



*Armoire blanche et table blanche*, 1965, has held Marcel Broodthaers's auction record since 1992, when it sold for \$760,000 at Christie's London.

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## Marcel Broodthaers

The Conceptualist and poet made sculptures, prints, photographs, and films—a selection of which are currently on view in a retrospective at MOMA, bringing market interest to an artist almost universally described as undervalued **By Sara Roffino**

ALTHOUGH LONDON-BASED DEALER Richard Saltoun has sold both eggshell sculptures and prints by the Belgian Conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers, he remains largely unconcerned with the market. “Why the hell does the Broodthaers market matter?” he asks. “It’s not going to change his perception in history. It’s not going to change the way that younger artists are inspired by him. It’s not going to change the pleasure he has given.” Saltoun most recently

purchased an impression of the print *24 images par seconde*, 1970, at Germann Auktionshaus in Zurich this past November, paying CHF 18,000 (\$18,000) on an estimate of CHF 10–15,000 (\$10–15,000) despite few prospects for an immediate sale. “I’ve always coveted that print. I’ve always wanted to have it. I remember the first time I saw it, so I didn’t even care what price I paid,” Saltoun says. “I’ll probably sell this print for half the price I paid for it in 10

## VITAL STATS

**ARTIST:** Marcel Broodthaers

**NATIONALITY:** Belgian

**DATES:** 1924–1976

**AUCTION RECORD:** *Armoire blanche et table blanche*, 1965, sold for \$760,000 at Christie's London in 1992.

**HONORS:** Broodthaers has had retrospectives at Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; Jeu de Paume, Paris; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, among other venues. A retrospective now on view at MOMA, New York, will travel to the Reina Sofía, Madrid, and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.

*Boot and photographic canvas*, 1968; and the 1970 print *24 images par seconde*, bottom, which sold for \$17,683 at Germann Auktionshaus in Zurich in November 2015.



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years' time." Saltoun insists he doesn't collect, yet his zeal in acquiring the print is typical of Broodthaers's collectors, who are passionate, even though the market for his works has never really taken off.

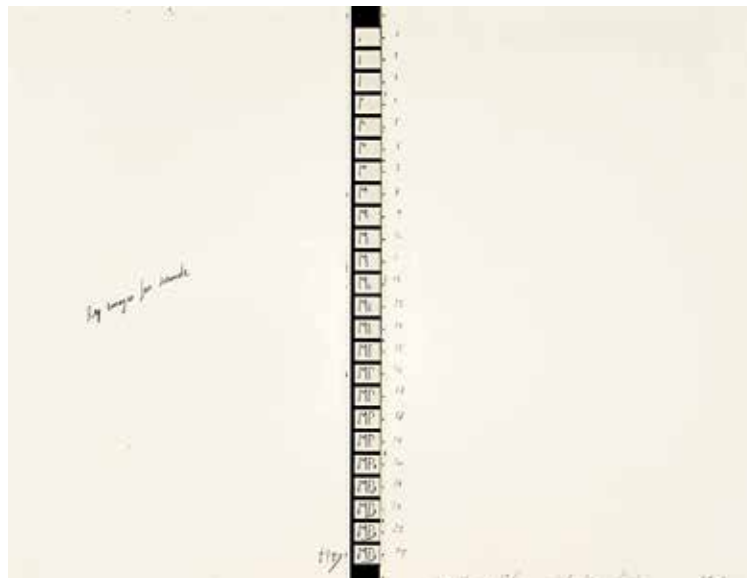
The dispersed and uneven nature of his market can be attributed to a variety of reasons, including the fact that his most iconic pieces are in eggshell and mussel shell and therefore so vulnerable that it's nearly impossible to keep them intact in transit, installation, or storage. "It's always arduous to prove to people that the breakages in the eggs are the same as those in the first known photograph of that work," says Saltoun. Beyond the unusual materials seen in Broodthaers's sculptures—which fetch the highest prices at auction—the artist embraced such then-radical media as film, site-specific installations, manufactured signage, and stenciled text paintings. Another challenge is that Broodthaers was also a poet whose work relies heavily on puns and subtle innuendos and jokes in French, making the nuance and humor difficult to understand even among native French speakers, and nearly impenetrable for non-native speakers.

