

London's Art Networks and Marcel Broodthaers in the 1970s – One-day Conference

Venue: Chelsea College of Arts, 16 John Islip Street, London SW1P 4JU

Date: Friday 23 June 2023, 10:30-17:30

Room: Red Room

Organisers: Dr Deborah Schultz (schultzd@regents.ac.uk) and Dr Andrew Chesher (a.chesher@chelsea.arts.ac.uk)

At the end of the 1960s British artists related to conceptual art - some directly, such as Art & Language, others by association, such as Gilbert & George and Richard Long - all had their first solo shows in continental Europe. It was there too, not in the UK, that their American counterparts, such as Sol LeWitt, Douglas Huebler and Lawrence Weiner, were shown before appearing in London's galleries. The 1970s, however, saw the growth of a network of figures and institutions that supported the activities of conceptual and related art practices in London and the UK more widely.

Marcel Broodthaers's interactions with these networks exemplifies their growth over the decade. The Belgian artist had his first London-based show at the newly founded Jack Wendler Gallery in late 1972 and was living in the city by the beginning of the following year, where he was in contact with various artists including Richard Hamilton and David Lamelas. Institutions central to the development of new art in the UK, including the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, the Jack Wendler and Nigel Greenwood galleries, and the magazine *Studio International*, all became hosts to or supporters of Broodthaers's work.

This conference will draw together research that explores these networks as they coalesce around Broodthaers's career, whether directly coming into contact with it or not, as well as some parallel networks. Taking Broodthaers as its touchstone, it will explore, on the one hand, the aesthetics and politics of experimental practices that become public in England in the 1970s, both before and after Broodthaers' death in 1976, and simultaneously on the other, the practical and intellectual ambience in which they came into being and into conversation with one another. The conference will have a keynote address by Prof. Jo Melvin, Chelsea College of Arts, who, alongside the convenors, will be one of the panel chairs.

Schedule:

10:30-11:00 Registration (Coffee and Tea available)

11:00-11:15 Conference Introduction (Deborah Schultz, Andrew Chesher)

11:15-13:15 Panel 1 (Chair: Deborah Schultz)

- Jo Melvin (University of the Arts London), 'Marcel Broodthaers and Peter Townsend a friendship unfolded'
- Michal B. Ron (independent art historian, Berlin), 'M.B.'s ABCs'
- Maria Elena Minuto (University of Liege), 'A Poetry Issue: The Critical Reception of Marcel Broodthaers in Barbara Reise's Art Criticism'

13:15-14:15 Lunch (served in room BG07)

14:15-16:15 Panel 2 (Chair: Jo Melvin)

- Florentine Muhry (University of Hildesheim), 'Radical Resistance and Transformative Aesthetics. Rasheed Araeen's Postcolonial Approach to Conceptual Art'
- Raf Wollaert (University of Antwerp), 'London Friends: On the Development of David Lamelas and Marcel Broodthaers's Cinema Practices (1973-1975)'
- Andrew Chesher (University of the Arts London), 'A Broodthaers Prospective: John Murphy, Susan Hiller, and Steve McQueen'

16:15-16:30 Coffee break (Coffee and Tea available)

16:30-17:30 Plenary Panel

To read Contributor Biographies, please see our [Eventbrite page](#).

ABSTRACTS:

RAF WOLLAERT, ‘LONDON FRIENDS: On the Development of David Lamelas and Marcel Broodthaers’s Cinema Practices (1973-1975)’.

ABSTRACT: Marcel Broodthaers and Maria Gilissen can be seen broadly smiling in a 1973 picture from the series ‘London Friends,’ taken by a fashion photographer on behalf of the Argentinian artist David Lamelas (b.1946). The photograph only presents the most ‘alluring’ example of the intense artistic exchange that took off after the two artists’ first encounter at the 1968 Venice Biennial. For both of them, London provided a temporary backdrop for their artistic activities at a crucial period in their careers, while sharing a common entourage of gallerists and critics.

