark within Broodthaers' artistic profession. It signifies both end and beginning: the burial of Broodthaers' last work of poetry and the inauguration of Broodthaers' career as a visual artist. Moreover, as suggested above, the sculpture reveals a method and visualization of silence that reappears throughout Broodthaers' later works and writings.

View Broodthaers' *Pense-Bête* here:

<http://smak.be/en/exhibition/8288>

Marcel Broodthaers, *Pense-Bête* (1964). Books, paper, plaster, plastic ball, and wood. 30 x 84 x 43 cm. Collection of Flemish Community, long-term loan S.M.A.K., Gent.

This essay will focus on this particular, and often overlooked, aspect of Broodthaers' work. How is silence visualized in his works, and to what extent does this visualization contribute to their meaning? To answer these questions, several of Broodthaers' works, closely related to *Pense-Bête*, will be discussed together with notions of silence. By analyzing these works in relation to theories of silence, this essay also aims to reveal ways of perceiving art through notions of silence, silence as a concern for the visual arts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even though ideas and acts of silence are present within art history, notoriously by John Cage's performance of silence or Marcel Duchamp's renunciation of art by turning to chess, a comprehensive study on the meanings, uses, and iconology of silence in modern and contemporary art appears non-existent.

Several critics and philosophers, however, have written influential pieces about the aesthetics of silence in modern and contemporary art. Because of a limited scope, this essay will primarily focus on arguably the most eloquent description of the aesthetics of silence, the short, yet renowned, essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967), by Susan Sontag.<sup>[4]</sup> The forms of silence Sontag describes will serve as a backbone throughout this essay and, furthermore, will be extended with theoretical and philosophical backgrounds. Therewith, this essay argues that in Marcel Broodthaers' earliest works silence functions as a method to deliver his critique on the arts, a method that enabled him to disrupt the boundaries between art and poetry and, moreover, deploy a strategy that transcends the differences between major artistic movements of his time: neo-dada, conceptual art, minimalism, and institutional critique.<sup>[5]</sup>

This essay will depart from the proposition that the visual silence of Marcel Broodthaers is rooted in, and historically determined by, the Romantic theory of art.<sup>[6]</sup> His rhetoric of silence and, more broadly speaking, notions of silence in the visual arts appear entangled with the Romantic thought of literary silence, most notably through a strong focus on form and materiality. To capture this thought I will first relate *Pense-Bête* to the different notions of silence described by Susan Sontag. These notions will be connected to a Romantic theory of art and the thoughts on poetry and silence in the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé that I regard as foundational to Broodthaers' method of silence. Subsequently, Broodthaers' spatial expansion of poetry, his own translation of silence, will be analyzed through his materials and composition. This poetic expansion, lastly, will be related to the thoughts of Theodor Adorno regarding a breach with representational methods.

## 2. *Pense-Bête* and the pursuit of silence

The sculpture of *Pense-Bête* is built out of unsold copies of Broodthaers' last book of poetry, published in 1964, three months before their casting into plaster and still wrapped in the original paper from the printing house. The title of this work is a portmanteau combining the French words for 'think' and 'beast,' homonym for 'stupid.'<sup>[7]</sup> Before publishing this piece, Broodthaers had issued three other volumes of poetry; after he had encased his last bundle into plaster he never published a book of poetry again.<sup>[8]</sup> Consequently, the transformation of *Pense-Bête* bears witness to the literary silence of Marcel Broodthaers, the published poet. Simultaneously, it initiates the artistic practice of Marcel Broodthaers, the visual artist, a profession Broodthaers would practice until his early death in 1976.<sup>[9]</sup>

Throughout history silence has taken different forms with distinctive meanings in theories of aesthetics. For example, as a presence in theories of the sublime; a withdrawal of language in theories of mysticism and Romanticism; a break with the past and search for the limits of representation in theories of the avant-garde; an absence of signs and subjectivity in artistic expressions, coined by Roland Barthes as the "zero degree;" or as a potential to render an active experience of consciousness, argued by John Cage in his extensive writings on silence.<sup>[10]</sup>