Complicating matters further, there is no catalogue raisonné, despite an effort by the late English curator Michael Compton, who organized the first posthumous retrospective of the artist's oeuvre at the Tate Gallery in London in 1980. "The character of Broodthaers's work sets a tremendous problem for a collector or a curator who wants to put it on exhibition," wrote Compton at the time of that show. "This is one which he clearly recognized when he gave his wife the right, after his

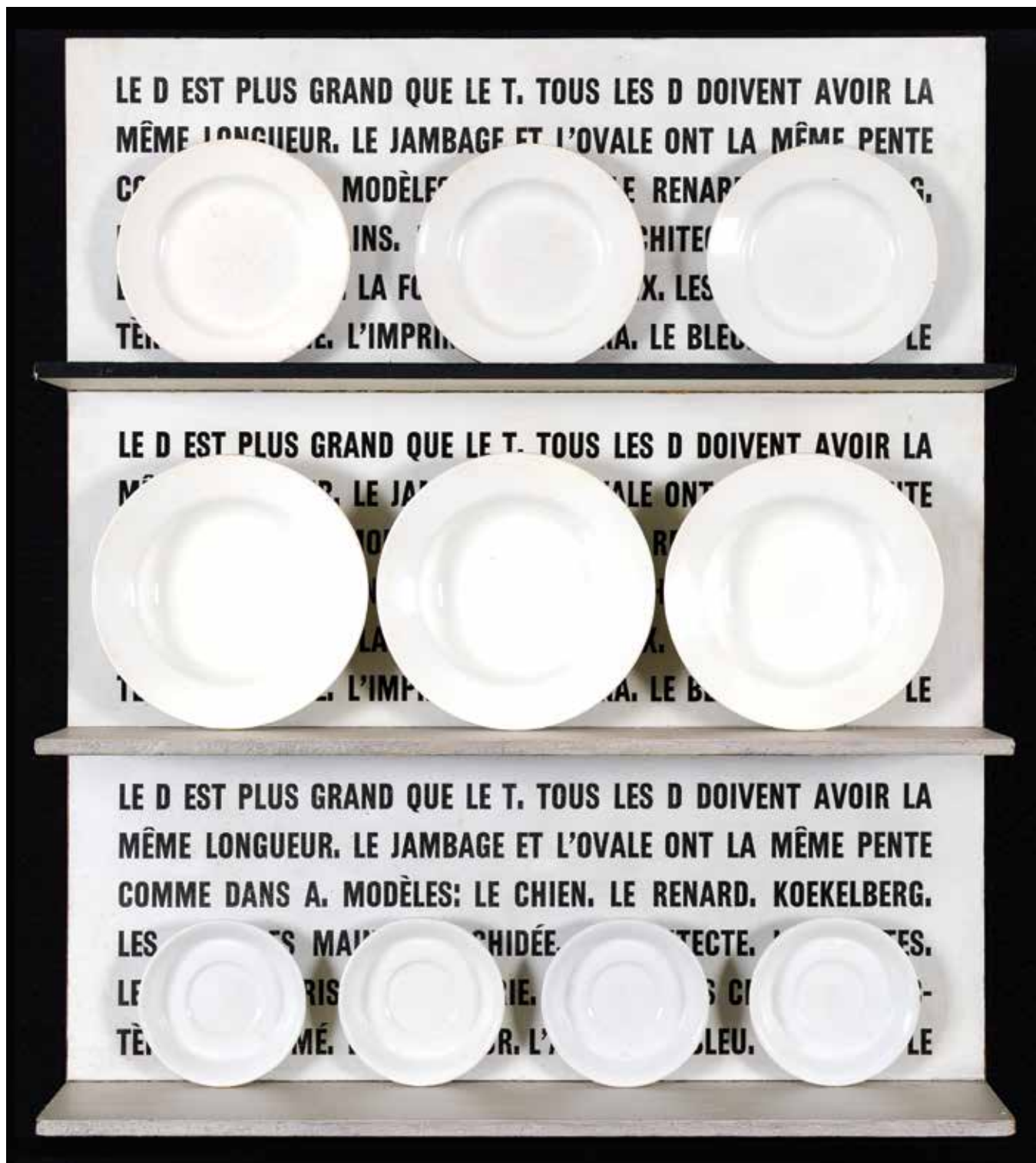
death, to decide what was and what was not a work of art." Broodthaers's estate continues to be managed by his widow, Maria Gilissen, and his daughter Marie-Puck Broodthaers.

