

Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers, (La Bataille de Waterloo), 1975, ICA, London

Natasha Adamou

Abstract

This essay seeks to examine Marcel Broodthaers' last exhibition *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers, (La Bataille de Waterloo)* 1975, ICA, London, in the light of two seminal essays in the field of aesthetics and political theory. It starts by looking at Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer', which introduces issues of artistic intentionality, political commitment and its relation to the aesthetic quality of an artwork. It then goes on to address 'The Politics of Aesthetics' by Jacques Rancière, which incorporates the notion of the 'distribution (or partition) of the sensible' as its main analytical tool. Finally, this essay introduces Jacques Derrida's notion of 'undecidability', as employed by Rancière, in order to set an appropriate theoretical context in which to consider *Décor's* aesthetic and critical currency.



Fig. 1: Broodthaers, Marcel, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*, as it was originally installed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975.

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Fig. 2: Broodthaers, Marcel, *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*, as it was originally installed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975.
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*They drew rafters
inside the A's and on top of the T's
They made images
They told us we were children,
They kept us from reading the texts,
since there is not a line which does not condemn them.*

-Marcel Broodthaers, *Untitled*, 1962

Marcel Broodthaers (Belgium, 1924–1976) presented *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* at the ICA, London, in June 1975, shortly after the end of the Vietnam war. This exhibition was the culmination of his career as an artist and the last one before his death in 1976. It was realised after an invitation by Barry Barker, who was the ICA director at the time, to inaugurate London's new ICA. Consequently, *Décor: A Conquest* took place in two adjoining rooms, staged as a nineteenth and a twentieth-century period room, respectively. Most of the objects on display were rented on the occasion of the exhibition from a movie props company or borrowed from a London furniture store and returned there after the exhibition ended. More specifically, the nineteenth-century room contained two canons, several grass mats, six potted palm trees, two chairs, two silver candelabras, one stuffed python, a ball of dried flowers, one nineteenth-century pistol, a colour poster of a cowboy film, two wooden barrels labelled *Gin* and *Rum*, one plastic crab and lobster engaged in a game of cards, and four light reflectors. The displays in the twentieth-century room included a parasol, a garden table with plastic chairs, a jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo after a painting by W. Heath, a number of guns on shelves and cases and one light reflector. Both rooms had windows with a view over Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament.

At the time of the exhibition, in June 1975, the annual parade of the 'Trooping of the Colours' was taking place in front of Buckingham Palace. This event formed an integral part of *Décor: A Conquest* as part of the film *La Bataille de Waterloo*, which was first shown in public at the Tate Gallery in 1976. The film includes shots inside the exhibition that alternate with views of the parade and the buildings outside—most of them sites of political power. Interrelating frames include the hands of an actress shown assembling and then hastily disassembling a jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo.

The nineteenth-century room presented a rather rigid geometrical arrangement of the heteroclite objects listed above, many of which were positioned in pairs and

rested on Astroturf mats. In place of the traditional base, the mats designated a separate space for the objects, playing with their status as autonomous, aesthetic objects, while at the same time their rather sloppy appearance seemed to parody any such attempts. On another level, these rugs also seem to mimic the decorative conventions of bourgeois interiors. Several among the objects, such as the pistol, the two wooden barrels and the two silver plated candelabras were positioned on pedestals, echoing the display settings of the nineteenth-century museum. The adjoining twentieth-century room, with its centrally placed garden table, parasol and white garden chairs, was more casually arranged as a site of leisure while also mimicking the more spare display conventions of twentieth-century galleries. The two glass vitrines hung on one wall displayed seventeen assorted guns and a framed print with a diagram of instructions on how to load the guns, while fifteen Vietnam semi-automatic rifles rested on top of them. The striking contrast between the garden furniture and the guns pointed to the curious relationship between leisure and war, drawing parallels between the spectacle of war in the nineteenth century and today's experience of war through the mass media. On top of the garden table in the centre of the room, rested a half-assembled jigsaw puzzle depicting the Battle of Waterloo, the same one shown in the film.

