

Set Piece

RACHEL HAIDU ON *DÉCOR: A CONQUEST* BY MARCEL BROODTHAERS



Marcel Broodthaers,
Décor: A Conquest by
Marcel Broodthaers, XIXth
Century, 1975/2007, mixed
media. Installation view,
Galerie de France, Paris,
2007. Photo: Patrick
Müller. All works by Marcel
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THE SHOOTING OF MARCEL BROODTHAERS'S FILM *La Bataille de Waterloo*, at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in June 1975, was timed to coincide with the British military pageant known as Trooping the Colour. The spectacle is staged annually on the Mall, and as the infantry and cavalry perform elaborate drills in full dress, a mood of orderly festivity prevails, betraying little of the ceremony's origins in the psychic exigencies of war. Trooping the Colour re-creates an old battlefield ritual in which flags representing the regiment and the sovereign were paraded through the ranks before fighting commenced, encouraging soldiers to feel protective not of their own lives but of the "colors" and the military and the state they represented. To defend the symbolic silk, and to capture the enemy's, were among the more stupendous demands of battle, the kind that try the imagination of noncombatants. On the summer day when Broodthaers shot his film, however, noncombatants' imaginations were, of course, left untroubled. Spectators looked on as the Trooping proceeded serenely down the Mall, and thus right past one of London's most prestigious contemporary art venues.

La Bataille de Waterloo intersperses footage of the parade, filmed from the ICA's windows and terraces, with shots of the institute's galleries inside. There, an incongruous mixture of knickknacks, furniture, cannons, and firearms is on view. This display, at once film set and exhibition, is the artist's penultimate work, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, which was reprised earlier this spring at the Galerie de France in Paris. Among the furnishings is a patio set; in some shots in the film, as the Trooping passes by just outside the windows, a woman sits at the white patio table beneath its attached sun umbrella, languidly disassembling a jigsaw puzzle depicting Napoleon and Wellington's battle royal. Her solitary "gaming"—a distant predecessor to the militaristic cyber and video games of today—is a kind of emblem of the lonely experience that Broodthaers's exhibition offers. Obsessed with the rules of representation and the systems that exchange direct experience for representation, *Décor: A Conquest* tests the trope of the decline of direct experience against the most extreme experience: that of war. In particular, what is at issue here is a type of martial enterprise as central to our day as it was to Broodthaers's: the war of choice fought through an imperialist frame of reference impervious to its own historical

illegitimacy. Today, the work's framing of its own alienated staginess serves to remind spectators, once again, of their familiar—even domesticated and cultivated—relation to the signs of imperialism and war. In so doing, it prompts a reconsideration of the common perception that Broodthaers was anything but an activist or interventionist artist, forcing us, in fact, to rethink the very meaning of those designations.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, XIXth Century, 1975/2007, mixed media. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. Photo: Maria Gilissen.

In June 1975, just after the fall of Saigon brought the American war in Vietnam to its brutal and ambivalent conclusion, it is unlikely that the coy set piece at the ICA had the impact of, say, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, 1967–72, Martha Rosler's series of photomontages polemically splicing published documentary photographs of the conflict in Southeast Asia into layouts culled from shelter magazines. There is no spectacular disjunction in *Décor: A Conquest*—no Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. If both Rosler and Broodthaers set up analogies between the interior of a nation (known so often, as to us today, as the homeland), bourgeois interiors, and museum interiors, the impact of this comparison is anything but shocking in *Décor: A Conquest*. It offers, instead, its own, subtler forms of productive alienation.

Décor is the generic name Broodthaers gave to a number of his late works, all of which play off the notion of interiority in a way that brings two connotations—interiority as in “inner life” and interiority as in “interior decorating”—into paradoxical congruence. In French, *décor* means “film set,” and Broodthaers's consistent use of the term reminds us of the intensity with which he engaged in filmmaking at the end of his career and marks the extent to which his practice at that time was filmic in concept even when not in fact. But also central here is the idea of turning decoration—superfluity and formalism—into work. Though only two *décor*s, *Un Jardin d'Hiver* (all three versions of which were mounted in 1974) and *Décor: A Conquest*, serve the double function of exhibition and film set, all of them have the evacuated, expectant air of an abandoned soundstage.

