

## **Cli-je: Subjectivity and Publicity in Art and Criticism The Letters of Pierre Restany and Marcel Broodthaers in *Court-Circuit***

By Hannah Bruckmüller

### **Abstract**

This essay focuses on the increasingly short-circuited relationship between art, criticism and publicity in French-speaking countries in the 1960s. Zooming in on the case study of the exhibition catalogue to Marcel Broodthaers' solo-show *Court-Circuit* (1967) reveals the electrified entanglement of letters—written and published between artist and critic—and letters of the alphabet, which form words, stencils to be re-used, namely clichés. Following the performativity of typography, this essay takes into account questions of subjectivity and canonization. In 1972, Leo Steinberg attested that the critic's words intend to be repeated and to perform *clichés*. In 1967, art critic Pierre Restany describes Broodthaers' art object—a muffled telephone—as a 'cliché of our civilization'. His text reads like a letter to the artist, in which Restany uses big bold capitalized letters to mask individuals who might have attended the opening of the exhibition: **A, B, C**. Artist Marcel Broodthaers responds in the same manner repeating the critic's alphabet. Reading the exhibition catalogue becomes an experimental enterprise: How do critic and artist write to each other? Apparently, *clichés* are set to play in this publication: *clichés* are employed in the use of language as well as in the graphic design of the catalogue page, which is also based on a *cliché*. Investigating *short-circuits* and following terminological *clichés*, my reading of Broodthaers and Restany is accompanied by Avital Ronell and her media-theoretical, techno-philosophical approach coming from literary criticism. Reading Ronell's thoughts on the electrifications of speech published in her book *Telephone Book*, which itself stages a telephone book, supports this essay's strive to 'take the call' of typography with its performative capacities and its onomatopoetic dimensions. The letters of Marcel Broodthaers and Pierre Restany, this is my hypothesis, enact a coded play of letters, words and initials, infused by technology. Dealing with the printed letter while continuously employing the printed letter in my own writing, causes a terminologico-typographical culmination in the most common *cliché*: *cli-je*.

Art and literature [...] which of the moon's faces is hidden? And how many clouds and fleeting visions there are...  
(Broodthaers 1975)

When Marcel Broodthaers wonders in retrospect about the relations of art and literature, his question can be read programmatically: 'Which of the moon's faces is hidden?' The artworks that the poet exhibited in between 1964 and 1978 were vividly entangled with literature, incorporating text(s) and language. Broodthaers' oeuvre—produced in the historical context of the 1960s and 1970s—is often discussed under conceptual, critical and literary premises. Yet, there are 'many clouds and fleeting visions' from the other sides of the moon. Reading Broodthaers' exhibition catalogue of the 1967 solo-show *Court-Circuit* (Short-Circuit) at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, prompts questions about the letter and its publication: What is made public by whom in this species of publication called 'exhibition catalogue'? In *Court-Circuit's* exhibition catalogue, art critic Pierre Restany and artist Marcel Broodthaers published their letters: What is this literary correspondence about? The electrified entanglement of their letters enacts a coded play of letters, words and initials, infused by technology and involved with the public: visitors, readers, recipients. Which faces of the alphabet appear in the increasingly short-circuited exchange between art, criticism and publicity in French-speaking countries in the 1960s? This essay sets out to a close, loud and cross-reading of *Court-Circuit's* exhibition catalogue, taking into account the performativity of printed letters and their relation to subjectivity.

### **A B C, Art, Literature and the Letter: 'Which of the moon's faces is hidden?'**

At the core of this essay are letters: Letters of the alphabet constitute words like alphabet, art and criticism. Letters are shaped by font, size and style: **A B C**. At the same time, alphabets, art and criticism are constituted *by* letters: written words. But letters are also to be written,

for example from the art critic to the artist. To be sent *and* to be written the letter always implies a manifold semantic *charge*. The experienced reader—who is used to read—does not *see* the letter anymore, being all focused on reading the word. Paraphrasing Broodthaers, one could ask: Which side of the letter is hidden? The letter of the alphabet, or the letter constituting the word?

Initially, letters of the alphabet form *clichés*, they build stencils to be employed. Letters can start to circulate, relate and spread the news when being published; letters come with a repetition-intention, and thus they are to be investigated carefully. Dealing with the printed letter thus always demands to ask: ‘How?’ and requires a rigid testing. In her media-theoretical, literary and philosophical writings on the test and the telephone, Avital Ronell sets out to take this question as a call. In *Telephone Book*, she elaborates on the history of the telephone and the electrified communication prompted and facilitated by this technological object, which always comes as a pair, *doubled*. In its typographical layout, Ronell’s book stages a telephone book: the publication and its research object—the telephone(-book)—enter an echo chamber, in which content and form are in constant oscillation. Accompanied by Ronell’s media theory, this essay strives to take the call of typography with its performative capacities and the onomatopoeic—*read out loud!*—capacities of the letter. Quite fittingly, the telephone appears in Broodthaers’s *Court-Circuit* as a work of art, as a literary figure, *and* as an object of communication. *How to call you?* Consequently, this text—written by ‘me’ and read by ‘you’, both ‘I’—is informed by Michal B. Ron. Ron’s reading puts emphasis to Hegel’s observation that everyone, you and I, says ‘I’: the same ‘I’, but always different. Spoken out loud or written down, my ‘I’ looks and sounds like your ‘I’. ‘I’ take that call: Who answered the phone? The difference of subjectivity is obliterated in pronunciation and writing: it is erased by language. Paul de Man interpreted this generalizing function of the ‘I’ in the realm of literary criticism. Writing about and reading with the poet Marcel Broodthaers, who wrote the poem *Ma Rhétorique*—‘Me