In addition to this arrangement, the exhibition included several light reflectors with coloured gelatines placed in both rooms. The reflectors questioned the objects' status as 'art', turning them into set-design objects, revealing, in fact, their 'real' condition as film props. The transition between two systems of representation, (gallery and film set), shifted the status of the objects from autonomous, aesthetic ones to film props, commodity objects and back again. In a text that appears in the catalogue of *Décor: A Conquest*, Maria Gilissen writes that the exhibition was 'dealing with the relationship between "war and comfort"'.¹ Indeed, it seems that the subject of Broodthaers' assemblage of objects is the shifting relations between these two systems: 'I don't so much organise objects and ideas as organise encounters of different functions that all refer to the same

world . . .’ Broodthaers says.² In effect, the exhibition serves to demonstrate set conventions and perceptions, not only to expose them as culturally constructed, but most crucially, as the artist suggests, ‘to make a dent in the falsity inherent in culture’.³ I suggest that by suspending the work between different systems, the artist marks a certain ‘undecidability’ of the object to inhabit either the aesthetic or the commodity realm a situation that is both *Décor’s* subject-matter and its fundamental structural element. This very notion of ‘undecidability’, which I will discuss in relation to Rancière’s ‘distribution’ or ‘partition of the sensible’, rests in the centre of *Décor: A Conquest*.

In a short text entitled ‘To be *bien pensant*. . . or not to be. To be blind’, Marcel Broodthaers reflects on the nature of Art, expressing his doubt as to whether art can have any political agency, whatsoever: ‘I doubt, in fact, that we can give a serious definition of Art, unless we examine the question in terms of a constant, I mean the transformation of art into merchantise. . . . We could justify [art] as affirmation and at the same time carve out for it a dubious existence One fact is certain: commentaries on Art are the result of shifts in the economy. It seems doubtful to us that such commentaries can be described as political’.⁴ Here, Broodthaers puts into question art as a practice *and* its surrounding discourses, namely art criticism. When he talks about ‘commentaries on Art’ he casts a critical eye on art and its interpretation, as a system. It seems, then, that for Broodthaers, it is necessary that an artwork should acknowledge, reflect upon and internalise in its very structure any such critical commentaries.

In the essay ‘The Author as Producer’, Walter Benjamin introduces issues of artistic intentionality by commenting on the relation between political commitment on the part of the artist/author and its relation to the formal quality of the artwork.⁵ Benjamin’s main thesis is that a politically-engaged artist should establish the work’s position *within* the relations of production, rather than in its attitude *toward* them, by incorporating the new technological developments that inevitably change its form. Besides that, Benjamin insists that the author/artist should

reflect upon these conditions of production, as an intrinsic part of his work. The artistic value of the work is then determined not only on the basis of its 'correct' political tendency, which is a necessary but not sufficient condition, but on its formal and technical qualities. One of the key issues at stake here is the relationship between political commitment and artistic technique that establishes the position of the artwork within the production apparatus. Finally, Benjamin's analysis stresses the significance of the relationship between form and content, requiring that the two collapse together for the artwork to fulfil its revolutionary function.

However, this collapse between form and content, as advocated by Benjamin and practiced by Broodthaers, does not account for a total appropriation of the aesthetic object by the sphere of commerce, that Broodthaers maintains when he reflects on the 'transformation of art into merchantise'.⁶ It is for this purpose that I employ in my analysis Rancière's 'partition of the sensible', for it incorporates the notion of a fundamental 'undecidability' insofar as it signifies both dividing *and* sharing. This peculiar position that develops in Broodthaers' work as a series of negations maintains a distance that further sustains this rather paradoxical situation. Referring to a body of work that Broodthaers produced in the form of open letters under the collective title 'industrial poems', Benjamin Buchloh observes: 'At first glance, they seem to link Broodthaers's work with that fundamental assumption of modernist thought . . . that an inextricable dialectic links the advancement of the artistic forms of a society to the advancement of its technical means, and that the transformation of the hierarchical structures of a social totality necessitates the transformation of aesthetic hierarchies'.⁷ However, Buchloh continues, Broodthaers 'no longer permitted the naive incorporation, within his work, of those structures attesting to the impact of industrial modes of production upon artistic practice. And further, he criticized the way a seemingly progressive and provocative structural simplification of the work betrays, precisely, the dominance of technology's rationalism and instrumentality'.⁸ At the same time, according to Buchloh, we do not 'see him deploying artistic strategies