In "The Aesthetics of Silence," Susan Sontag relates these different forms of silence to artistic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She argues that these movements are characterized by a persistent search for myths and justifications of existence. 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."<sup>[11]</sup> Sontag reckons that the craving towards silence in art reveals both a spiritual aspect, as a zone of contemplation and consciousness of the absolute truth, and a provocative aspect, since silence is the furthest extension of a reluctance to communicate. The ability to negate art's relationship with existent reality, history, and the audience is regarded by Sontag as one of the most important strands in the aesthetics of silence: "by silence he [the artist] frees himself from servile bondage to the world." Following Sontag, most artists did not carry this gesture towards a permanent silence, that is, a complete renunciation of their vocation as an artist. Instead, they continued to communicate in a manner that disrupts and frustrates the expectation of the audience.<sup>[12]</sup>

Sontag predominately locates the origins of the aesthetics of silence in the modern period of art, a period when art, and the leading myth of absoluteness of the artists' activity, become problematic, and art's very "right to exist can be called into question."<sup>[13]</sup> The sculpture of *Pense-Bête* not only signifies how Broodthaers questioned his own artistic existence but also, as this essay will argue, how the works he created as a visual artist disclose a complex relation to language and a provocative stance towards the perception and expectations of the audience. Furthermore, his works reveal a continuous tension between opposites that appears closely related to the ambivalent character that notions of silence brought along.

This ambivalent character of silence had crystalized though the writings of mysticism, a term derived from the Greek word *muein*, which actually meant "to close the lips" or "to close the eyes." Through the ancient writings of mysticisms, by St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Pseudo-Dionysius (5th-6th century CE), medieval mystics as Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) developed a negative theology to address their struggle with the apparent contradiction that something beyond our consciousness, the divine, transcendence or infinity, was unspeakable yet always subjected to written or spoken words. Words would always remain insufficient compared to the truth they would express; only silence would do justice to these unspeakable matters. Through an emphasis on those matters that language could not express, the mystics, however, believed to solve this contradiction and designate the divine and eternal: the realm beyond words.<sup>[14]</sup>

A certain paradox occurs within these writings. Silence is not withdrawn from language but simply shaped through linguistic styles and forms, two sides of the same coin that are irreconcilable yet interdependent.<sup>[15]</sup> This ambivalence within the mystical tradition between language and silence, the material and the immaterial, the human experience and something higher, are mentioned by Sontag as a religious precedent for the aesthetics of silence. Following Sontag, these tensions and difficulties between silence and materiality are even fundamental within the modern tendency towards the aesthetics of silence. She relates this thought to the Romantic idea that art expresses something absolute or inexpressible, the secular unspeakable, and, furthermore, to the devaluation of language in the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>[16]</sup>

This Romantic idea of art is closely related to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). In this critique, Kant elaborated on the judgment of taste and the idea of aesthetic autonomy, "*reines interesseloses Wohlgefallen*," a domain without practical function through which the beautiful and the sublime could be analyzed.<sup>[17]</sup> His thoughts on aesthetic autonomy influenced early Romantics, like Novalis (1772-1801) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), whose writings reveal art as a distinctive form in the presentation of truth. Art could disclose something beyond our comprehension, an absolute truth beyond what we can perceive: "*Er [Sinn für Poesie] stellt das Undarstellbare dar. Er sieht das Unsichtbare, fühlt das Unfühlbare*," as Novalis put it.<sup>[18]</sup> It is within this line of thought that Romantic poets searched for silence in their work and, moreover, that the aesthetics of silence thoroughly infiltrated the arts.