I say I Me I say I [...]’ (Moure 2012, 158)—‘Moi Je dis Je Moi Je dis [...]’ (Broodthaers 1966), Ron consequently repeated the ‘I’ once more and trenchantly wrote that it ‘transforms the singular ‘I’ into a general subject’. Regarding Broodthaers’ continuous repetition of ‘I’ and ‘me’, Ron discussed the mold provided by *every* ‘I’, which turns the artist, the individual, me and you into a *general* ‘I’. We all say ‘I’: the most common *cliché*. Ron follows the ‘I’ of the artist to the ‘I’ of the other artist, from the ‘I’ of literature to the ‘I’ of art, from your ‘I’ to my ‘I’. Working with the short-circuit of Restany and Broodthaers, ‘I’ am always waiting for ‘you’ to call.

### **Véritablement**

In *Court-Circuit*, Broodthaers presented eggshells, bottles, crates—empty vessels, forms, containers. While the historical viewer visited the show and probably read the catalogue afterwards, the (art) historian today starts out with the catalogue. Although the exhibition was documented by a film and a few installation shots, the exhibition catalogue remains as a document *from* the exhibition. According to a definition by Jean-François Chevrier and Philippe Roussin, the document is circumstantial and closely related to and intertwined with its context: ‘The document neither exhausts itself nor is it closed: it is contingent on its situation.’ (translation by the author)<sup>1</sup>. This integrity of printed matter is crucial to Broodthaers’ artistic approach: being busy with writing, reading and reciting, he was not only highly aware of the value of the exhibition catalogue, but also *used* it artistically and integrated his publications in his artworks and installations. Broodthaers’ exhibition catalogues frequently resemble the exhibited objects as well as the exhibitions, oftentimes they bear the same title, sometimes the exhibition catalogue is re-exhibited in the same or a forthcoming exhibition. For example, in 1974 Broodthaers published the artist book *Un Jardin d’Hiver*, which he presented in a showcase

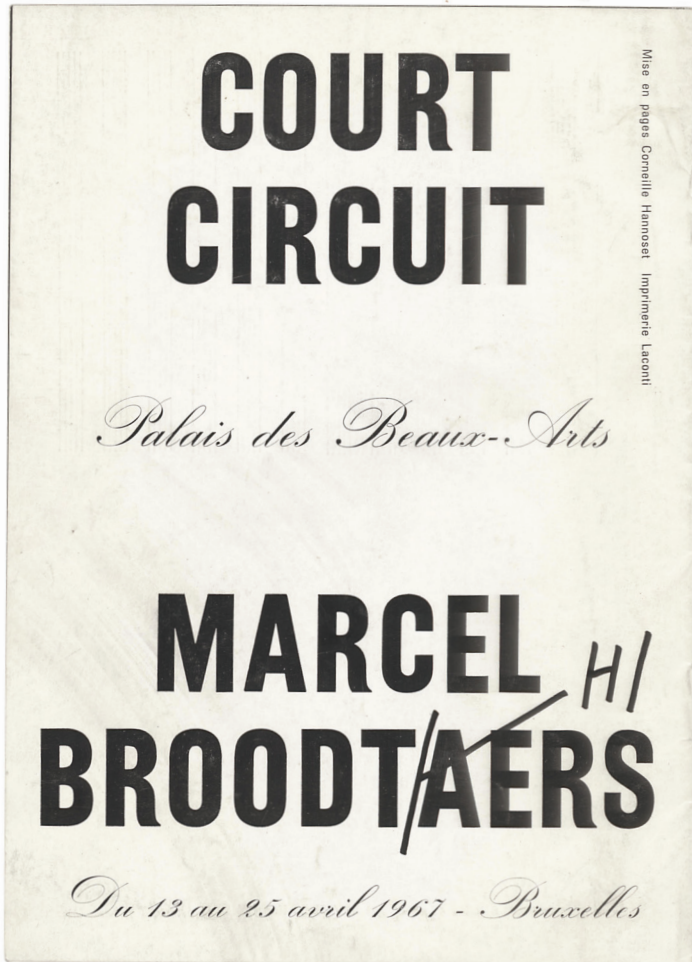
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<sup>1</sup> ‘Le document n’est jamais suffisant ni fermé sur lui-même: il est circonstanciel’ (Chevrier/Roussin 2006, 6).

in the second iteration of the installation 'Un Jardin d'Hiver' in 1975. Such homonymies are to be conceived as consequent extensions of the singularity of a work of art into the publication or exhibition space. Although Broodthaers did not employ the homonymic structure in *Court-Circuit's* exhibition catalogue, the empty vessels, forms and containers presented in the exhibition space keep re-appearing typographically, semantically and formally throughout the publication.



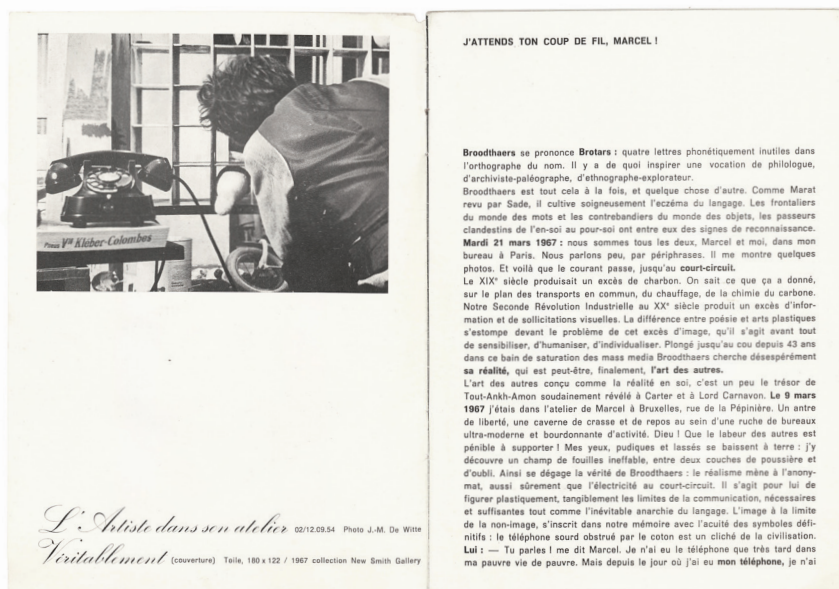
**Figure 1:** Front Cover of the exhibition catalogue, *Marcel Broodthaers. Court Circuit*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 13.-25. April 1967. Copyright: Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels.



**Figure 2:** Back Cover of the exhibition catalogue, *Marcel Broodthaers. Court Circuit*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 13.–25. April 1967. Copyright: Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels.

On the front cover of the catalogue the word *Véritablement* flaunts in big, bold, capital letters (Fig. 1), while the exhibition title is only mentioned on the back cover: *Court-Circuit*. (Fig. 2) What, then, is the title of this publication? The reader might choose between *Véritablement* and *Court-Circuit*. *Véritablement*, meaning ‘truly’, ‘really’, ‘actually’, accedes with a heavy semantical load, opening boxes containing questions of truth, reality and presence. *Court-Circuit*, French

for 'short-circuit', meanwhile comes with implications of technology, failure and connection. While the visitor might remember the *Court-Circuit*, the contemporary reader will probably stick with *Véritablement*, which is—still—to be read on the cover. The catalogue starts with a text written by French art critic Pierre Restany, who was a key figure in the Parisian art scene in the 1960s. Restany's text reads like a letter addressed to the artist and ends with the prompt 'I'm looking forward to your call, Marcel!'. His request simultaneously figures as the title of the text. The final sentence and the first sentences are homonomies, the end equals the beginning, the text becomes a closed circuit. (Fig. 3/4). Meanwhile, the short circuit plays a central role in Restany's text, which can already be *seen* in the bold font style of the text: **court-circuit**. In regard of this echo of text and image in typography, the publication, and essentially the printed letter, provides a crucial site for the encounter of art and criticism, being highly contingent on publicity, the *condition of being public*.



**Figure 3:** *J'attends ton coup de fil, Marcel!* Text by art critic Pierre Restany, page 1/2, in: *Marcel Broodthaers. Court Circuit*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 13.–25. April 1967. Copyright: Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels.

### **'I am waiting for your call, Marcel!'**

Under this title, the influential art critic recalls Broodthaers's visit to his office on Tuesday, 21 March 1967 (Fig. 3). The artist came to show him some photos and then they 'speak a little bit, mainly in circumlocutions'. (Museum of Modern Art 2016, 120)<sup>2</sup> Originally written in French, the text reads: 'Nous parlons peu, par périphrases' (Restany 1967). *Périphrase* already implies that their communication was rerouted, haunted by a kind of *détournement*. The text continues: 'And then, electricity succeeded, just until the short-circuit' (MoMA 2016, 120). Restany's French words, which are difficult to translate, read: 'Et voilà, le courant passe, jusqu'au **court-circuit**' (Restany 1967). Obviously, electricity interfered in the conversation of the two men and caused a fault in the professional exchange. This incidental interruption, which was formatted bold and thus highlighted in the original publication, became eponymous for the artist's solo-show (Fig. 3). The electrical failure in the critic's office—Restany recounts a short-circuit in his text—emerged to an institutional heading: the exhibition was titled *Court-Circuit* (Fig. 2). Was this a *real* electrical error, or is Restany writing in metaphors? An English translation of Restany's French sentence, published posthumously in 2016, reveals the polyphonic and multilayered meaning of *court-circuit*: 'And click, we have connected, all the way to short-circuiting' (MoMA 2016, 120). This astonishingly technical, or more specific: electrical vocabulary attached to *court-circuit* demands for etymological inquiry. According to the lexical definition, *court-circuit* primarily translates to an electrical incident, but it also comes with a medical meaning, designating a conversation, between two bodily vessels. Both translations are closely bound to the general means and matters of communication. While the first connotation of *court-circuit* addresses a connection essentially supported by technology,