which, qua strategies, materials, or mode of distribution, would already constitute an assault on the separateness of the aesthetic in favor of an explicitly political conception of art production'.⁹ Broodthaers' work, thus, maintains an intentionally ambivalent position that neither seeks to advocate the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, nor promote its total collapse into the realm of the commodity and the everyday. Its hermetic disposition, rather than closing the work down, opens it up, preventing it from becoming overtly didactic, literalist and reductive.

Productive alienation

In 'The Author as Producer', Benjamin draws on the work by the German writer Bertolt Brecht as a paradigmatic case where form and content successfully collapse. I seek to demonstrate, however, that in doing so the work incorporates within its very structure the notion of a critical distance. Brecht's project to liberate the means of production by applying the technical innovations of the new media (radio and cinema, for example) aimed to overturn the conventions of theatre. To achieve that, Brecht broke the narrative continuity that created an illusion of reality in theatre in order to reveal the very illusion of theatre as another reality. By using interruption (pauses, laughter, etc.) as a confrontational device, the author sought to bring the audience back to themselves and to the reality of their own life. In one scene, for example, a stranger enters the stage in the middle of a family row which causes the action to suddenly stop and suspend in mid-air.¹⁰ This interruption device introduces a different viewpoint, one from *outside* (a stranger's viewpoint), thus distancing the spectator and the actors from the event in order to disclose the absurdity of the situation. According to Benjamin, interruption is not used by Brecht as a stimulant, but it assumes an organising function; not only does it act upon the structure of the theatrical apparatus but most importantly, it has the ability to act upon and transform the structure of the viewer's perception. Moreover, Brecht applies the technique of montage (cutting, interruption) to perform a contradictory movement: to eliminate the distance between life and theatre by allowing elements of reality to enter onto the theatrical stage and, at the same time, by breaking this distance, to introduce another distance, a stranger's viewpoint that allows the spectator to see into the

conventions of his own life from *outside*. According to Brecht himself, this double dislocation aims to expose the living conditions of modern man and to reveal his reality as ‘a reduced man kept on ice in a cold world’.¹¹

Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers plays on the concept of alienation, but realises it in a different manner: ‘There is no spectacular disjunction in *Décor: A Conquest*—no Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*’,¹² Rachel Haidu argues in an article that appeared in *Artforum* on the occasion of the exhibition’s restaging at Michael Werner Gallery, New York, in 2007. The distancing effect in Brecht which prevents the passive immersion of the audience in the conventions of theatrical narrative—thereby allowing the viewer to become a critical observer—functions in *Décor* in a more subtle but rather complex way. To begin with, *Décor* presents itself at once as a film set¹³ and as an art exhibition. This double function introduces a series of elaborate shifts between different representational systems and modes of perception, setting up analogies between ‘the interior of a nation (homeland), bourgeois interiors, and museum interiors . . . turning decoration—superfluity and formalism—into work’.¹⁴ *Décor* falls between these different systems of representation (film-set, exhibition etc.) to leave the viewer trapped in an empty space (empty of signification). Broodthaers is concerned above all with our placement, as viewing subjects ‘boxed in by those strangely symmetrical arrangements or faced with the curiously abandoned picnic table, puzzle, and gun collection’.¹⁵ Our place in the overall arrangement becomes increasingly awkward: ‘There is nowhere to go’, Haidu writes, ‘and the carefully stage-managed atmosphere leaves us nothing to feel’.¹⁶ The effect of alienation in *Décor*, the distancing of the viewer, results from our constant displacement as subjects. A subjectal displacement that comes, in turn, from an increasingly complex, fragmented perspective.