According to George Steiner, the Romantic poets were fundamental for the modern critique towards the word. In the nineteenth century, the thought emerged that words had no fixed meaning, were always subject to change, and, therefore, were far from being a tool to unlock an absolute truth.<sup>[19]</sup> This loss of trust in language is addressed in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's renowned *Brief des Lord Chandos an Francis Bacon* (1902). In this letter, Lord Chandos describes how he encounters difficulties with the power of words. He argues that the body reveals everything to him, "new relationships with all of existence," that we could only experience when we "began to think with our hearts." Words ultimately fail to address this experience.<sup>[20]</sup> In Romantic writings, this suspicion towards language had created an obsession with the capacities of words and the limits of expression, a rupture by means of communication and an opportunity to explore the possibilities of silence.<sup>[21]</sup> An opportunity, also, to think beyond words, with the heart, or, alluding to *Pense-Bête*, to think stupid, like an animal.

### 3. An exclamation of silence critique<sup>[22]</sup>

The writings of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) are embedded in this nineteenth-century perception of verbal language. In his work, he alluded to the idea that the poet was a visionary who could reach for the intangible *Idée*, or absolute, through *une langue universelle*.<sup>[23]</sup> According to Mallarmé, the poet could reach for this *Idée* with words that constituted silence, with words that were marked by absence and a pursuit towards nothingness or *le Néant*: a stairway towards the absolute, demolishing all contingencies related to our time-bound existence.<sup>[24]</sup> Thereto, Mallarmé deployed a method of elimination and reduction. He believed this strategy 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.<sup>[25]</sup>

Following Mallarmé, this negative tendency enabled poets to translate silence in their work. The poem became a hermetic system rejecting direct communication and worldly references; it would mark the absence of perceptible reality and present an image of truth by suggestion.<sup>[26]</sup> This endeavor to explore the (im)possibilities of expression was part of Mallarmé's ambitious project of *Le Livre*. Although *Le Livre* was never completed, its manuscripts reveal a preoccupation with writing a book that would function as microcosm, a book that would end all books. It would be freed from all subjectivity and transcend the limitations posed by the material qualities of a book. Its chapters would be loosely bound, could be read in any order, and even performed through different artistic forms or mediums.<sup>[27]</sup> It is interesting to note that even though many art historians and critics commented on the relationship between the ideas of Mallarmé and the works of Marcel Broodthaers, most authors addressed the issue of silence rather indirectly by referring to associated concepts of absence, abstraction, and materiality.<sup>[28]</sup>

In his essay, "The Space of Words," Jacques Rancière touches on these concepts, as he argues that the works of Mallarmé and Broodthaers are entangled primarily because of a "knot between writing and space."<sup>[29]</sup> According to Rancière, both artists voiced a critique on the modernist theory of art and the accompanying idea that the autonomy of art ultimately led to the specificity of each medium, or purity of art forms. They investigated the boundaries of the medium, particularly the spatial dimensions of writing, and challenged the homogenizing forms each

medium supposedly brought along. Their works therefore testify, following Rancière, that Mallarmé and Broodthaers did not practice any particular medium, yet "forged a new *sensorium* against the links of common sense: other perceptible habits."<sup>[30]</sup> In her writings on the aesthetics of silence, Sontag explicitly relates this thought, "new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc." as she calls it, to "notion of silence, emptiness and reductions," as these promote a "more immediate, sensuous experience of art or confront the artwork in a more conscious, conceptual way."<sup>[31]</sup>

In quite an extraordinary way, *Pense-Bête* explores this specificity of the medium. The sculpture questions the perceptible habits of its audience and enforces a (re)consideration of the spatial dimension of poetry. Besides, it enabled Broodthaers to deliver his artistic critique. *Pense-Bête* was exhibited at Broodthaers' first solo exhibition at Brussel's Galerie Saint-Laurent in April 1964. This exhibition was accompanied by a short statement presented as an invitation. The text of this statement was printed in a bold type on the recto and verso pages of a magazine. Translated, it reads:

I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life. For some time I have been good for nothing. I am forty years old... Finally, the idea of inventing something insincere crossed my mind and I set to work straightaway. At the end of three months I showed what I had produced to Ph. Edouard Toussaint, the owner of the Galerie Saint-Laurent. But it is art, he said, and I will willingly exhibit all of it. Agreed, I replied. If I sell something he takes 30%. It seems these are the usual conditions, some galleries take 75%. What is it? In fact, objects!<sup>[32]</sup>