Facing these challenges, most who collect Broodthaers have a strong personal affection for the artist, which means his creations rarely change hands, and when they do, they tend to be sold in discreet private sales rather than on the auction block.

In 1963, at age 40, the Brussels-born Broodthaers collected 44 unsold copies of his most recently published book of poems, plastered them together, and titled the sculpture *Pense-Bête* (generally translated as "Memory Aid," but also as "Think Stupid," or "Stupid Thinker"). It was the first piece of art he produced, and in the text he wrote to accompany the work's presentation in his first solo exhibition the following year, he described his despair at "giving up" poetry to make art: "The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work straightaway." As Compton explained in his 1980 essay, "Perhaps the crucial word here is 'insincere.' It means that he would do something that was determined by others: by the market, by the art market in particular. . . . He had become an artist specifically to participate in the trade (while hoping to undermine it)."



FROM TOP: ESTATE OF MARCEL BROODTHAERS AND MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY; ESTATE OF MARCEL BROODTHAERS AND RICHARD SALTOUN GALLERY



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Indeed, while Broodthaers may have hoped to “participate in the trade” as an artist, and therefore escape the financial struggles of life as a poet, his attempts to “undermine it” seem to have had the more enduring effect, at least on his own market. In the 12 years of his output as an artist—he died in 1976 at the age of 52 from complications of liver disease contracted as a teenager—Broodthaers never actually embraced a conventional path to market success, investing energies in experimenting with material and form and frequently reworking pieces even after they had been exhibited. Today he may be best known for challenging the museum and the very nature of art, but his

Typical of Broodthaers’s layered poetics, *Le D est plus grand que le T (assiettes)*, 1967, contains the artist’s text inspired by La Fontaine’s fable *The Fox and the Crow*. Broodthaers’s text made multiple appearances around this time, including in a film made the same year.

critique of the market is no less trenchant.

He has served as an inspiration for untold numbers of young artists, and has been long celebrated by a specific contingent of the art world avant-garde—Benjamin H.D. Buchloh edited a special issue of *October* dedicated to him in 1987. A similar mind-set is common among those who buy his work.

“Collecting Broodthaers is an intellectual exercise,” says Chicago-based rare book dealer Michael Thompson, who has sold several Broodthaers editions, including a paperbound copy of *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, 1969, now valued at \$5,000 to \$10,000, and *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 1973, a 16 mm film, which sold for £5,000 (\$7,850) at Christie’s London in July 2015.

Continuing Marcel Duchamp’s inquiries into what constitutes an art

*Petite forme de moules*, 1969, sold for \$110,721 at Ewbanks in June 2014; *Pipe*, 1969, below, is one of nine plastic plates in the \$200,000 price range in Paul Kasmin's Broodthaers exhibition in New York, on view through April 23.

object, and combining elements of the Surrealists he knew in Brussels (including René Magritte, with whom Broodthaers was highly engaged throughout his career) and the Pop artists who were making waves (and money) throughout Europe and the United States, Broodthaers was both a pioneer of postwar Conceptual art and a progenitor of institutional critique. James Lee Byars, Daniel Buren, Lawrence Weiner, and Joseph Kosuth were his peers, and Broodthaers introduced them all—and many other artists—to Nicole and Herman Daled, Belgian collectors who amassed one of the world's most important troves of Conceptual art. In 2011 New York's Museum of Modern Art acquired much of that collection, including important Broodthaers works such as *Maria*, 1966, a readymade composed of a dress and eggshells that was shown and purchased the day it was created at Brussels Galerie St. Laurent. It was the first Broodthaers work purchased by the Daleds. Broodthaers also exhibited at Anny De Decker's influential Wide White Space in Antwerp in 1971, at Documenta in 1972, and in other shows throughout Europe during his lifetime.