Décor: A Conquest carries that sense of evacuation into an investigation of museal spaces. It comprises two “period rooms,” a “nineteenth-century room” and a “twentieth-century room,” which contain items Broodthaers and his collaborator, Barry Barker (the curator who commissioned the work in 1975), procured from prop warehouses or purchased from a London department store. But just as these replicas and retail commodities falsify any claim to historical authenticity on the part of Broodthaers's period rooms, their radically static arrangements belie their ostensible status as sets, which is to say, as places where action will take place. In the nineteenth-century

room, half a dozen potted palms, a pistol, a ball of dried flowers, and a giant stuffed python join two fake cannons, two worn red-velvet Edwardian chairs, two silver candelabras, two saloon-style, wooden liquor casks, and two plastic shellfish engaged in a card game. The rigid symmetry with which all of these pairs are positioned is underscored by the faux-ceremonious effect of Astro turf rugs placed beneath each object or its pedestal. This is a nineteenth century ordered by a kind of absurd geometry, like Lewis Carroll's gridded, chessboard Wonderland, or, indeed, like the battlefields of nineteenth-century Europe, with their regular tactical formations and phalanxes of infantrymen. As if in rejoinder, the twentieth-century room is determinedly casual in its bellicosity. Near the patio table, on which the jigsaw puzzle is laid out half-assembled, are two vitrines containing seventeen assorted handguns and a poster explaining "how to load a Lüger." On top of the vitrines, perched against the wall and at the ready, are fifteen automatic rifles.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, XXth Century, 1975/2007, mixed media. Installation view, Galerie de France, Paris, 2007. Photo: Patrick Müller.

But this progression from century to century, which suggests that Broodthaers is mimicking a historical society or museum, is shot through with metonyms for film and television that assert a different kind of continuity. Spotlights with colored gels illuminate corners, and mounted publicity for a 1969 Glenn Ford western, *Heaven with a Gun*, sits above the liquor casks. The two systems, historicity and media spectacle, cross-pollinate—or, rather, neutralize each other. As relics from cinematic representations of war and battle are, in turn, subjected to the pretensions dear to institutions charged with producing and protecting history, it becomes unclear which system is the more fetishizing or sterilizing.

The beauty of proposing his film sets as exhibitions is that doing so enabled Broodthaers to work between modes of production rather than merely in them, allowing the critical object to fall into the gaps between projection and set, event and object, and even critical method and subject of analysis. This fit perfectly with the caustic mood of the *décor*s, which, in their accent on decorative uselessness, also reframe the blatantly capitalist venture known as the artist's retrospective. For his first self-retrospective, in 1974, Broodthaers remade a 1966 exhibition

catalogue titled *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon*, adding the term *Perroquets* (Parrots) to the title.¹ He placed two copies inside a glass-topped exhibition table and placed the table next to a caged parrot between two palm trees, thus constituting a work titled *Ne dites pas que je ne l'ai pas dit—Le Perroquet* (Don't Say I Didn't Say So—The Parrot). A mordant commentary on the condition of artists consigned by the market to grandiose repetitions of their earlier experiments, *Ne dites pas . . .* mercilessly dramatizes the efforts at self-historicization that are an artistic institution in themselves. This self-parodic mode becomes a manner of reframing the question of how institutions produce the traditions they are charged with keeping. As institutions that produce history and those that produce art and artists are set into a relay with each other, an uncomfortably similar static quality emerges from the comparison. For all the alleged differences between their audiences and functions, a series of rooms dedicated to a radical avant-garde artist's retrospective and a series of rooms dedicated to the seemingly inert view of the past proposed by a historical society share utterly conventional pedagogical aspirations and a singular appeal to the spirit of collection.



Marcel Broodthaers, *La Bataille de Waterloo*, 1975, strips from a color film in 35 mm, 10 minutes.