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2 The original French texts by Restany and Broodthaers, which are discussed in this essay, can be read on the images (Fig. 3/4/5). The English translation of both texts is cited from the exhibition catalogue to 'Marcel Broodthaers. A Retrospective', edited by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and published in 2016. Hereafter, this translation is referred to as 'MoMA 2016'.



the second one is loaded with medical implications. (Larousse 2019) Navigating the crucial instance of diagnosis, both meanings are highly dependent on connectivity, built on the communication between spatially separated elements. When short-circuiting, the medical as well as the electrical orbit are subject to unexpected interruptions. *Court-circuit* terms and terminates points of (dis-)connection and essentially involves the question of success and failure: a short-circuited conversation is often a failed one. It is a communication which came to an (abrupt) end. Connectivity and its dysfunctionalities are decisive for the meeting of the artist and the critic. 'Did you click?' essentially programs the aftermath of their encounter: 'Was it successful?'

In 1967, when the text in Broodthaers' catalogue was published, Restany was already a successful and influential art critic, writing for magazines like *Art International* or *Studio International*. Andy Warhol called him 'a myth' (Bourriaud 2003, 31) and Nicolas Bourriaud wrote that Restany 'was at once a champion of artists and an entrepreneur of concepts, which he defended with all the power of his conviction' (Bourriaud 2003, 31). Bourriaud concludes his obituary with an imperative followed by a prediction: 'Let's bring his [Restany's] books back into print and make a date for later this century—a century sure to be more Restanian than the one before' (Bourriaud 2003, 31). Restany's legacy is, in a large part, a terminological one. In 1960, Restany coined the term and movement *Nouveau Réalisme*, including artists such as Yves Klein, Daniel Spoerri and Raymond Hains. In the movement's manifesto, Restany stated that 'The New Realists have become conscious of their collective identity; New Realism = new perceptions of the real'. After the art critic first mentioned 'Nouveau Realism' in the printed manifesto, the term circulated widely and enjoyed popularity among the artists affiliated with the movement. Soon, *Nouveau Réalisme* received remarkable public attention and international recognition, followed by various institutional exhibitions. *Nouveau Réalisme* quickly emerged as European counterpart to *Pop Art* and became a historical moment. In this regard, it stands exemplary for

the substantial historiographical capacity of the text-production by art critics and their successful detection of names. According to Benjamin Buchloh, this formation of an avant-garde movement is a result of Restany 'recognizing the public-relations value to be gained from organizing artists into a group operating under the banner of a single name' (Buchloh 2004, 472). Buchloh's 'public-relations value' points to the efficacy of naming and art's public-relations, which the art critic needs to manoeuvre. Writing about art adds visibility to any artist's oeuvre and generates a surplus of intellectual, public and economical value. Buchloh targets the capacity of publicity and emphasizes the value—generating function of writing, curating and art criticism. Seen from this point of view, Restany somehow figured as a brand-manager of *Nouveau Réalisme*, coining the 'banner of a single name', which is repeated by the artists, the public and eventually by art history. This calls in mind Leo Steinberg's definition that it is 'in the character of the critic, to say no more in his best moments than what everyone in the following season repeats; he is the generator of the cliché' (Steinberg 1972, 23). Steinberg's influential definition, recently also drawn upon by Hal Foster, can be read as an interpretation of the art critic as a man of printed letters, who writes in relation *to* and *for* a certain public. Although Buchloh critically referred to the 'public-relation value' of 'the banner of a single name' and rather calls for a 'responsible responsiveness' (Ronell 1989, 106) of the art critic's tasks, Steinberg seems to detect a similar structure or a rather delicate threshold, when he describes the art critic as a 'generator of the cliché' (Steinberg 1972, 23). According to Steinberg, the critic's choice of words is relevantly programmed by repeatability and recognizability. After reading the critic's letters, words and texts, the readers should have something in mind and at their hand: a statement to repeat, an argument to refer to, an opinion to reiterate. Steinberg's *cliché* addresses this specific semantical layer of the word: *cliché* denotes a 'phrase or opinion that is overused and betrays a lack of original thought' (Oxford Dictionary 2019). Thus, *cliché* is programmed by the common and the conventional.

Meeting the needs of publicity, a *cliché* is designed to be spread. And it seems that it is the art critic generating *clichés* for artists, artworks and exhibitions to circulate. Then, the critique is absent, and the critic-turned-promoter—in charge of art's public-relations—inherits the job to write about art. In 1969, Restany published his definition of 'art criticism', which seems to almost predict Steinberg's characterization. Restany clearly states that promoting artistic ideas is a task of the critic: 'Thus, faced with the collapse of an anachronistic commercial system and the growing socialization of art, will the critic in an effective way play the role of the promotor of new ideas and forms' (translation by the author).<sup>3</sup> With *Nouveau Réalisme*, he certainly achieved a success in this regard and generated a terminological *cliché*, which artists as well as the public, including the historians and historiographers, 'everyone', as Steinberg put it, repeated. This coming-about of the *cliché* is essentially facilitated by its mediation: the art critic is not only writing letters to be printed, he is working for the publishing industry. The critic's words and letters are to be read, to be spread, to be published. Although Steinberg draws upon the notion of promotion and repeatability—the semantical layer of the (over-)use—*cliché* also serves as a typographical term. *Cliché* forms a stencil to be re-used: it defines the form of the publication and is used in the graphic designer's vocabulary to denote the typography and design of the page. In this regard, *cliché* is vividly entangled with the printed letter and its form: the publication.

Investigating species of the public figure, Jean-François Chevrier proposed that 'Broodthaers reinvented the artist as a man of letters'. 'The man of letters makes a trade of writing; he draws letters and has them printed' (Chevrier 2016, 24). Chevrier's etymologically informed conception of the *homme de lettres* involves his entanglement with knowledge, being a well-educated intellectual, acquainted with letters. In order to 'justify his status', the *homme de lettres* has to publish:

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<sup>3</sup> 'Ainsi, devant la faillite d'un circuit commercial anachronique et la croissante socialisation de l'art le critique jouera-t-il de manière effective le rôle de promoteur des idées et des formes nouvelles qui est le sien' (Cabanne/Restany 1969, 167).

'He is a public figure' (Chevrier 2016, 24). Here, 'letter' is to be read in its polyphonic meanings: the letter of the alphabet (*écriture*), the letter as a personal message (*correspondance*) and the letter as a specific form of knowledge (*science humaines*). With Chevrier, the 'man of printed letters', a term proposed by Broodthaers himself in the edition of *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, can be conceived as a species of this public figure. The add-on adjective 'printed' ('*imprimées*') involves an aesthetic dimension: typography and narratology converge in the medium of the publication, which becomes a crucial instance for artistic *and* critical practice in the 1960s. Instead of giving Restany a call, Broodthaers consequently responded with a letter to the critic, published in the same exhibition catalogue. Thus, he took up the public role of the *homme de lettres imprimées*, professionalising the business of the letters. This artist's œuvre is essentially configured by letters: highly aware about their publicity function, this artist produced and dealt with letters.

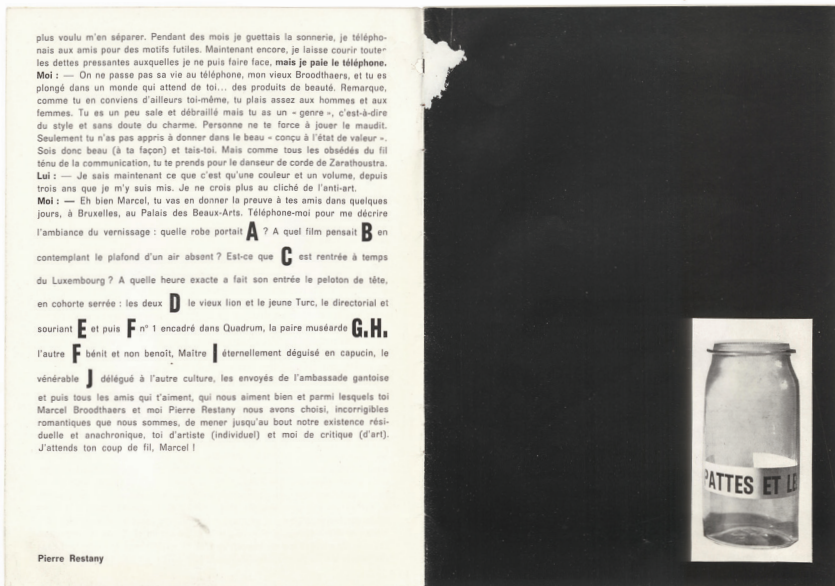


Figure 4: *J'attends ton coup de fil, Marcel!* Text by art critic Pierre Restany, page 2/2, in: *Marcel Broodthaers. Court Circuit*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 13.–25. April 1967. Copyright: Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels.