However, in a paradoxical contrast to the position described above, Cerith Wyn Evans attests of his experience of *Décor* when he was beginning his own career

as an artist, remarking that this effect can also be quite liberating. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Wyn Evans explained:

I felt I had discovered something very exhilarating, and part of that exhilaration came from thinking that this work was somehow forbidden, unsanctioned, not allowed. It was one of those feelings, partly shock in a sense, because it seemed very stimulating that the pieces didn't add up, that there was room to move, or if there were connections, they were weak connections. I didn't feel as if I was losing out on the experience of the piece by not being able to source all of the references; it was a kind of liberation, a newfound sense of freedom. The decor felt like a set, a stage setting, as if you had walked in by accident through the wrong door onto someone else's stage. [To] find an encounter with something that you don't actually expect, and so consequently you are somehow refigured or remodeled against the backdrop of another; somehow you find yourself in a scenario that isn't of your own writing. It wasn't sculpture, because it was too much like window-dressing, but it wasn't window-dressing either, nor theatre. It felt more like a decor, a setting.¹⁷

I suggest that in *Décor* this ambivalent position occupied by the spectator marks the moment when politics happens, characterised by a deep ambiguity between entrapment and a moment full of possibility.

The strategy of fragmentation and displacement adopted in *Décor* breaks down both the continuity of space and the unity of the viewer's perspective. As I suggested above, this strategy of interruption of a preconceived order or an imposed narrative is employed in a more complex and subtle way than in Brecht. Instead of a visible, spectacular interruption of a given narrative, *Décor* plays on the idea of constructing different narratives and the constant suspension of this process as one representational system repeatedly collapses into another. For

example, the disparate objects that are brought together in the exhibition, function both as aesthetic *and* commodity objects. In this twofold movement, their identity as aesthetic objects is suspended, not only because of their obvious status as readymades, but also in their subsequent use as film props for the shooting of the film *La Bataille de Waterloo*. Broodthaers' strategy of placing his objects on a threshold between commodity and art, exhibition and film set, interior and exterior, seeks to expose the hidden narratives embedded in different systems and spheres of perception (history, politics, aesthetics), thereby disclosing their 'truth' as constructed. The artist carefully and systematically dismantles these systems to the point where he only displays their sheer banality.

This complex operation that shifts the object between different spheres of perception, ultimately complicates the viewer's position in the relation between interior and exterior. In 2006, Cerith Wyn Evans presented the exhibition *Take my eyes and through them see you*, at the ICA, as a kind of homage to Broodthaers' *Décor: A Conquest*. Wyn Evans observed that this ambivalent position between inside and outside, the place and the view that interested him in *Décor*, 'creates the possibility of placing oneself symbolically in either space, [but also] creates space for negotiation between these binary opposites'.¹⁸ However, things become more complicated with *Décor* insofar as Broodthaers constructs the work within a system of recursive negations. As soon as the possibility to get outside a system of representation arises (with the shots outside the gallery windows, for example), it is instantaneously suspended to reveal 'reality' as yet another representation, one that forms part of a historical or institutional narrative. In *Décor* there is never an outside, as in the work of Brecht. Furthermore, here none of the suggested narratives seem to make sense; in every step, there is a negation of meaning. The different systems of representation thus constantly expand and collapse into each other to leave the viewer in a paradoxical position, distanced from *and* trapped in them at the same time. Throughout this process, the various fields of forces that are in play are

rendered more visible, disclosing the power relations that are specific to these systems. Broodthaers' work thus alludes to the limits of representational systems to demonstrate the spectator's entrapment in them.