This statement can be regarded as a faux-naïve one, humorous and not a little cynical. While Broodthaers hints that his life and literary career had been a failure, he implies that selling works of art might make him successful. At the same time, he states that it took him only a short time to produce these works, just some "objects" that were regarded art because the gallery owner believed so. This thought, together with the printing of these words on advertisement, draw on the suggestion that the value of art was created and sustained by an economic system. It evokes the suspicion that all art is intertwined with commodity culture: "something insincere" and driven by commercial purposes. The objects on display, naturally, obeyed this deception and dishonesty.

By placing this statement also on the walls near the sculpture of *Pense-Bête*, Broodthaers alludes to the idea that its content did not just accompany the exhibition but was intrinsically related to a more personal and societal dimension. The sculpture actually amplifies and visualizes his statement. The bundles of *Pense-Bête* were an ignored piece of merchandise until they obeyed the language of commodity culture and the conventions of the art of their time: the assemblage as practiced by artists affiliated to Pop Art and *Nouveau Réalisme*.<sup>[33]</sup> Making art, or "something insincere," was taking the place of something regarded as a failure: Broodthaers' previous profession as a poet. Or, as posed by Rachel Haidu, his art was taking the place of "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."<sup>[34]</sup>

Notwithstanding this "belittled status," *Pense-Bête* reveals a great paradox. It demonstrates that the visual arts enabled Broodthaers to deliver his vicious critique on commodity culture and the art world from within. "Something insincere" is, therefore, provided with a certain seriousness.<sup>[35]</sup>

#### 4. A spatial dimension of silence

One thing implied or specifically mentioned by every critic is the fact that Marcel Broodthaers remained a poet, a poet who took up the visual arts and pushed his linguistic activities past the page into the space of the gallery.<sup>[36]</sup> The transformation of *Pense-Bête* reveals that Broodthaers deployed a method of silence, of negating supposedly true words to address a message or artistic process that he could not just formulate with words. Therewith, it touches on the same ambivalences between silence and speaking, the immaterial and the material, or something higher and the human, as encountered by the mystics and the Romantics.

Broodthaers' gesture of silence contains an allegorical play with exactly these ambivalences; most notably because the sculpture refuses a straightforward reading while reifying his poetry. This can be deduced by a few peculiarities. First of all, Broodthaers attracted much more attention by silencing his poems than through publishing. Second, *Pense-Bête* attests to a manner of speaking that is marked by a ruptured dialogue, a habit of provoking or frustrating the audience.<sup>[37]</sup> This is demonstrated by the fact that the transformation of *Pense-Bête* 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 colored paper on its pages. As a result, 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.<sup>[38]</sup> An active attitude of the reader or spectator was required in order to understand the poems in *Pense-Bête*.

The importance of this active attitude is also reflected by the loose structure of the sculpture; only a small part of the lower half of the books was put into plaster, allowing them to be removed with ease. In an interview carefully designed and edited by Broodthaers himself in 1974, "Ten thousand francs reward: an interview with Irmeline Lebeer," he commented on this aspect of *Pense-Bête* and uttered a great disappointment in the effect the sculpture 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 poetry, of sadness or 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.<sup>[39]</sup>

This citation exemplifies Broodthaers' ambivalent position towards the work and its characteristic silence. He emphasizes that the books in *Pense-Bête* were not completely unreadable but rather suspended from reading. They still reveal something that could, or even should, be read. The books were transformed into art, yet he wanted people to destroy its "sculptural aspect" and break through the insincerity of art. Broodthaers could not address this matter, and his artistic statement, better than through poetic silence. He attempted to speak through not speaking, and stumbled upon a fertile negative strategy, a method to suspend and frustrate the normal legibility of books and comprehension of art.