However, next to a vibrant local network, a profound interest in cinema as a means to dissect the material, communicative, and social premises of mass media can be seen to slide over their practices. Lamelas was almost exclusively involved with filmmaking (and photography) since he settled in the city in 1968, while Broodthaers’s cinema reached a very pinnacle in terms of output and sophistication during his ‘London years’ spanning between 1973 and 1975. Moreover, a closer look suggests a surprisingly similar evolution of their cinematic pursuits. If both artists pursued a deconstruction of the filmic apparatus as a matter of (material) space and time at the beginning of the 1970s, partially in response to the reductive models of conceptual and structural film, their concerns soon shifted to an exploration of the representational regimes operating within the diegetic expanse of the screen, which ultimately resulted in an apparent critical embrace of fiction, not entirely unlike the famed “Pictures Generation” practitioners. Whereas classical cinematographical techniques are exploited to the fullest in Broodthaers’s *Figures of Wax* (1974) or *La bataille de Waterloo* (1975), *The Desert People* (1974) by Lamelas—significantly, all three films were mounted by the London film editor Noel Cronin—presents a subversive appropriation of Hollywood aesthetics.

Through a number of specific cases, this paper refracts through the lens of their cinematic endeavors Lamelas and Broodthaers’s artistic exchange and development throughout the 1970s, as sustained by their shared London network.

Dr. MICHAL B. RON, ‘M.B.’s ABCs’.

ABSTRACT: Marcel Broodthaers’s oeuvre is full of alphabets: handwritten, machine-typed, printed, vacuum-formed, painted, stencilled. When the artist appropriates a found old English picture-alphabet made as a learning aid for children, l’alphabet differs from the alphabet. In 1974, the artist designs the page covering the Belgian Issue of Studio International with the bright round letter-plates, famously composing the phrase: FIN(E. Eagle) (A. Ass)RTS. Here, the letter A is associated with ‘Ass’, rather than with Broodthaers’s mythologized ‘Aigle’, and ‘Eagle’ migrates from Art’s capital A to the letter E. The expression “The Fine Arts” appears also in Times Roman font in a British catalogue of typographical specimens, which Broodthaers lifts for his catalogue entry in the 1974 group exhibition at Brussels’ Palais des Beaux-Arts. In the copies of a text laid for picking up on a vitrine of the Jardin d’Hiver he exhibits there, the artist advises to “voir catalogue”, while referring to “un autre alphabet”. I suggest viewing the English ABC as “an-other alphabet”. For those reading a foreign language, letters forming unknown words become images, as ABC-ABC Image (1974), the double slide projection Broodthaers produces using that old picture-alphabet, may demonstrate. What can we learn from the confrontation of the English picture-alphabet with the artist’s own handwriting in French, in a rebus he designs for the less-discussed back cover of Studio International? He writes: “une faute d’orthographe cachée vaut en fromage”. How would the worth of “an orthograph’s mistake” be translated from “a cheese” into D.M., F.F., E, and S, according to the edition Gedicht Poem Poème – Change Exchange Wechsel (1973), counting and evaluating the artist’s initials? With M.B.’s internationalisation, when the French FIN – end – of Arts becomes the English FINE – beaux, we follow a trail of “Em-Be”’s turning into “Em-Bi”’s.

FLORENTINE MUHRY, ‘RADICAL RESISTENCE AND TRANSFORMATIVE AESTHETICS: Rasheed Araeen’s Postcolonial Approach to Conceptual Art’.