Fiction

Indeed, as Broodthaers observes with regards to an earlier work consisting of several plastic plaques with engraved text on them, for him, it is exactly this negative attitude that constitutes the artistic endeavour: '[The plaques] are intended to be read on a double level—each one involved in a negative attitude which seems to me specific to the stance of the artist: not to place the message completely on one side alone, neither image nor text. That is, the refusal to deliver a clear message—as if this role were not incumbent upon the artist, and by extension upon all producers with an economic interest'.¹⁹ In this elaborate demonstration of the limits of representation, Broodthaers' use of commodity objects devoid of historical context ensures that they remain fictional objects; that is, objects that tell us a story about society. As the artist explains in 'Ten thousand francs reward', describing an earlier exhibition staged at the Mönchengladbach museum:

You can see in the Mönchengladbach museum a cardboard box, a clock, a mirror, a pipe, also a mask and a smoke bomb, and one or two other objects I can't recall at this point, accompanied by the expression Fig. 1 or Fig. 2 or Fig. 0 painted on the display surface beneath or to the side of each object. If we are to believe what the inscription says, then the object takes on an illustrative character referring to a kind of novel about society. These objects, the mirror and the pipe submitted to an identical numbering system . . . become interchangeable elements on the stage of a theatre. Their destiny is ruined. Here I obtain the desired encounter between different functions.²⁰

With the suspension of narrative, furthermore, the artist problematises the process of meaning-making and their purported exposure of the rhetorics of each discourse—whether aesthetic, political or historical—seeking to reveal them as fictional constructs. By effecting a relation between fictional voices and institutional authority he effectively reveals the constructed character of power relations.

In *'A Voyage on the North Sea': Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Rosalind Krauss considers Broodthaers' practice within the context of a 'differential specificity' (a term she coined to draw a distinction—and to suggest an alternative position—between the modernist notion of medium specificity and contemporary installation art that embraces different mediums effectively rendering this notion redundant) as evincing that 'the master medium for Broodthaers [is] fiction'.²¹ Krauss insists that what is important for this artist is the revelatory potential of the medium, that is, of fiction. Indeed, as Broodthaers suggests, 'fiction allows us to grasp reality and at the same time what it hides'.²² Fiction offers, thus, not only the possibility of grasping reality, but it also grants us an insight into specific structures of experience and exposes them as constructed or self-illusory. As Krauss argues: 'It was just this structure of a spatial "behind" or layering that was for him a metaphor for the condition of absence that is at the heart of fiction'.²³

The distribution of the sensible

In his essay, 'The Politics of Aesthetics', Jacques Rancière argues that art is not political as a result of its political commitment, the message it carries or its ability to represent socio-political structures. It is political because of the very *distance* it maintains from such functions. The notion of *distance* appears, then, as a determining factor in the evaluation of artworks as politically effective, a function that—here Rancière seems to agree with Benjamin—is the ultimate criterion for the evaluation of art. In this essay, Rancière deals with the intrinsic relation between aesthetics and politics by introducing his key concept of the 'distribution

of the sensible'.²⁴ For Rancière, politics is 'the framing of a specific sphere of experience', that is, the capacity of the human subject to discuss issues of justice in a public sphere.²⁵ He stresses, however, that the 'distribution of the sensible' designates not individual subjects or objects, but a sphere of experience. The 'distribution of the sensible', thus, marks the (re)distribution of power in the social field of contradicting forces and the ability of human subjects to 'make themselves visible' in the common space of politics.²⁶ As mentioned above, the act of redistributing the sensible pertains to the sphere of experience and thus, has the ability to transform structures of perception. As such, according to Rancière, it marks the sphere of aesthetics as much as the field of politics.