In this citation, Broodthaers sardonically remarks that his life as a poet was "isolated from all communication" and that "it became real, on that level where it is a matter of space and conquest" through the visual arts. This relationship between poetry and the "matter of space and conquest," maintained an important characteristic of Broodthaers' later works. It is even argued that *Pense-Bête* functioned as a stepping stone for Broodthaers' future endeavors, as it ushered a movement through which linguistic themes and ideas were presented in art, a shift from the verbal to the visual.<sup>[40]</sup> This time the visual expansion did not come through plaster but through the reference to "*La Moule*," an influential poem from the bundle of *Pense-Bête*:

*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 parfait.*<sup>[41]</sup>

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 that 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."

The artworks Broodthaers created with mussels or other empty shells all emphasize this linguistic play with "*moule*." Mussels, furthermore, visibly recall the word of *muein*, the closing of the lips or, more precisely, the aesthetics of silence. Most of the works containing these empty shells 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 in Antwerp, 1966.<sup>[42]</sup> They reveal that Broodthaers sought a reunification with his old profession as a poet and that the themes he introduced in *Pense-Bête* were not buried into plaster but rather reinvented through the visual arts. Moreover, this visual expansion brought along new notions of silence by its non-conventional choice of

materials and subsequent references to hollowness and negation.

### 5. Silence through forms and materials

In order to understand this focus on materiality and accompanying notions of silence, it is important to return to the theory of silence. As mentioned, the nineteenth-century perception of verbal language witnessed a distrust towards the capacities of the word and a quest for the limits of expression. Most authors emphasized that the consequential negative attitude towards verbal language, the process of elimination and reduction, created an abstract and self-reflexive understanding of modern poetry.<sup>[43]</sup> The poetic act became its own subject: a self-conscious poem reflecting on the possibilities and impossibilities of language. The visual aspects, such as typography, spacing, intervals, and white spaces, subsequently received greater importance; as the form would express a directness that language supposedly lacked.<sup>[44]</sup>

In his essays, George Steiner asserts that the visual arts disclose the same suspicion towards language as poetry and literature. He recognizes this tendency in the art after the post-impressionists and their morphed and shifted depiction of reality, and in artistic expressions that moved away from an accurate verbal equivalence.<sup>[45]</sup> According to Steiner, this movement was affected and enforced by the political inhumanities of the Second World War, a thought obviously interwoven with the writings of Theodor Adorno and his well-known dictum of 1949, "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch."<sup>[46]</sup>

This dictum is embedded in Adorno's wider frame of cultural criticism and his dialectical method and problems with a progressive vision of history. Adorno assigns Auschwitz a critical point in history: "the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism."<sup>[47]</sup> He regards this dialectic to have collapsed causing a disappearance of the opposition between art and barbarism. In his essay, "Commitment" (1962), Adorno clarifies this thought by arguing that his dictum questioned the possibility of deriving aesthetic pleasure from artistic representations after Auschwitz. The 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."<sup>[48]</sup>

This paradox is constitutive for Adorno's theory of aesthetics that insists on "the dual character of art as autonomy and social fact."<sup>[49]</sup> He argues that the political potential of art can be found in its autonomous position. Autonomous works of art "negate empirical reality, destroy the destroyer, which merely exists and by merely existing endlessly reiterates guilt."<sup>[50]</sup> According to Adorno, both the material content and formal categories of artistic creations originate 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. Committed art, therefore, is constantly in the middle of the ambivalence between art as an autonomous and a social fact. It is constantly searching for manners of expression that disrupt the socio-political reality and negate representational methods.<sup>[51]</sup>

Following this line of thought, a notion of silence would be present in art through a negative conception towards the representation of reality, emphasizing rejections of both language and the image. This regrouping of the formal laws of art and a break with representational methods is visible in Broodthaers' choice of materials and composition: his reference to "La Moule" and use of empty shells. The catalogue accompanying *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* contained the following poem:

