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## Marcel Broodthaers – *Décor: A Conquest and Bricks: 1966-1975*

Michael Werner Gallery London

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*Marcel Broodthaers Décor: A Conquest 1975 installation*

In retrospect, through documentary images, it becomes difficult to separate out Marcel Broodthaers's original installation of *Décor: A Conquest*, as seen at the ICA in London in 1975, from its later reconstructions – at Galerie de France in Paris in 2007 and, now, at Michael Werner's new Mayfair gallery – or from the descendants it has spawned, such as Cerith Wyn Evan's homage: his exhibition 'Take my eyes and through them see' at the ICA in 2006. The kaleidoscoping of hindsight is fitting and might even have been predicted by a work which meditated on how we fictionalise the past, as much as how objects, and particularly art objects, become images of themselves which replace them and obscure their specific historical contexts.

As both film set (for la *Bataille de Waterloo*, Broodthaers's 1975 film of the British military parade known as Trooping the Colour) and found-object-based art installation, both a collection of historical artefacts and an arrangement of props, *Décor: A Conquest* is a manifestation of paradox. The objects which made up this reconstruction were the originals, but most of them were originally sources from a company that supplied the film industry so temporal distance has authenticated what was intended to signify artifice. The subversive play between an object and the cliché it represents makes the installation prescient – and now vividly current – in a context in which a premium is placed on the smooth equivalence between an artwork and what it stands for, in terms both of its commodity value and of the arguments and narratives to which it can be reduced in order to be effectively promoted.

*Décor: A Conquest* was created seven years after the 1968 publication of Guy Debord's situationist ur-text *The Society of the Spectacle*, which articulated an alienation between ourselves and the reality surrounding us, a schism Debord claims we mediate by avidly consuming images that masquerade as real objects. But this intimation of the spectralness of the objecthood was always countered by Broodthaers's structuralism. Two years earlier in *Tableau Bateau*, 1973 – a sequence of 80 slides that zoom in and out from the surface of a conventional naval painting, scrutinising its sentimental image only to relinquish it to canvas weave – he was insisting on the material reality which underpins an image and, like a bout of seasickness, unsettles our sense of stability of its illusion. Torn between disabused structuralism – for which the object is no more than itself – and the fictive spectacle it deconstructs, Broodthaers admitted to having always been uncertain of his ability to live up to the embodied objecthood visual art asked of him. He was a poet before he reinvented himself as a visual artist and, in 1974, he demurred: 'It is possible that I have not been able to liberate myself from a certain literary climate, that I fall short of art.' But, possibly, he was being ironically disingenuous.

In the early 1970s, Minimalism, early conceptualism and structuralist filmmaking were emphasising the internal coherence of an artwork over its historical representational capacity; but the original installation of *Décor: A Conquest* in June 1975 was realised two months after the fall of Saigon, the end of Vietnam War (the first to have been rendered a 'real time' televisual spectacle), and followed a decade of Belgium's psychological absorption of the aftermath of its violent and exploitative colonisation of the former Congo, which began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dividing into two parts – a 19<sup>th</sup> century and a 20<sup>th</sup> century room, both dominated by weapons – *Décor: A Conquest* does and does not comprehend these events. At Michael Werner, two 19<sup>th</sup> century cannons were placed under inset Georgian sash windows almost identical to those which faced out on to the Mall in the original installation. They were real cannons but they stood on AstroTurf mats of an obviously fake astringent green, while the room was lit by colour-filtered film lamps and decorated with a cluster of potted palms. A luridly coloured promotional poster for a Glenn Ford western hung on the wall. In French, *décor* means film set, and Broodthaers's metaphors for imperialism are theatrical, as conscious of their own artifice as a naval painting. The rows of automatic rifles in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century room were also real but their context claimed them as props, as did the two vitrines over which they stood in rows and in which real handguns were arranged, reduced to toys or relics by the museological frame. A jigsaw puzzle, laid out on a kitsch table-and-chair garden set, depicted the Napoleonic Wars as a pretext for a summer afternoon's middle-class leisure.

The verticality of the standing rifles, the cannons, the film lamps, the potted palms and the stuffed python rearing up on its own matt are all surrogates for figure sculpture, but they are also mass-produced stand-ins for the previous reality they adumbrate. If figure sculpture is reduced to found object, those objects are liberated from mass production and consumption by the conceit. Simultaneously ennobled and diminished, their original specificity helplessly attempted to justify their present condition as cyphers drained of specificity. Historical veracity is shown to be as much a spectacle as *décor*. Resisting resolution into a neat dialectic, this paradox arouses a sense of disorientation that is only exacerbated by the installation's status as one of the several reproductions of a lost original.

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Perhaps the only let-out from this bewildering *huis clos* of contradiction is absurdity. The second part of the exhibition was a series of works, produced between 1966 and 1975, which share the motif of a brick, carrying it through a range of guises satirising its aura of minimalist autonomy. Real bricks are painted a brighter red; their image is silkscreened on to brick-shaped canvases; four of them are cemented in a line as the raised cross-section of a tabletop; or they become a wallpaper pattern partially decorating a plywood crate. *Fume*, 1972, is a naïve painting of the silhouette of a brick factory – red of course. The series is a comic coda to Broodthaers's ruthless deconstruction of the Duchampian found object in *Décor: A Conquest*. In French, brick is *brique*, which was slang for 1,000,000 Belgian francs. A spectrum, incrementally spanning the scale between reality and representation, consigns the common/artistic referent of a brick to an eerie absence, with Broodthaers, the mischievous magician twirling his wand in the background, having created a set of art objects whose function is to make the art object to which they all testify vanish and leave the plush Michael Werner Gallery, at least symbolically, with nothing to sell.

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