Later in his essay, the author goes on to discuss the central argument, between two different strategies, that has defined artistic practices since the eighteenth century: one that establishes the autonomy of the aesthetic domain versus another that advocates the collapse between art and life. The modernist approach, Rancière writes, supports the notion that 'art empowers collective life to the extent that it creates a remote and empty space dedicated to individual meditation',²⁷ while, the opposing view corroborates the merging between art and life, due to 'forms of social life and techniques of reproduction [that] made it definitely impossible to maintain the boundary between artistic production and technological reproduction, high art and low art, autonomous artworks and forms of commodity culture'.²⁸ To support his final thesis, Rancière challenges both positions as inadequate, arguing instead for a 'third position' that puts forth the notion of 'undecidability' that seeks to maintain the tension between the two. This tension, then, between 'two politics of aesthetics' becomes the decisive factor that assigns the aesthetic domain with its political agency. 'This third way', Rancière argues, 'is made possible by continuously playing on the boundary and the absence of boundary between art and non-art'²⁹ therefore making apparent the possibility to exist in both places at once, or in the gaps created between them. Moreover, the notion of 'undecidability' the author incorporates here as a tool to negotiate the distance between the two realms of the sensible, marks the

possibility for an active negotiation (or re-negotiation) of the spaces where power resides.

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, Broodthaers doubts that art may have any political agency. In 'To be *bien pensant*. . .', the short text written in 1975, the artist muses: 'I choose to consider Art as a useless labor, apolitical and of little moral significance',³⁰ only to immediately express that it would give him 'some kind of pleasure' to be proved wrong. *Décor* was staged the same year the above text was written and reflects a similar 'undecidability'. Although it seems, at first, to confirm such claims for art's complete absorption in the sphere of commerce, with its blatant use of retail commodities that pose as aesthetic objects, *Décor* shifts among so many different spheres (aesthetics, economy, politics, history, technology, media), performing so many manoeuvres, that it frustrates any attempt at a straight-forward reading. The display, for instance, of weapons in vitrines highlights the relation between war and leisure, implicating at the same time the role of institutions, such as museums, and their technologies—such as exhibitions—in the construction of history, while avoiding to talk about war and violence in an overtly direct and didactic manner. The intended ambiguity of Broodthaers' work seems to comply with Rancière's views on the subject. According to the author of 'The Politics of Aesthetics', the shift that Brecht performed between 'allegory and the debunking of allegory . . . the connection and the disconnection between art and [life], politics and [life]',³¹ which opens up the possibility that existing in two places at once is the only possibility for art to be revolutionary. This collision between two politics of aesthetics, two different systems of perceiving and understanding the world, opens up the possibility to disclose 'some secret of power and violence'.³²

According to Rancière, 'artistic practices take part in the partition of the perceptible insofar as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular'.³³ In *Décor*, Broodthaers

complicates the network of relationships between different systems of representation that frame forms of power: 'Proposing his film sets as exhibitions 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, critical method and subject of analysis',³⁴ Haidu writes. The artist systematically unfixes the relationship between sign and signifier to let his artworks, as well as the other signifying systems he implicates in *Décor*, become dismantled or left in suspension. For example, the succession of the two rooms that are staged in accord to nineteenth and twentieth-century conventions mimics the museological conventions that present a linear succession of history, only to immediately break down the historical continuity from century to century with the use of film (montage).³⁵

Rancière writes about the 'two politics of aesthetics': 'Art is political, in the aesthetical regime of art, inasmuch as its objects belong to a separate sphere. And it is political inasmuch as its objects have no specific difference with the objects of the other spheres'.³⁶ It would be safe to infer that *Décor* occupies this paradoxical position in an exemplary manner. The rented props that are exhibited as artworks are in fact commodity objects, hence they fully and beyond any doubt belong to the sphere of commerce—while the display of weapons highlight the intricate relations between war, commodity, art and economy. On the other hand, though, by virtue of their display in the context of an art exhibition, these objects also belong to the aesthetic sphere. But as soon as their function as aesthetic objects is confirmed it is altogether negated by their subsequent transition in the realm of the film set through their actual use as film props. They thus simultaneously occupy equally valid positions in different realms of experience, without establishing a dominant hierarchy between them.