*Ma rhétorique*

*Moi Je dis Je Moi Je dis Je*

*Le Roi des Moules Moi Tu dis Tu*

*Je tautologue. Je conserve. Je sociologue.*

*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<sup>[52]</sup>*

In this poem, Broodthaers elaborates on his own rhetoric in which the subject, "Je," is the king of "Moules," a king of empty shells, connoting both form and absence, following the poem of "La Moule," and the Greek word of *muein*. The subject nonetheless speaks, "Je manifeste," but appears to have lost: his words are just an expression of absence and

hollowness. Furthermore, in this rhetoric the subject is structurally incorporated in language. In order to say something about itself, "Je dis, je," the subject is represented by and dependent on words. In other words, the subject is empty outside the system of language.<sup>[53]</sup> Therefore, Broodthaers' rhetoric appears to be a circle, characterized by words as empty as hollow shells.

The use of mussels and empty shells in Broodthaers' works are therefore not only a visual expansion of poetry, a poetic conquest of space, but also a direct reference to the suspicion of language and the limits of expression. His series of *Panneaux de moules* (1966), exhibited at *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon*, are exemplary for this thought. These wooden panels are simply painted and decorated with masses of mussel shells glued to the surface; nothing but monochromes with empty creatures. Through the presence of these absent creatures, however, 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. Empty shells embody the closing of the lips; reveal the ambivalences of silence, the material and immaterial or form and hollowness; and visualize a withdrawal from the word.<sup>[54]</sup>

The difficulties encountered by the mystics, that words were necessary yet insufficient to address silent matters, or described by Sontag as the clash between the craving towards silence and the material character of art, are solved by Broodthaers through this unusual choice of materials. Silently, these materials communicate Broodthaers' linguistic game with poetry and its visualization, providing "something insincere" again with something serious, the limits of representation, and, as argued by Rosalind Krauss, "the revelatory potential of the medium."<sup>[55]</sup>

#### **6. *Pense-Bête* and its aftermath**

It goes without saying that Broodthaers' works with empty shells are all but easy to comprehend and comply to the aesthetics of silence by their materiality and continuous habit of displeasing the expectations of the audience.<sup>[56]</sup> The composition Broodthaers chose for these early works concurs with this enigmatic character and resembles, at least to a large extent, the methods of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde of monochromes, grids, assemblages. Even though Broodthaers' own writings indicate that he primarily used these strategies in order to criticize the art of his time, this method evinces a preoccupation with the boundaries of expression and representation, as described by Adorno.<sup>[57]</sup>

In their writings on modernist and post-modernist art, authors such as Peter Bürger, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss famously reflect on the aesthetics of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. In general, they describe a breach with representational methods and the tendency of negative aesthetics of a hostility to history, narrative, and discourse, addressed through techniques of structural and semantic breakdown.<sup>[58]</sup> Art was being disposed of its general assumptions and attacked from within, first, by an attack on the autonomy of art and second, by an attack on the institutions that provided art with value: museums, galleries, and so on. While the early works described in this essay reveal that Broodthaers used *Pense-Bête* and the poem "*La Moule*" to formulate his attack, on art and its interrelatedness with commodity culture and the boundaries between art and poetry, his later works would abandon these direct references.

His critique, however, would remain and return, maybe even more fiercely, through the institutional critique of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968-1972), and also by installations such as *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers (La Bataille de Waterloo)* (1975). Another thing that remained and returned, in different disguises though, are notions of silence and Broodthaers' preoccupation with space, materiality, linguistic ambivalences, and ideas of absence and negation. Most lucidly, this is reflected in the exhibition *Marcel Broodthaers à la Deblidouebliou/S, Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé* (1969) and Broodthaers' adaptations, the visualization and spatialization, of Mallarmé's closest reflection of *Le Livre: Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (1897).