ABSTRACT: While earlier research on conceptual art in the 1970s in Britain examined works by Western artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Art & Language, and Marcel

Broodthaers, this paper discusses a postcolonial perspective on conceptual art that has been increasingly advanced in recent years. It focuses on the work For Oluwale (1971–73/75) by artist, critic, and curator Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935, Karachi, living in London), which heralds a shift in his artistic practice away from minimal art and toward a political understanding of conceptual art. The four-part work consisting of newspaper cuttings and anti-colonial protest flyers was first shown in a group exhibition at the Swiss Cottage Library in 1973 and later at his first solo show in 1975 at the space of the collective Artists for Democracy in Whitfield Street, London, run by David Medalla (1942–2020). Considering Araeen’s activist involvement in the British Black Panther Movement, as well as the historical references to police violence, racism and colonialism depicted in the work, this paper aims to analyse the ‘dematerialised’ artwork under post-colonial conditions. This is pursued through two perspectives: The first is to investigate whether the premises of conceptual art were discussed and received with a different focus in London’s alternative art spaces, as while canonical conceptual art used a purist formal language, Araeen in For Oluwale uses a radically resistant aesthetic, which is composed of activist-affiliated fragments and cheap information material. On the other hand, the question arises whether the information-oriented and even propagandistic concern in For Oluwale could only in the context of conceptual art be placed as a work of art in an aestheticized art space, since both the canonised logic and Araeen’s postcolonial logic aim to unite art and life, to question modernist notions of art and autonomy, and to expand ontological and epistemic understandings of artworks. Looking at postcolonial conceptual artists such as Rasheed Araeen, in the context of the diverse London art scene of the 1970s, allows us to revisit the inherently political and experimental potential of conceptual art, to consider synergies that locate practices of marginalised subject positions not outside the canon, but within a pluriversal art historiography.

Dr. MARIA ELENA MINUTO, ‘A POETRY ISSUE: The Critical Reception of Marcel Broodthaers in Barbara Reise’s Art Criticism’.

ABSTRACT: ‘Broodthaers is less a contemporary Shaman than a Socrates: posing questions in poetic images which transcend traditions of individual media and which connect with many layers of historical culture and of contemporary life.’ (Barbara Reise. ‘The Imagery of Marcel Broodthaers.’ 1974).

A leading figure of 20th century art, Belgian poet and visual artist Marcel Broodthaers (Brussels 1924 – Cologne 1976) played a crucial role in shaping the transnational network of conceptual art criticism as it flourished and spread across European counterculture in the late 1960s and 1970s. Drawing on sources from the Archives & Musée de la Littérature in Brussel and the M HKA Collection in Antwerp, this paper examines the critical reception of Broodthaers’ interart poetics from two comparative perspectives suggested by the London-based American art critic Barbara Reise in her critical essay entitled ‘The Broodthaers Museum Gambit’ (Art in America, May/June 1975). The first focuses on ‘the artist as museologist’ and the way in which Broodthaers encouraged the analysis of structures and meanings of museum practices by radically changing the critical understanding of what an exhibition could be (reference to Un Jardin d’Hiver, 1974). The second discusses ‘the artist as structuralist’, from Broodthaers’ poetic-artistic interventions published in neo-avant-garde art and literary magazines such as Studio International, Labris and Phantomas, to his outstanding exhibition Le privilège de l’Art, 1249-1975 (The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1975) that strongly contributed to circulate Broodthaers’ work across mediums of poetry ‘objects, photographs, slides and films’ in 1970s England’s art scene. A focus on Reise’s research and art criticism will bring to light some of the main reflections at the core of Broodthaers’ verbal-visual pun: the strong intersection between verbal and figurative arts and the way they are exhibited, circulated and perceived; the pursuit of an extensive body of new poetic forms in art; and the possibility to conceive literary paintings, visual poems, and poetic objects as manifestations of an inter-artistic thought.

Prof. JO MELVIN, ‘MARCEL BROODTHAERS AND PETER TOWNSEND, a friendship unfolded’.

ABSTRACT: A working relationship between Marcel Broodthaers and Peter Townsend, Studio International’s editor, evolved into a friendship during Broodthaers’s so called ‘London years’ from 1973-75. Broodthaers was to

make several contributions to Studio International, each one a feuilleton, and each with a different form. According to Townsend’s assistant editor, John McEwan, the wrap around cover Broodthaers designed by the October 1974 issue was amongst Townsend’s favourites of the artist commissioned covers from his time as editor. Townsend confided in me that this project was the one in which he had ‘interfered directly’ with an artist’s initial concept.