Broodthaers's artistic output stretches from populist print editions to an entire fictional museum. However, "it's very difficult to say where the market is from the auction point of view, because there are not often works of good quality at auction," explains Brussels-based Marianne Hoet, international director of postwar and contemporary art at Christie's. "Most of Broodthaers's works are in very good collections with long traditions," she continues. "His collectors are not speculators, so the works stay in their collections for a long time." Grégoire Billault, a Sotheby's senior vice president and senior international specialist, concurs: "It's definitely a pure collector market.

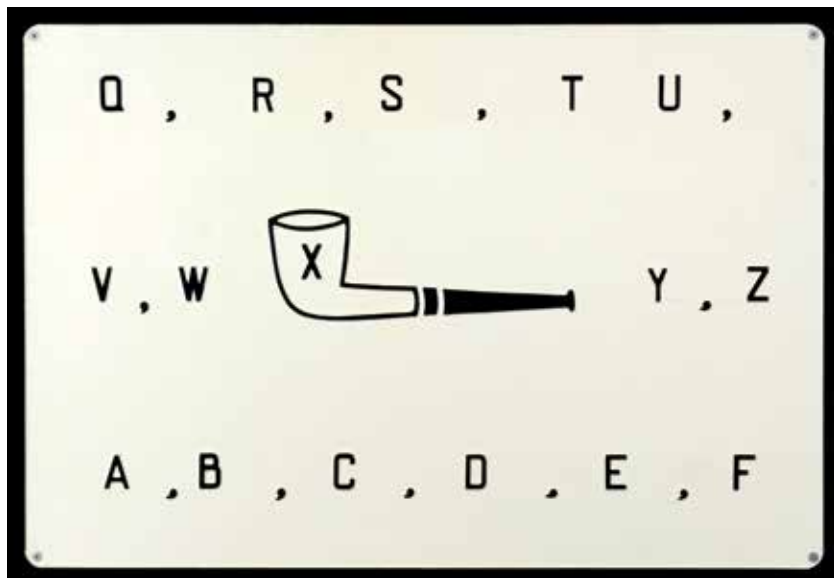


There's absolutely no signal of people trying to capitalize or invest for the future. It's people who adore him and are trying to bring together groups of works of importance."

In 1989, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis organized a Broodthaers retrospective in collaboration with the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, that traveled to the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It drew attention as the first significant retrospective of his work since Compton's 1980 exhibition at the Tate, and reviews appeared in all the major publications. Three years later, in 1992, five of Broodthaers's top 20 auction results were achieved in a modern and contemporary sale at Christie's London. These included the 1965 eggshell-covered *Armoire blanche et table blanche* (initially two separate pieces that have been combined into one), which sold for £360,000 (\$760,000), an artist record that still stands. The piece was reportedly purchased by London dealers Berggruen & Zevi at the sale and is now listed as having entered MOMA's collection that same year as a fractional and promised gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder. The work features prominently in the current retrospective at the museum,

which is on view through May 15. While the Walker's traveling show may have played a part in spurring the market to record heights in the early 1990s, most experts do not predict a similar bounce this time around, though signs of interest among new collectors may bode well for the longer term.