**Visiting the Artist's Studio: 'God! The toil of *others* is hard to bear!'**

On 9 March 1967, when the critic Restany visited the artist Broodthaers's studio, he encountered a 'lair of liberty, this filthy cavern of repose in the heart of a hive of ultra-modern offices buzzing with activity' (MoMA 2016, 120). Hence, the studio is characterized as an antipole to the office. While the atelier is almost a world on its own, the office must be this other space, worldly entangled with the buzzing activities of mass-media, haunted by electricity. Emphasizing on the disparity of the two working spaces not only strengthens specific notions of labour, it reiterates the narrative of the artist's studio as a solitary manufactory. Two *othered* spaces build the initial backdrop for Restany's text: the critic's bureau as the site of an electrical misfiring, and the artist's atelier as a site of artistic production. 'God! The toil of others is hard to bear!', writes Restany (MoMA 2016, 120). His characterization of the two different workspaces draws upon an already well-established notion of the artist's studio and the critic's bureau and thus contributes to solidifying clichés of the respective workspaces.

When visiting the artist's studio, 'this filthy cavern', as Pierre Restany called it, he found an 'image on the verge of the non-image', which 'etches itself in our memories with the acuteness of definitive symbols: the deaf telephone muffled by cotton wool is a cliché of our civilization' (MoMA 2016, 120). The implied *objet d'art* (Fig. 5) is reproduced on the page between the critic's text and the artist's response. The reader can see a photo of this 'image on the verge of the non-image': It consists of a black wooden box, split in half by a vertical shelf. The right half accommodates a black telephone, surrounded by white cotton, while the telephone wire draws a connection to the left half, which is horizontally divided in three equally tall compartments. The upper cell contains two glasses stuffed with white cotton, the middle one hosts the receiver, while the telephone wire coming from the telephone in the right half passes through the lower cell. All compartments are stuffed with white cotton, providing a high-contrasted background for the black telephone, which appears disconnected from the power supply. It

cannot ring or be heard. Stuffed in white cotton, the black telephone is silenced: it remains quiet.

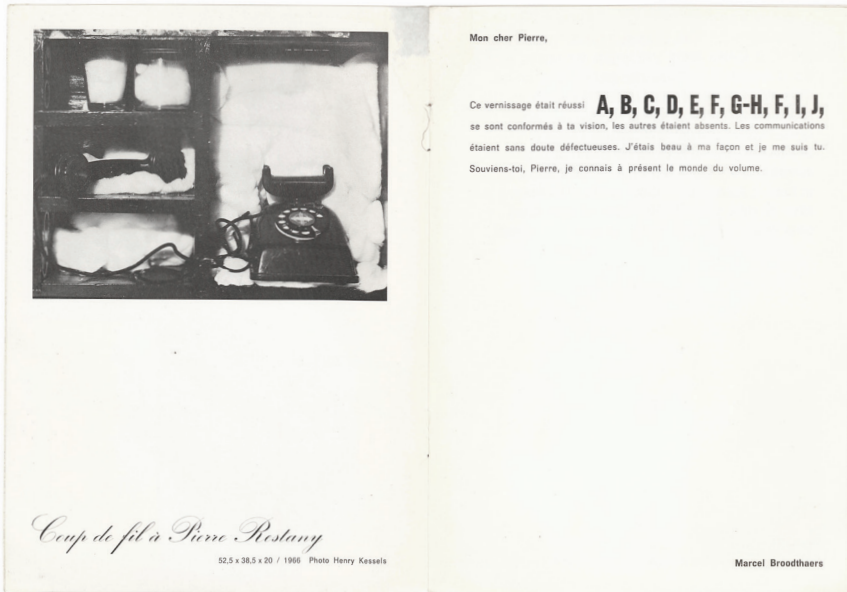
This disconnected, disabled, and short-circuited telephone recalls one of the artist's first objects: *Pense-Bête* consists of 'a bundle of fifty copies of a book called *Pense-Bête*', published by the same author, Marcel Broodthaers. The black books of poetry were half wrapped in white plaster, like the black telephone muffled in white cotton. The stark contrast of black and white, of which *Pense-Bête* is the earliest example, is crucial to Broodthaers' oeuvre. His engagement with Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* influences the application of monochrome black or white background in his later works. As discussed by Jean-François Chevrier, the series of works called *Le Corbeau et le Renard* (1968) is probably the most relevant reference for his extensive use of black and white in relation to words and printed letters. At the same time, these formal aspects also involve the usage of the objects: Broodthaers' vessels and texts are occupied with a specific function. *Pense-Bête* was published as a book and transferred to an artwork. 'Here you cannot read the book without destroying its sculptural aspect', Broodthaers explained in 1974 (Broodthaers 1987, 44).<sup>4</sup> The prohibition was forwarded to the viewer, who had to decide whether to destroy the sculpture and read the book or accept the prohibition and just *look at* the 'books in plaster'. The object *Pense-Bête* bereaved the book *Pense-Bête* from its essential function, which was *to be read*. In favor of becoming a 'sculpture', the artist defunctionalized his own book. Seen from this point of view, *Pense-Bête* initially stages a *short-circuit*. It is a figure of failure, like the deaf telephone. Broodthaers stated that he was surprised about the art public's approval: 'Everyone so far, no matter who, has perceived the object either as an artistic expression or as a curiosity' (Broodthaers 1987, 44).<sup>5</sup> He interpreted the public's acceptance as disinterest. When his books are exhibited as a work of art, they are turned into a singular object at which people only looked.

