‘Marcel Broodthaers,’ a Knot of Riddles in a MoMA Retrospective

“I’m no good at anything. I am 40 years old.” So wrote the Belgian poet Marcel Broodthaers, who up until 1964, had been supporting himself, barely, as a bookseller and photojournalist (lots of pictures of the Brussels World’s Fair), while making short, strange films and publishing avant-garde poetry.

One thing he didn’t lack was ambition, which led him to wonder whether he couldn’t, after all, finally “sell something and succeed in life.” Sell what? It was around then that “the idea of inventing something insincere crossed my mind.” The insincere something was art, and he jumped on it.

Eureka. He had his first solo the very year he wrote the words quoted above; in fact, they appeared in his debut exhibition brochure. A mere four years later he declared that he was changing careers again, this time to become the director of a fictional museum, his own. And now comes the belated but majestic, and woozily perplexing, “Marcel Broodthaers: A Retrospective,” a show that opens at the Museum of Modern Art on Sunday and gives New York its first-time full exposure to one of Europe’s most influential 20th-century poet-artists.
The poetry side of that dual identity was evident early on. Born in Brussels in 1924, Broodthaers — pronounced “Brotars,” as he himself explained, grumling about the superfluous letters in his name — started writing as a teenager. After a stint in the Belgian resistance during World War II, he fell in with a group of revolution-hungry local Surrealists. Several of his own early books are in the show, including “Pense-Bête,” or “Memory-Aid,” a beauty. (You can read it digitally in English translation in the show.) When he decided to add art to his résumé, he took 50 unsold copies of the book, stuck them in a bed of wet plaster, and called the results a sculpture.

Many more such objects followed. They tended to be made from a fixed repertoire of materials, the way poetry sequences are built around a cluster of repeated images. For sculptural reliefs he used lump coal and mussel shells, because they were easy to get and had specific Belgian associations; with them he mocked the idea of art as an advertisement for nationalism. Eggshells were similarly available — he scrounged them from neighborhood restaurants — but metaphorically more versatile. Like languages, they were containers and generators of new life.

Words — handwritten, printed, photographed, painted and spoken — are everywhere in Broodthaers’s art. To him they were images, like portraits, and blend most smoothly with nonverbal images in his films. The earliest of these here, “The Key to the Clock, Cinematic Poems in Honor of Kurt Schwitters” from 1957, is a homage to a great, earlier Dada poet-artist who, with René Magritte and Stéphane Mallarmé, was among Broodthaers’s abiding heroes. The film combines close-up shots of Schwitters’s interstellar-looking assemblages with a recording of Broodthaers engaged in a nonsensical but transcendent chat with an imagined lover.

In a 1967 piece based on a Jean de La Fontaine fable, language piles up in silent layers as photographed words are projected over others printed on a screen. And in the film “The Rain (Project for a Text),” from 1969, words vanish before our eyes. We see the artist sitting in a garden writing in a notebook. Suddenly, water showers down, soaking him and washing his words away. Yet language persists. Looking as unperturbed as another of his heroes, Buster Keaton, Broodthaers keeps on writing.
By the time of this film, he was deep into his largest project, the multipart, multilocation, ever-morphing "Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles" (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles), which he started in 1968 and sustained for four years. A sprawling distillation of it is the centerpiece of the MoMA show, and rather than trying to crack its coded logic, the best approach is to just dive in.

A few of the original "galleries" of his museum have been evoked in installations. The so-called XIXth-century section is one. Installed in Broodthaers's studio, it consisted primarily of postcards of 19th-century paintings stuck on the wall and slides of others projected onto a shipping crate. Later sections were devoted to 17th-century art (notably Rubens), film and literature. The largest "wing," for which the museum was named, was composed entirely of images of eagles, hundreds of them, as found in neo-Classical paintings, on military gear, schnapps bottles and tourist souvenirs. The sampling gathered at MoMA is hilarious and creepy, a visual essay not just on the manipulation of an image, but on museums as an instrument of political power and commercial branding.

Here as elsewhere, although the ideas may be heavy, Broodthaers is careful to keep the tone light. (He once compared his socially messianic contemporary Joseph Beuys to Richard Wagner and himself to Jacques Offenbach.) Critical subtlety is a tricky tension to maintain, which may be why, in 1972, he declared the dissolution of the museum, his retirement as director, and his return to the role — which is how he treated it — of artist.

His new work was, ostensibly, in a belle époque mode: a series of installations he referred to not as art but as "décor," evoking luxury salons and movie sets. One example, "Un Jardin d'Hiver II" ("Winter Garden II"), with its 30 potted palms and prints of tropical birds, conjures bourgeois Europe's first great museum age, and sets it squarely on a foundation of African colonialism.

A second "décor," titled "A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers," from 1975, brings the show to a startling conclusion. It's in two parts. One, the "Nineteenth Century Room," holds more palm trees, a pair of antique battle cannons and a taxidermied boa constrictor, uncoiled and standing erect as if about to strike. The smaller "Twentieth Century Room" is furnished with a suburban lawn table and an arsenal's worth of handguns and rifles. Offenbach? By way of Napoleon, and the Unabomber.
For various reasons, Broodthaers's work feels more at home in America now than it ever has before. Look around at the show — organized by Christophe Cherix, MoMA's curator of drawings and prints; Francesca Wilmott, a curatorial assistant; and Manuel J. Borja-Villel, director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid — and you'll find his art anticipating the work by many current artists, including Fia Backstrom, Andrea Bowers, Rachel Harrison, Karen Kilimnik and Haim Steinbach. If none of them seem as resistance-minded as Broodthaers, who was young in a time of revolutions, all share something of his subversive zaniness.

There's nothing easy about him. His brief, prolific cross-disciplinary career is all but impossible to shape to the mold of the standard museum surveys. He made sure of that. By requiring you to simultaneously look at, read and listen to art, he created the condition of incoherence and instability. (One way to get a bead on him is to take him in limited doses, as you can do in a current exhibition at Michael Werner Gallery in Manhattan that focuses on the theme of writing in his art.)

No doubt to many MoMA visitors his personal and cultural references, Old World and literary, will feel precious and arcane. Art worldlings who harbor resentments against Conceptualism and the necessity of reading labels to understand art will find Broodthaers a trial. And what turns them off is exactly what makes this artist an academic darling, a knot of riddles to be untied, retied and untied again, which is what much of the ponderous catalog is about.

One of the last pieces he made before he died, in 1976, of chronic liver disease at age 58, reads as a retreat from complications, and maybe from art. Titled “La Salle Blanche” (“The White Room”), it’s a full-scale model of his original Brussels studio, the one in which he had for years written poetry, before the art idea came. In re-creation, it's basically a big, blank beige-wood shell with isolated words floating across its walls. Some are the traditional stuff of poetry: shadow, sun, cloud. Others are political: privilege, value, museum. They take us back to “Pense-Bête,” the book that began the show, and its poems — brief, crystalline and genuinely beautiful.