On February 12, the 1967 photographic transfer on canvas *Casserole de moules avec ficelles* sold for £206,500 (\$300,000) on an estimate of £110,000 to £150,000 (\$160–218,000) at Christie's London, making it the seventh-highest Broodthaers sale at auction. Yet just prior to that, in December 2015, an undated coin-size medallion from the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*—Broodthaers's fictional museum, of which he appointed himself director—stamped with an eagle and inscribed *Export*, was snagged





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for only €387 (\$425) on an estimate of €400 to €600 (\$440–660) at Pierre Bergé & Associés in Paris. This disparity in prices is not unusual for the artist. While his sculptures are the big-ticket items, his 26 prints, produced in editions of 50 to 100, can be had for as little as a few thousand dollars and are bought in even at these prices.

Lacking a catalogue raisonné or an authentication board, the market in part depends on provenance and exhibition documentation to verify the authenticity of individual works. Yet even impeccable provenance is no guarantee of stellar prices. In June 2014 the small British house Ewbank's auctioned artwork from the estate of writer and curator Compton including nine pieces by Broodthaers, all of which had been gifted to Compton by the artist's widow while he was working on the never realized catalogue raisonné. Among the artworks was *Petite forme de moules*, a small and slightly damaged sculpture of mussel shells from 1969, which surpassed its estimate of £40,000 to £60,000 (\$68–102,000) to sell for £65,000 (\$111,000). Also included was the painted text on canvas *Un Chateaubriand bien saignant pour deux*, 1973, which also surpassed its estimate of £30,000 to £50,000 (\$51–85,000), selling for £58,000 (\$99,000). Other Broodthaers works in the sale fell short of their minimum estimates, but all were sold, with two works, including the mussels, going to Galerie 1900–2000 of Paris.

Galleries and private sales dominate the

Broodthaers market. And like his collectors, the artist's dealers are committed. He is represented by Ronny Van De Velde in Brussels. Marian Goodman has shown him since she opened her New York gallery in 1977 with a Broodthaers exhibition. Indeed, the desire to show his work was the reason she opened the gallery, Goodman told *Art in America* in 2010, the year of her most recent presentation, "Section Cinema, 1972," which consisted of 6 of the artist's 60 films. Michael Werner of New York, London, and Märkisch Wilmersdorf, Germany, has represented Broodthaers since 1971, when he presented an exhibition of the artist's drawings in Cologne.

Early this year, Werner mounted a varied show timed to the debut of the MOMA exhibition, comprised of films, works on canvas, and the small piece *Dites partout que je l'ai dit* from 1974, a pared-down version of the room-size "Décor" installations Broodthaers made following the dissolution of his *Musée d'Art Moderne*. "There are collections that I wouldn't have thought would be interested in work like this chasing after it now," observes Werner gallery partner Gordon VeneKlasen. In addition to more information spurring this interest, VeneKlasen notes that "Broodthaers looks like a bargain in the market compared with other artists."

This spring's exhibition of Broodthaers's multiples by New York dealer Paul Kasmin, who has never before shown the artist, likewise signaled the possibility of rising value in the coming years. Bringing together all 26 prints, along with films, the artist's complete set of books, and nine unique hand-painted plastic plates, the Kasmin show was the most overt attempt so far to build demand for Broodthaers prints in America. It's one more interesting anomaly of the market that these haven't yet achieved their potential, because, as Kasmin director Nick Olney points out, "For Broodthaers, each medium and each format are profoundly interconnected—the installations and paintings and sculptures. It's hard to parse out one section of the oeuvre from the next because it's all part of this large-scale creative project that he worked on for those 12 years."

*Casserole de moules avec ficelles*, 1967, left, almost doubled its low estimate, selling for \$300,808, at Christie's London on February 12; below, a still from the 16 mm film *La Pluie (Projet pour un texte)*, 1969.

The plastic plates were in the \$200,000 range, significantly more than the works go for at auction. Kasmin intended to sell the set of prints as a unit for an undisclosed sum.

The market for Broodthaers might blossom, but as Billault of Sotheby's noted, it won't change the fact that "Broodthaers would laugh so loud if he heard people trying to capitalize on his market." ▣



FROM TOP: CHRISTIE'S; ESTATE OF MARCEL BROODTHAERS AND MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY