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presents

Marcel Broodthaers : A Voyage on The North Sea

January 28 - March 20, 2009

Specific Object / David Platzker is pleased to announce the opening Marcel Broodthaers : A Voyage on The North Sea. The exhibition will be on view at Specific Object from January 28 through March 20, 2009.

In this project Specific Object presents a film screening and exhibition of Belgian Conceptual artist, Marcel Broodthaers' (1926 - 1976) unusual hybrid of book and film, A Voyage on the North Sea (1973 - 1974).

The subject of the exhibition focuses on Marcel Broodthaers' film and book, both titled A Voyage on the North Sea which were distributed together as part and parcel of the same publishing plot. The ostensibly related subject of both book and film consists mutually of 19th and 20th century nautical images including 1. photographic reproductions and details of an amateur's 19th century painting of a fleet of fishing ships and 2. photographs of a contemporary sailboat. Bringing together film, books, ephemera, drawing, and the artist's original maquette for the book, this specific exhibition sets out to map the local coordinates of A Voyage on the North Sea's maiden launch on January 28, 1974 at the London offices of Petersburg Press. The opening on January 28, 2009 commemorates the anniversaries of the artist's birth (January 28, 1924), the artist's death (January 28, 1976), and the book-film's debut screening (January 28, 1974).

Broodthaers, a poet associated with Belgian Surrealism before becoming an artist in 1964, was a pioneer of intermedia and site-specific installation. One of the most influential European Conceptual artists, Broodthaers' films remain almost entirely unknown by general audiences, mostly because they are rarely shown. From 1967 until his death, the artist made over 50 films that were neither intended to be screened in mainstream cinema, nor in experimental film contexts. A quirky distinction of Broodthaers' cinema – which combines poetry, writing, film and even objects – is that it was characteristically conceived, like nearly everything else he made, for context-specific “environments” or screenings subject to change over time.

Some films, including A Voyage on the North Sea were projected onto a retracting, home-movie screen; others onto “special screens” designed by the artist. On occasion, Broodthaers' films were distributed together with books (as with A Voyage on the North Sea), creating the unusual hybrid art edition the artist referred to as a “book-film,” which is the specific focus of this exhibition. While the form and content of Broodthaers' cinema evokes the turn-of-the-century tropes, gags, and amateurism of pre-Studio cinema, it also has a pointedly

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particular and dialectical relationship to the present (counter-pointing then and now, contrasting late 19th and 20th century modalities). The artist's homespun cinema, filled as it is with amateurish, old school tricks and blagues, also inscribes into itself the particular conditions of its own production but also of its reception. Conceived differently, Broodthaers idiosyncratic films are transient propositions grounded in particular moments in time, including the viewer's.

Both book and film components of A Voyage on the North Sea deliver a befuddling, progress-defying narrative, pairing images of an amateur's 19th century painting of fishing vessels with photographs of a 20th century sailboat. The film is structured like a book with 15 paginated titles interspersed between static images of the boats while the layout of the book, on the other hand, is structured like the comparative grid of the art historian's slide show. Broodthaers' complex dialogue between painting, photograph, book and film plays hide-and-seek with the original, exploring a frustrating journey through the conditions of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

A sea of contradictions collapsing original and reproduction, image and text, book and film, 19th and 20th century modalities, A Voyage on the North Sea is relentlessly confounding: it is a booby-trap rigged with elliptical trickery to befuddle, to bemuse or perhaps to engage the reader/viewer. In characteristically elliptical language, Broodthaers here describes, on the press release of 1974, the subject of this work on the occasion of its original screening in London:

More than a theory, the subject of this proposition reflects a simple image of the frustration that rules the social condition of today, for example of the frustration of this year. Perhaps I should add that le sujet brille. -- M.B., January 28, 1974

Referring a contemporary audience to the original screening context of Broodthaers' book-film—itself very much like a reading lesson--this exhibition asks how a contemporary audience might begin to unpack the particular dialectics, obtuse poetics, and critical cargo of Broodthaers' confounding enterprise. "It is up to the attentive reader," Broodthaers writes in the preface of the book, "to find out what devilish motive inspired this book's publication."

Portions of this press release are excerpted from an opuscle written by Todd Alden on the subject of Marcel Broodthaers' A Voyage on the North Sea to be published by Specific Object / David Platzker to commemorate the occasion of this anniversary exhibition.

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Trépiéd: Your curriculum vitae shows that film is not your only activity. Could you tell us what film means to you?

Marcel Broodthaers: Before I answer, I'd like to say that I am not a filmmaker. For me, film is simply an extension of language. I began with poetry, moved on the three-dimensional works, finally to film, which combines several artistic elements. That is, writing (poetry), object (something three-dimension), and image (film). The great difficulty lies, of course, in finding a harmony among these three elements."¹

In the publicity for this program (films at Brussels, 1972) there have appeared the words 'essential complement to his visual art' and elsewhere 'experimental films'. These do not seem to me appropriate to describe the films which I wish to show. It is not cinematographic art...it is no more and no less than something to talk about like a picture by Meissonnier or Mondrian...these are (just) films. – Marcel Broodthaers ²

Trépiéd: Do you think there is still any future for film?

Broodthaers: I don't believe in film, nor do I believe in any other art. I don't believe in the unique artist or in the unique work of art. I believe in phenomena, and in men who put ideas together.³

Specific Object's hours are Monday - Friday 10 AM to 5 PM, or by appointment.

Specific Object is located at 601 West 26th Street / Floor 2M / Room M285, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (212) 242-6253. Specific Object's website is www.specificobject.com

For additional information regarding Specific Object please email David Platzker at david@specificobject.com

¹"Interview de Marcel Broodthaers" (January 30, 1968) reprinted in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh ed., October, No. 42 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 36.

² Marcel Broodthaers, as quoted by Michael Compton in "A Programme of Films by Marcel Broodthaers" (London: Tate Gallery, 9 – 18 February, 1977), n.p.

³Op. cit., p. 38.