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4 'On ne peut, ici, lire le livre sans détruire l'aspect plastique' (Broodthaers 1974, 66).

5 'Quel qu'il fût, jusqu'à présent, il perçut l'objet ou comme une expression artistique ou comme une curiosité' (Broodthaers 1974, 66).

Broodthaers concluded that he ‘suddenly [...] had a real audience’ as opposed to his situation before, when he ‘had lived practically isolated from all communication, since I had a fictitious audience’ (Broodthaers 1987, 44).<sup>6</sup> Writing books of poetry seems to equal a fictitious audience, while making art objects means facing a real audience. Who then, was the artist’s, the public figure’s, the man of the printed letters’s, Marcel Broodthaers’s audience? This leads to...



**Figure 5:** *Mon cher Pierre*, Text by the artist Marcel Broodthaers, in: *Marcel Broodthaers. Court Circuit*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 13.–25. April 1967. Copyright: Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels.

### **The Critic’s Question: ‘Have *they* been there?’**

Restany’s eponymous request for a call—‘I’m waiting for your call, Marcel!’—is motivated by his interest in the public that attended *the* opening. The purpose of this telephone call from the artist to the critic was to get to know more about the ‘who is who’ at the opening. He

<sup>6</sup> ‘Jusqu’à ce moment, je vivais pratiquement isolé du point de vue de la communication, mon public étant fictif. Soudain il devint réel, à ce niveau où il est question d’espace et de conquête’ (Broodthaers 1974, 66).

wants the artist to report back about the ‘atmosphere at the opening’, in order to get to know *who* attended the opening. ‘What dress was **A** wearing? What film was **B** thinking about while he was looking up at the ceiling with a distracted air? Did **C** get back from Luxembourg in time?’ (MoMA 2016, 120) Restany uses the alphabetical letters for schematization: the individual is anonymized by a single letter. Every individual letter in Restany’s envisioned public is annotated with specific attributions, suggesting that the critic had specific individuals in mind. Every person in this public is veiled by a *cliché* in its typographical sense. In the jargon of printmaking, *cliché* denotes a template or a stencil. Restany covers the individuals at the opening with big, bold, capital letters which interrupt the continuous text: they are formatted differently, and at the same time they anonymize the individuals that they cover. This public is generated by the system of the alphabet and the individuals of this public are called **A B C D E F G-H F I J**. I would like to call this public, that the critic asked about, the ‘ABC art public’ since it is constituted by the first 10 letters of the alphabet and heavily relies on their aesthetic appearance. Each letter of the alphabet is printed in an enlarged bold font; each letter is visually different from the continuous text; and each letter replaces the name of the individual. If the reader *looks at* the text page, these first ten letters of the alphabet, dispersed across Restany’s text, strike the eye (Fig. 4). They are big, they are bold, they are capitalized: **A B C D E F G-H F I J**. The first ten letters of the alphabet act as figures within the continuous text. In view of the reciprocal echoes between meaning and typeset this public is visible and appears prominently, although being highly anonymized. **A B C D E F G-H F I J** become equally narrational, structural *and* aesthetic figures. This visual emphasis on the single letter draws attention to typography and the graphic design of the publication, realized by Corneille Hannoset. According to the caption on the back cover, Hannoset, who frequently worked as a graphic designer for the Palais des Beaux-Arts, designed the *mise-en-page*. (Fig. 2) In this publication, the typeset—the visuals of the letter,



its form, text, and the content and semantic charge of the letter—are vividly entangled.

### **The Artist's Response: 'They were there'**

'A, B, C, D, E, F, G-H, F, I, J' complied with your vision, the others were not there' (MOMA 2016, 120). In his response to the critic, the artist Broodthaers uses the critic's alphabet as a template and repeats it *exactly*. (Fig. 5) He even repeats what could be a mistake in Restany's alphabet: the double mention of the letter F. The reader encounters this as an echo chamber: The *cliché* generated by the critic is reiterated by the artist. The artist here becomes the first one to repeat the critic's cliché, he is the first of 'everybody', who repeats, according to Steinberg, the critic. Why did Broodthaers repeat Restany's 'A, B, C, D, E, F, G-H, F, I, J'? Maybe, Broodthaers was able to decipher Restany's letter-code. It probably refers to initials of friends they had in common, maybe Restany and Broodthaers were communicating about individuals in their shared social network of the art scene. This interpretation calls upon the question of friendship of these two men, who address each other with their prenames and address each other with the French informal 'tu'. 'Tu' as opposed to the formal address 'vous': the French language hosts a polite form of address between professionals, which is conjugated as plural form of 'you', whereas friends call each other with their first names and in the singular 'tu'. After all, Broodthaers addresses Restany with 'Mon cher Pierre'. What does it mean to call each other by the *first* name? Analysing Marguerite Duras, Avital Ronell elaborates on the crucial threshold shared by numbers and names. 'If she does not give her number, she gives her name, giving it like the first letter of a number, in fact. [...] What she gives is a phony, coded name, therefore, a "prename"' (Ronell 1989, 356). Meanwhile, Marcel Broodthaers does publish his name *and* his number: *Court-Circuit* opens with a photo showing 'the artist in his atelier', and the caption continues '02/12.09.54'—the artist's landline number. 'Giving her his telephone number, he makes a gift of his audial address. [...] He now