As I have argued so far, Broodthaers' work tests the object's withdrawal in the sphere of aesthetic discourse by layering different systems of representation on top of each other, while at the same time dismantling them. In this double act, he

not only questions the process of meaning-making, but exposes the hidden structures of these systems while also reflecting upon the viewer's position within them. The constant transition, however, of the object between these in turns present and withdrawn systems renders the very process of aesthetiscisation visible. This operation asserts the 'separateness' of an aesthetic domain which, according to Rancière, renders it political by virtue of the very distance it maintains, while at the same time allows it to collapse into the commodity realm. Broodthaers' strategy of 'borrow[ing] elements from different spheres of experience'³⁷ and negotiating their relation resembles Brecht's strategy that served as 'a kind of archetype of political art in the XXth century [because of] the way he negotiated the relation between the opposites, blending the scholastic forms of political teaching with the enjoyments of the musical or the cabaret . . .'³⁸

Buchloh notes that Broodthaers's investigations of the art object constitute:

a continuous reflection on [its] status under the universal reign of commodity production, once the object had lost the credibility of its modernist, utopian dimension. For Broodthaers the work of art no longer operated in terms of its inherited—quintessentially modernist—dialectic: to be simultaneously the exemplary object of all commodity production and the exceptional object which denied and resisted the universality of that reign. Instead, in the final subsumption of artistic production under the reign of the culture industry . . . the work could now only engage in the destruction of that dialectic.³⁹

In effect, Broodthaers' enquiry addresses the emergence of 'aesthetic production as one industry among others in the culture of the spectacle',⁴⁰ and can be interpreted as a critique of art's reluctance to recognise this condition.

As I mentioned earlier, the paradoxical position that *Décor* occupies can be approached through the strategic notion of ‘undecidability’ that Rancière considers as the necessary condition to maintain the tension between the two ‘politics of aesthetics’. This concept has been introduced in post-structuralist theory by Jacques Derrida, for whom an important ‘undecidable’ is the idea of *différance*, which refers to the deferred thing, the displaced meaning that always lies elsewhere. The value of *différance* in discourse is to make us aware that meaning within a language structure can never be fixed. Adopting the strategies of fragmentation and the erasure of meaning, Broodthaers employs a series of linguistic devices, such as allegory, irony, metaphor and metonymy, to create an impenetrable distance between the object (artwork) and the subject of analogy and at the same time to altogether eliminate this distance. To perform such a complicated act, the artist uses fiction as a tool that belongs to the realm of the ‘undecidable’ in order to effectively demonstrate the gap between the signifier and signified and to make evident the fact that meaning can never be secured within any language structure (set of cultural practices, representation systems etc.).

Décor exemplifies the notion of the ‘undecidable’ through its function as fiction on several levels. First of all, it seeks to question and overturn conventions in the realm of aesthetics by employing two paradigms from the domain of art history. It incorporates the history of the Duchampian readymade—the affirmation ‘this is art’—to overturn it by way of Magritte’s negation: ‘this is not a pipe’. As Thierry de Duve observes, Broodthaers’ work challenges the convention established through the concept of the readymade—namely, the notion that the objects exhibited in art museums have already been judged and accepted as art. In *Décor*, Broodthaers proclaims, ‘this is not a work of art’, in much the same manner he did in his fictional museums. Although in *Décor* he does not directly place a carved inscription reading ‘this is not a work of art’ in metallic plaques in front of the displayed objects, the implied presence of the pronouncement is as distinct. At the same time, by filming the exhibition, he complicates the relation

between image and object, echoing Magritte's problematisation of this relation. On a second level, *Décor* challenges conventions within the realm of art institutions and the construction of art history through its ironic take on the institution of the retrospective exhibition. Its self-mocking title *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers (La Bataille de Waterloo)* echoes Napoleon's historical defeat in Waterloo and addresses issues of institutional power as well as brings attention to the process of constructing artistic legacies. On a third level, as I hope to have demonstrated throughout this essay, *Décor* complicates the position of the art object within the commodity realm, allowing it to circulate between different domains of experience. Broodthaers' main project is to emancipate art from illusion: 'Art is a prisoner of its phantasms and its function as magic',⁴¹ he writes in 1975; Buchloh supports this disillusionment when he argues that Broodthaers' project is to demonstrate 'the mythical nature of artistic production [which is] the target of his analytic and mythoclastic project after 1968'.⁴²