The plan Broodthaers had initially brought to Townsend was for a cover on which the painting of a schooner from his film the voyage in the North Sea would feature. Emblazoned across the schooner would be the word ‘cack’. When he showed Townsend the dummy layouts, Peter said: ‘but Marcel you can’t say painting’s shit when some of your closest friends are painters’. So instead, he made the now famous rebus cover for the front and the back of the issue. The back also advertised two galleries, art and project and MLT. It was a humorous play on the general use of magazine back covers to sell for advertising space.

Dr. ANDREW CHESHER, ‘A BROODTHAERS PROSPECTIVE: John Murphy, Susan Hiller, and Steve McQueen’.

ABSTRACT: This paper will explore Marcel Broodthaers’s work through a speculative methodology, that of the ‘prospective’. If a retrospective looks back at an artist’s oeuvre from its end (or at least a later point), a prospective would look forward from an artist’s oeuvre to the work’s reception and later ramifications, misprisions or, indeed, obscurity. It would treat the work as irreducible to a determinate context, whether it be the original moment of its production or the subsequent moment of its institutionalisation, looking rather, in a Benjaminian manner, for its heterogenous potential. In this spirit, the primary question the paper will seek to introduce in relation to Broodthaers and the early 1970s is this. What does the present look like from the perspective of the past – specifically, what does art in the UK during the decades following Broodthaers’s death look like from the perspective of his practice in the early 1970s? In particular, I will speculate on the feasibility of Broodthaers’s work, in its ‘refusal to deliver a clear message’, acting as the basis for the critique of subsequent practice.

Specifically, I will look at works by three London-based artists as reprises of themes and formal strategies to be found in the work of Broodthaers. The first two, Susan Hiller and John Murphy, met the Belgian artist when he was living in London in the early 1970s. Their works, Dedicated to the Unknown Artists and An Art of Exchange respectively, were completed in the year of Broodthaers’s death (1976), and can be understood as variations on the concerns and strategies evident in the older artist’s practice. The strategy at the base of each of these works involves drawing resonances from existing artefacts or documents, the overdetermination of which becomes apparent through their reframing. In this relation, Hiller’s view of herself as ‘collaborating’ with the ‘original producers’ of the artefacts she collected echoed Broodthaers ironically assuming of the mantle of curator and museum director; and where she emphasised the influence on her practice of her anthropological training Broodthaers readily embraced the label of ‘sociologist’ Magritte apparently used to describe him. Moreover, Dedicated to the Unknown Artists reads as a reiteration of Broodthaers’s play on the relation between ideas of nature and of culture. Murphy’s An Art of Exchange, by turn, which re-presents Weimar Republic banknotes from Germany’s years of hyperinflation each bearing an illustration derived from an artist’s work, addresses another of Broodthaers’s concerns: the relation of art and money. In contrast to Hiller’s ‘sociological’ affinity with the Belgian, Murphy’s work is characterised by an inheritance passed on through Broodthaers, that of nineteenth century French poetry, in particular of Mallarmé and the poet’s notion of the work as a structuring of pre-existing material (language) such that its inherent meanings are released rather than those meanings being expressed by the author. Lastly, the potted palms that feature in my third example, Steve McQueen’s short film Exodus (1992-1997), invoke, albeit probably unintentionally, a signature motif of Broodthaers’s late décors. In McQueen’s work the palm trees’ connotations undoubtedly differ; but while, on the one hand, Exodus radicalises the relation of exoticism and reification that concerned Broodthaers, on the other, it nonetheless shares the allegorical succinctness and complexity – the ‘refusal to deliver a clear message’ – of Broodthaers’s own figures of identity and their poetic structure.