becomes what he is; in service of the telephone, he is on permanent call' (Ronell 1989, 355). Like the name of a person, every telephone comes with a number you may call. The telephone number identifies *your* telephone, and when you owned a telephone, you can have your number registered and published in the telephone book. Then, the one who wants to call can easily find you and your number by looking up your name. In order to be easy to access, the telephone book is organized in alphabetical order: A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P-Q-R-S-T-U-V-W-X-Y-Z. Containing an alphabetical list of telephone owners, this species of publication provides the 'ABC telephone public' and publishes a telephonically available public, which is about to expand by each re-publication of the book. The 'ABC art public' in Restany's text is indeed organized alphabetically, but restricted to a specific amount of people at a specific date, place and time: '**A, B, C, D, E, F, G-H, F, I, J**'. (Fig. 4/5) This art public counts 10 letters, while 2 letters are added through different operations of doubling: F is mentioned twice, and D is called 'les deux D' in the text. This results in 12 letters, who attended the opening, while 'the others were not there'. *They*, 'the others', were absent.

While these mysterious others stayed absent, the critic requested the artist's voice to remain. Absent in the specific way of remaining silent, Restany advised Broodthaers' to '[...] be beautiful (in your own way) and keep quiet' (MoMA 2016, 120). At the public event of his own opening, the artist, who is "quite attractive to women and men" (MoMA 2016, 120), should remain silent and beautiful: to be *looked at*, like his unreadable *Pense-Bêtes*. Silent like the muffled telephone, which is called *Coup de fil à Pierre Restany*. After enumerating his ABC, Broodthaers reassures the critic that he followed his advice: 'I was handsome in my own way and I remained silent' (MoMA 2016, 120). Broodthaers kept quiet: like his deaf telephone, like his sculptured books, like four useless letters in his name. In his letter to Pierre, Marcel concluded that 'communication was doubtlessly faulty' (MoMA 2016, 120). *Court-circuit*, it seems, now comes full circle. In a section on electric portraits, Avital Ronell writes that 'some of these

sounds were incapable of phonetic representation with our alphabet' (Ronell 1989, 317). She describes a few friends visiting Alexander Graham Bell, who challenged the inventor of the telephone by giving him 'the most peculiar and difficult sounds we could think of' (Ronell 1989, 317) to be reproduced in his 'Visible Speech' (Ronell 1989, 317). Reading about Bell's 'Visible Speech' calls to mind the 'peculiar sound' of a specific Belgian name, which is particularly susceptible for typographical errors: Marcel Broodthaers. Difficult to spell, this artist's name is constantly written wrongly. The artist himself even made use of this his name and its orthographic error-proneness, when he turned the misspelling of his name into the edition *Mea Culpa* (1964). Obviously, also the critic Restany was aware of the typographical trap that the artist's name installs. At the very beginning of his text, the art critic warns his reader: 'Broodthaers is pronounced Brotars: four useless letters in the spelling of the name. It's enough to inspire in one the vocation to become a philologist, a paleographic archivist, and explorer-ethnographer. Broodthaers is all of these things at once, and more besides' (MoMA 2016, 120).

## **Epilogue**

In 1969, Broodthaers produced a series of vacuum-formed plastic signs, known as *Signalisations Industrielles*. In black letters on a black background, one of these industrial poems reads: 'Je suis un signal. Je suis fait pour enregistrer les signaux. Je Je Je Je [...] -- four white telephones are the only white symbols on an all-black poem-object. Broodthaers' apparently endless repetition of 'I' is absorbed by the black of the background *and* the same black of the foreground. This calls to mind the exhibition catalogue of his first solo-show *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* at Wide White Space Gallery, in which Broodthaers published a poem entitled *Ma Rhétorique* (Aupetitallot 1995, 230). It starts: 'Me I say I Me I say I [...] – 'Moi Je dis Je Moi Je dis [...] – and continues with the multiple meanings, puns, and onomatopoeic confusions of French words such as 'je' ('I'), 'dire' ('say'), 'moule' ('mussel'/'form'). Restany started his text with a phonetic analysis of Broodthaers' family

name. Taking his call for vocation, I, too, would like to ask you, my dear reader – may I call ‘you’ by your first name, ‘tu’, may I call you, ‘mon cher lecteur’? – to pronounce *cliché*. Repeat it. Again! Especially when vocalized multiple times, the final syllable of *cliché* almost sounds like the French ‘I’, one of the most general stereotypes in language which ‘transforms the singular “I” into a general subject’ (Ron 2017, 104). Merging typography and onomatopoesis literally enacts another self-portrait: *Cli-je*.

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