In *Décor: A Conquest*, a pair of period rooms—cum—film set becomes an instance of self-retrospective, in large part through the sly and self-mocking analogy Broodthaers creates between his own position as an artist and that of Napoleon entering his last and defining battle. At this extraordinarily and poignantly productive point in his career—a mere six months before his death—Broodthaers was in his fifth year of self-imposed “exile” from Belgium, and if London was hardly his Elba, it was nonetheless a place from which he could consider, with typically mordant irony, a career trajectory that had brought him from then-marginal Brussels to the epicenter of the international art world. Along the same pseudobiographical lines, it is tempting to see the palm trees, cannons, candelabras, etc., as parts of a puzzle whose many signifying systems fit together only poetically—which is to say, in a private, serene, yet ludic manner, one that is always near at hand in characterizations of Broodthaers as a former poet. One might indeed see his artworks as so many signifying systems dismantled or left in suspension, of a piece with *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (or *Ceci n’est pas une Pipe*). But underneath the quiet, hermetic quality of his art is a pressure on psychic interiority—an artistic institution in itself. The generic

term *décor*, as Broodthaers uses it, names the decorative condition of the artist at a particular stage of institutionalization, but it also names a closed system—closed like an artist’s oeuvre at the point of a retrospective, or like a suite of coordinated interior decoration, but, above all, closed like a language. In response to the challenge of a retrospective that must always acknowledge his own point of departure—poetry—he states, “It is possible that I have not been able to liberate myself from a certain literary climate, that I fall short of art. That’s possible.”² The negative space between objects so formally arranged in the nineteenth-century room, so sportily disarrayed in the twentieth, is the space between words. The *décors* work as a kind of sculptural rendition of Magritte’s painting of a pipe: Representation is reduced to an act of naming that constitutively disavows its own status. But Broodthaers is concerned above all with our placement, as subjects, by this constitutive disavowal. Boxed in by those strangely symmetrical arrangements (or faced with the curiously abandoned picnic table, puzzle, and gun collection), our place as viewing subjects is as drastically proscribed as it is in a semiotic square: There is nowhere to go, and the carefully stage-managed atmosphere leaves us nothing to feel. Speaking of *Un Jardin d’Hiver*, Broodthaers explained: “The games of chance made by the metal chairs or the palm trees or the images of the nineteenth century, enlarged photographically, that’s an accident that’s been sought after. . . . It wasn’t easy to put it into place so that it would have this kind of . . . exactly this appearance of cliché.”³



Marcel Broodthaers, *Ne dites pas que je ne l'ai pas dit—Le Perroquet (Don't Say I Didn't Say So—The Parrot)* (detail), 1974, mixed media.

Broodthaers understands art as a pressure to communicate, but he perpetually refuses that pressure, substituting instead a series of rationalizations regarding the history of such pressures. The domestication of the exotic (propelled by colonialism) therefore goes hand in hand with the reification of the subjective (emblemized by the art market's exploitation of the private pleasures of contemplating paintings). Both are processes of fetishization that produce strikingly paralyzed subjects. But nowhere more vividly than in this late *Décor*, with its intense thematization of military history and spectacle, does Broodthaers allude to the actual human cost of those processes—in terms of lives lost but also in terms of the diminishment of the scale of human perception.

The single constant component in every Décor is palm trees, found everywhere from *Un Jardin d'Hiver* to *décor: A Conquest*. For his retrospective “Catalogue-Catalogus” at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1974, Broodthaers placed potted palms in a line leading up to the entrance to the exhibition hall—like visitors forming a submissive queue, as Yves Gevaert has pointed out. Palm trees are undeniably symbols of the interlocked systems of consumerism, fashion, and martial and economic conquest that allow exotic flora to become metonyms for *exotica*, but by the mid-'70s, they are also simple, banal signifiers that one has entered a waiting room. When, for an exhibition the same year in Basel titled “L'Eloge du Sujet,” Broodthaers dots palm trees across the entrance (and names the work *L'Entrée de l'Exposition*), these slyly anthropomorphic plants signify for the viewer. But they also mark out the importance of negative space to the viewer of Minimalist sculpture in the mid-'70s and thereby vacillate as markers for sculpture and markers for viewers, markers for positive and for negative space, for viewing and waiting alike. If “falling short” of art (like Broodthaers’s self-avowed inability to abandon the literary) can be signified in space, the *décors* symbolically represent that condition in relation to the processes of imperial conquest and embourgeoisement, but they also remind us that that condition is about spectators “waiting” for art as we wait just about anywhere.



Marcel Broodthaers,
Musée d'Arte Moderne,
Département des Aigles,
Section des Figures,
1968–72, mixed media.
Installation view,
Düsseldorf Kunsthalle,
1972. Photo: Maria
Gilissen.