This essay, however, has demonstrated that the first artworks Broodthaers made are marked by the aesthetics of silence, by different forms and notions of silence that would reappear and characterize his oeuvre. By silencing the true words of poetry, *Pense-Bête* had opened up on new manners of artistic expression. The sculpture reveals that Broodthaers deployed a method of silence to amplify his artistic statement and visualize his critique on the constructions and intertwinement of art and commodity culture. This method enabled Broodthaers to play with several ambivalences that the concept of silence brought along. Silence was used to reinforce the meaning of his bundle and Broodthaers' (ambivalent) message of failure; it transformed his collection of poems into art and "something insincere," while at the same time the message of *Pense-Bête* was neither silent, nor insincere.



Furthermore, the excessive use of empty shells proves that even though Broodthaers had silenced his last volume of poetry, the themes of his poems revived. His plastic reworking of "*La Moule*" refuses a straightforward understanding and complicates a process of meaning making. The mussel embodies the closing of the lips and visualizes, similar to notions of silence, something dialectical, insofar as it implies an opposite and depends on its presence: form and hollowness, substance and absence, language and silence. Broodthaers' reworking of "*La Moule*" symbolizes this interrelatedness and denotes a break between the boundaries of poetry and the visual arts: a spatial expansion of the page of the poem. Moreover, it reveals a negative attitude towards the representation of existent reality, and demonstrates that after the prestige of language had allegedly fallen, that of silence had risen.<sup>[5]</sup> Broodthaers abandoned his profession as a publishing poet, disrupted and shifted his poetry, and turned to the visual arts to formulate his ambivalent message, his own spatial poetry of critique.

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### Endnotes

[1] Marcel Broodthaers and Irmeline Lebeer, "Ten Thousand Francs Reward," *October*, 42 (Autumn 1987), 39-48, ref. on p. 44.

[2] I am greatly indebted to the thorough and precise suggestions of the reviewer of this article; the guidance of professor dr. Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, who supervised the thesis underlying this article with much attentiveness; and the sharp comments of Binkie Bloemheugel.

[3] Dieter Schwarz, "'Look! Books in Plaster!': On the First Phase of the Work of Marcel Broodthaers," *October*, 42 (Autumn 1987), 57-66, ref. on pp. 57-60.

[4] Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), pp. 3-34. Due to this focus on "The Aesthetics of Silence," only the thoughts of thinkers on silence who influenced Sontag will be mentioned, either directly or indirectly. This focus will narrow the scope of this article to theories of silence that depend more strongly on negative aesthetics. Other theories of silence, related to a phenomenological approach, are no less important yet will be excluded. See for example: Max Picard, *Die Welt des Schweigens* (Zürich: Rentsch Verlag, 1948); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. and trans. by Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

[5] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh et al., "The Moment of Marcel Broodthaers? A Conversation," *October*, 155 (Winter 2016), 111-150.

[6] For an extensive discussion of this thought, see: Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 37-46.

[7] In accordance with this title, the poems in *Pense-Bête* reflect the ancient tradition of the *bestiarium*: a genre which described and depicted natural history together with fabulous creatures and moral lessons on human society. See: Deborah Schultz, *Marcel Broodthaers: Strategy and Dialogue* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 31.

[8] Schwarz (1987), pp. 57-60.

[9] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Open Letters, Industrial Poems," *October*, 42 (Autumn 1987), 67-100, ref. on pp. 70-72.

[10] Longinus, *Het sublieme* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2000), pp. 31-32; Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Simon and Brown 2013), pp. 36-37, 65-67; Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Cape, 1984); John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1967).

[11] Sontag (2009), p. 5.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 7-11.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[14] Yra van Dijk, *Leegte die ademt: het typografisch wit in de moderne poëzie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), pp. 17-21; Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[15] Steven Katz, "Mystical speech and mystical meaning," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 3-41, ref. on pp. 3-5.

[16] Sontag (2009), pp. 21, 31.

[17] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Verlag, 2012); Osborne (2013), pp. 37-46.

[18] Gerhard Schulz, *Novalis: Leben und Werk Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (München: Beck, 2011), p. 266.

[19] George Steiner, *Language and Silence: essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber and Faber 1985).