To conclude, I argued in this essay that *Décor: A Conquest* employs the strategies of fragmentation and erasure to problematise communication and the generation of meaning. To do so, the artist brings disparate objects from commodity culture together and displays them in such a way as to suggest the construction of certain narratives which are then immediately cancelled. The negation of meaning, effected as the objects fall into the gaps between different systems of representation (museum exhibition and film, for example), not only confuses the limits of these systems, but also succeeds in alienating the spectator in a lasting, yet productive, manner. What is important here is that Broodthaers systematically refuses to adopt a political rhetoric of resistance, of direct opposition. Instead, his work finds its force through the 'suspension of the political', which, as Buchloh remarks, the artist 'perceives to be the necessary condition of the process of aestheticization'.⁴³ This suspension occurs at the moment of the transition from one system of representation to another, but also in the tension between two disparate discourses. By expanding and collapsing

the limits of the aesthetic sphere, the artist causes the aesthetic object to fall into the gap between two 'politics of aesthetics', as Rancière would support. Finally, I hope to have shown that it is exactly this act of 'undecidability' that is employed as a tool to negotiate the very distance the aesthetic object maintains from the sphere of politics, that invests *Décor: A Conquest* with its critical agency.

¹ Maria Gilissen, 'Décor' in *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers* (New York: Michael Werner Gallery, 2007): 35.

² Marcel Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward' (after an interview with Irmeline Lebeer), in *October 42, Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, Fall 1987: 41.

³ Ibid: 40.

⁴ Broodthaers, 'To be *bien piensant*... or not to be. To be Blind' in *October 42*: 35.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in Benjamin, *Understanding of Brech* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁶ Broodthaers, 'To be *bien piensant*... or not to be. To be Blind': 35.

⁷ Benjamin Buchloh, 'Open Letters, Industrial Poems', in *October 42*: 68.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid: 69.

¹⁰ Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer': 100.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Rachel Haidu, 'Set Piece-Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers' in *Artforum*, Summer, 2007: 436.

¹³ Ibid. *Décor* in French also means film set.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid: 439.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hans Ulrich Obrist 'Interview with Cerith Wyn Evans', in *Hans-Ulrich Obrist Interviews*, volume 1 (Milan: Charta, 2003): 940.

¹⁸ From a conversation between Cerith Wyn Evans, and Jens Hoffmann, Rob Bowman, 'Bringing the Wounded Back to the Battlefield', in *Take my Eyes and Though Them See You*, exhibition pamphlet (London: ICA, 2006): unpaginated.

¹⁹ Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward': 42.

²⁰ Ibid: 43.

²¹ Rosalind Krauss, '*A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000): 47.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics' at <http://theater.kein.org/node/99>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Haidu, 'Set Piece-Décor': 439.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rancière, 'The Politics of Aesthetics'.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Buchloh, 'Open Letters. Industrial Poems': 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Broodthaers, 'To be *bien pensant*...or not to be. To be blind': 35.

⁴² Buchloh, 'Open Letters, Industrial Poems': 90.

⁴³ Ibid: 88.

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Natasha Adamou recently obtained her M.A. in Contemporary Art and Theory (with Distinction) at the University of Essex. She also holds an M.A. in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester, 2006. In the past few years, she has been professionally involved with contemporary art projects, both in New York and Athens. During 2002-2004, she was part of the team which organised *Outlook International Art Exhibition*, Athens, curated by Christos M. Joachimides, which included works by eighty-five artists including Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis, Bruce Nauman and Ed Ruscha. In 2004, she worked at the Deste Foundation, Athens, for the exhibition *Monument to Now* featuring works from the Dakis Joannou Collection. During 2006-7 she served as Director at The Breeder Gallery, Athens. Natasha is currently working a Ph.D. at the University of Essex (Art History and Theory) that traces the legacies of the readymade and the found object in contemporary, post-conceptual art.