Since his early mussel-filled *Panneaux* of the mid-'60s, Broodthaers’s art had stressed the obduracy and muteness of objects and *l’art plastique*. But his art is also deeply reactive, in the best sense: It generates enormous depth out of its positions *vis-à-vis* contemporaneous and competitive art practices. The most famous episode of this is his *Exposition littéraire autour de Mallarmé*, 1969, in which he restores the nineteenth-century poet’s radical experimentation with the materiality of books and language—pages, typography, layout, etc.—in response to the evacuation of language at the hands of American Conceptual artists. The *décors*, in contrast, are propelled out of the rich treatment of negative space invented by Minimalist sculpture and are also filled with questions about the relations between language and vision worked loose by Structuralist film. In these works, Broodthaers is reacting to the propositions recently made by both movements, restoring the role of language that they overwrite or simplify, disposing of their exercises in medium-specificity, and insisting that any restructuring of the viewer’s experiential apparatus should conceive of that viewer as a political subject.

Insofar as the contemporaneous and co-terminous movements of Minimalist sculpture and Structuralist film shared a “phenomenological” approach, one that experimented with scale,

gestalt, frames, the “mind/eye,” and a general forcing out of all that is unconscious and habitual in our modes of seeing, their authors also suppress the important questions of language that invest phenomenology’s canon. Exceptions—Hollis Frampton’s films, Richard Serra’s verb lists, Carl Andre’s concrete poetry, and, in a sense, the entire armature of brilliant writing by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson—only render more stark the demand for wordless silence imposed by an oversize geometric sculpture or a slow zoom or a lengthy sequence of flashing images. (These exceptions also suggest possible starting points for alternative histories and theorizations of the movements.) Such a repression of language within the human negotiation of perceptual experience threatens to extinguish the position taken by Maurice Merleau-Ponty when he says, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, that it is language that “presents, or rather, is the positioning of the subject in the world of meanings.” Morris’s L beams and Judd’s bleachers challenge us to a level of self-reflexivity in our perceptual experience, and in so doing they implicitly ask whether this perceptual experience is available to us without language. But questions of language are naturally elided in the silent spaces devoted to art viewing, and to the degree that Minimal art rhymes with its institutional setting, it too elides such linguistic questions.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, 1975/2007, mixed media. Installation views, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. Photos: Maria Gilissen

It is common to find implanted in Broodthaers’s works direct references to critical theory (to Lacan and Foucault, for instance), and just as common to find his work operating parallel to “theory” rather than to the object exposed to theoretical interpretation. And just as often, the object of interpretation proposed by Broodthaers is literary: works by Mallarmé, La Fontaine, Heine, etc. In 1973, the polymath cultural theorist Jacques Leenhardt published his *Lecture politique du roman: La Jalousie d’Alain Robbe-Grillet*, a work that takes up, extends, and complicates the framework of the mentor to whom it is dedicated: philosopher-sociologist and literary theorist Lucien Goldmann, with whom Broodthaers took a seminar on Baudelaire in 1969–70 and to whom he too dedicated a work, *Charles Baudelaire: Je hais le Mouvement qui déplace les lignes*, 1973. In *Lecture politique*, Leenhardt argues that the “formal” and perceptual play of signifiers that makes

up Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *La Jalousie* repetitively enumerated rows of banana trees, descriptions of visual perspectives interrupted by window blinds, etc.—organizes the notion of vision that is the apparent subject of the book; vision may in turn be read as an allegory for the colonialist viewpoints put into play by the novel. Leenhardt further argues that the decline of republican colonialism in France is *La Jalousie*'s determinant context (though he also acknowledges the roles of irony, contingency, and sheer aesthetic play in the novel). In this way, Leenhardt restitutes subject matter and a political orientation to the *nouveau roman*, in 1973 one of the more recent forms of modern art to allege its own content-free status.