[20] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "A Letter," *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), pp. 117-128, ref. on pp. 121-125.

[21] Steiner (1985), pp. 47, 66-67, 111-112.

[22] This unusual title is on purpose in order to visualize the process of silence and its elimination.

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

[24] In his essay, "Mimique" (1886), Mallarmé emphasized this pursuit: "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." My own translation from Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 310. See also Pearson (2004), pp. 5-6.

[25] Walter Strauss, *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 103.

[26] See Mallarmé's thought on "Je dis: une fleur!" in Mallarmé (1951), p. 368; Van Dijk (2005), pp. 38-39.

[27] 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), pp. 187-202.

[28] See, for example, the chapter "Reading Art" in Haidu, *The absence of work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), pp. 47-105.

[29] 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), pp. 41-61, ref. on p. 44.

[30] Rancière (2007), pp. 45-46, 54-56.

[31] Sontag (2009), p. 13.

[32] Rafael Garcia and Fransesca Wilmott, "Objects," in *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja-Villel and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), pp. 76-79, ref. on p. 76.

[33] Schultz (2007), pp. 101-128.

[34] Haidu (2010), p. xv.

[35] Most authors have taken the above-mentioned intertwinement of Broodthaers' artistic statement and *Pense-Bête* to another level. They argue that Broodthaers' declaration functions as a manifest characterizing all of his artistic practices. Benjamin Buchloh, for example, argues that Broodthaers' definition of art as "something insincere" continued to mark his future investigation as a "[...] 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." Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (1987), p. 72.

[36] Sam Sackeroff, "Literary Exhibitions," in *Marcel Broodthaers: A Retrospective* [cat.], ed. Manuel J. Borja-Villel and Christophe Cherix (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), pp. 136-139, ref. on pp. 136-137.

[37] Sontag (2009), pp. 7-8.

[38] Schultz (2007), pp. 59-60; Haidu (2010), pp. 55-56.

[39] Broodthaers and Lebeer (1987), p. 44.

[40] Sackeroff (2016), pp. 136-137.

[41] 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. Translation in Marcel Broodthaers and Paul Schmidt, "Selections from "Pense-Bête," *October*, 42 (Autumn 1987), 14-19, ref. on pp.14-15.

[42] Garcia and Wilmott (2016), pp. 78-79.

[43] 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), p. 5; Pearson (2004), pp. 5-6.

[44] See the extensive discussion on the blank spaces in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé in Van Dijk (2005), pp. 38-61; or more general for the function of typographic blanks in poetry Yra van Dijk, "Reading the Form: The Function of Typographic Blanks in Modern Poetry," *Word & Image*, 27, 4 (2011), 407-415.

[45] Steiner (1985), pp. 41-42, 117-122.

[46] "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Translation in Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 17-34, ref. on p. 34. For a 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.

[47] Adorno (1983), p. 34.

[48] Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," trans. Francis McDonagh, *New Left Review*, 87-88 (1974), 75-89, ref. on p. 85.

[49] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), pp. 227-228; Osborne (2013), p. 44.

[50] Adorno (1974), pp. 85-86.

[51] *Ibid.*, 86-87.

[52] 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. Translation in Schultz (2007), p. 115.

[53] Birgit Pelzer, "Marcel Broodthaers: The Place of the Subject," in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1999), pp. 186-205, ref. on p. 188.

[54] Rachel Haidu touches on this thought but interprets it differently, as she argues that the panels of mussels only refer to themselves and their linguistic qualities. See Haidu (2010), p. 13.

[55] Rosalind E. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000). In this short treatise, Krauss argues that Broodthaers' work, his recognition of heterogeneity 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 conflation of different media.

[56] Sontag (2009), pp. 7-9.

[57] See the interview: Marcel Broodthaers and Jean-Michel Vlaininckx, "Entretien avec Marcel Broodthaers," *Degré Zero*, 1 (1965).

[58] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

[59] Reference to Sontag (2009), p. 21.