It is not merely that Leenhardt, like Broodthaers, perceives imperial consciousness as the regulative concept in understanding works of “cultural creation”—and thus in understanding his own time. Nor is it merely that Leenhardt interests himself in a mode of cultural creation whose progression from experimental literature to experimental film mirrors Broodthaers's. (The *nouveaux romanciers* not only wrote cinematically: Nine of Robbe-Grillet's screenplays were produced, between 1961's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* and 1976's television adaptation of *Dans le Labyrinthe*; and between Alain Resnais's film adaptation of Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* in 1959 and her 1975 *India Song*, the novelist directed six films.) It is also that the *nouveau roman* gives an ethical dimension to the problem of being trapped in language and is capable of moving between that sense of entrapment and problems of vision, space, and narrative. Speaking of Claude Simon's *La Route des Flandres* (1960), Gerald Prince summarizes: “I cannot get out of language and get to the thing; and, in order to capture some of the specificity of the latter, I must multiply designations for what is already a designation.” If the *Décors* speak to the problem of language, it is through this dialectic of entrapment and multiplicity, where we are faced with pairs of cannons, candelabras, and guns and also with the frustration of merely naming them, over and over. To “look” is merely to verify that the thing we have already named is still there. Broodthaers's ingenious system of using borrowed objects, robbed of any historical context, ensures that these remain fictional objects, stranded by the space of our own perception. The relay between fictional voices and institutional authority that had been put into play by his “museum fiction,” the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1968–72, had also forced into the open the contingency of such institutional authority on national and imperial “right.” The *décors*, erected in the period of conservative retrenchment that was Europe's lot in the mid-'70s, reframe these crucial links within the dusty atmosphere of period rooms, the empty austerity of a disused film set. Like interlopers at the scene of a crime, we are reminded that history is not necessarily ours, but always another's, and that this deferral is lodged within the structure of language itself.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, 1975/2007, mixed media. Installation views, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. Photos: Maria Gilissen

One of the last shots of *La Bataille de Waterloo* is of an ambulance waiting alongside the Trooping, in case a bystander gets hurt. (Even in this bowdlerized context, it seems, the suspicion of a potential for violence looms.) Film is hardly responsible for the banalization of warfare and its criminal loss of life: The Battle of Waterloo itself, like so many battles of its time, was watched by bourgeoisie picnicking on the neighboring hilltops. But what concerns the viewer of *Décor: A Conquest*: A Conquest is not merely warfare and imperial conquest but his or her own curious relation to these things. When Broodthaers lines up fifteen rifles, it is an unusually assertive gesture for such a restrained artist. For the visitor in Paris this spring examining these guns, the experience was as “fresh” as it must have been in 1975, as the last of the Americans—and whatever South Vietnamese were lucky or rich enough to get exit visas—left the place that had just become Ho Chi Minh City. That is to say, not fresh at all. If we are not combatants or direct witnesses to warfare, how do we relate to these objects except by multiplying our designations for them and still finding ourselves in language? “I cannot get out of language and get to the thing”: Perhaps these are extravagantly self-pitying words in the context of war. They certainly touch the limits of hypocrisy in Europe and America during the period of decolonization, during its immediate aftermath, and today. And yet they force a crucial recognition of our daily experience and of the limits to our efforts at communicating even the most urgent images and experiences. Not to recognize these limits is to misrecognize both our role and our times. This is the peculiarly deadening effect that Broodthaers likely intended for his own audiences thirty years ago, and it is just as sobering today.

Rachel Haidu, assistant professor in the department of art and art history and the graduate program in visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester, New York, is completing the book *Marcel Broodthaers, or the Absence of Work*.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, 1975/2007, mixed media. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. Photo: Maria Gilissen.

Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest* by Marcel Broodthaers, 1975/2007, mixed media. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. Photo: Maria Gilissen.

NOTES

1. The title is added in red, and a note on the inside jacket—the only emendation to the catalogue, aside from some internal titles printed in red ink—reads (in French), “This brochure by Marcel Broodthaers is the faithful reproduction, as concerns the black typography, of that which the gallery published in 1966.”

2. Interview with Marianne Verstraeten at an exhibition of *Un Jardin d'Hiver* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1974. Unpublished in Broodthaers's lifetime, the interview is in Anna Hakkens, *Marcel Broodthaers par lui-même* (Ghent/Paris: Ludion/Flammarion, 1998), 109. Author's translation.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See Gevaert's notes to “Catalogue-Catalogus” in Catherine David, ed., *Marcel Broodthaers* (Paris: éditions du Jeu de Paume/Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1991), 236.

5. Another view of Broodthaers's relation to Structuralist film is to be found in Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999). This article is greatly indebted to Krauss's readings of the Minimalist sculpture of Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and others through phenomenology.

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Phenomenologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 225. Author's translation.

7. Gerald Prince, “How to Redo Things with Words: La Route des Flandres,” *MLN* 103, no. 4 (1988), 781.



Marcel Broodthaers, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers, 1975/2007*, mixed media. Installation views, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975. Photos: Maria Gilissen.