Marcel Broodthaers's first performative action arose from wartime murk in 1944 when at a poetry gala at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels he shouted from the balcony, “Louis Aragon, when will you stop compromising French poetry!” Broodthaers (1924-1976), a Belgian Pop and Conceptual artist affiliated with a long line of Symbolist and Surrealist poet-rabble rousers, was a marginal literary figure until the age of forty. One of his first sculptures, *Pense-Bête* (Memory Aid, 1964), was in fact a partial encasement of copies of his last book of poetry in plaster. (In other works, copies of the book feature pages with expanses of text blocked out by colored paper.) This nihilistic impulse spun a slew of anarchistic objects-casseroles dangerously brimming over with mussels, barrages of eggs seemingly broken against walls or hoarded in frumpy, glass-door larders. Twelve years after beginning his art career, the charismatic though slightly berserk-acting Broodthaers was dead of liver failure.

Broodthaers’s loose-limbed, peripatetic series of installations “Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles” (Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 1968-72) has long been claimed as a prime early example of institutional critique. But it’s also a mad, allusive romp through the history of art—a post-May ’68 one-man revolution that turns methods of classification, installation, and
reification on their heads. Elements include *Projection sur caisse* (Projection on Crate, 1968), a slide show of nineteenth-century paintings alongside art postcards tacked up on a wall; and *Section Publicité* (Publicity Section, 1972), extensive, annotated photo-documentation of eagle imagery in everything from public sculpture to soccer clubs. How ironic, and how fitting in a way, that Broodthaers's alternative museum was finally given the big institutional hug in a magnificent, exhaustive, scholarly exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, complemented by three satellite gallery shows around town, at Paul Kasmin, Michael Werner, and Alden Projects.

The retrospective was organized by Christophe Cherix, MoMA curator of drawings and prints; Francesca Wilmott, MoMA curatorial assistant; and Manuel J. Borja-Villel, director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Reina Sofia, Madrid, to which the show travels in October. (It will also appear at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Dusseldorf, in early 2017.) The sheer number of potted palms in the “Décors,” a late series of installations often involving film props, in the retrospective (thirty alone in *Un Jardin d'hiver II*, 1974) made you think MoMA was canonizing the Brazilian modernist landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx. But no: the plethora of palms, we learn, was one of many coded references in Broodthaers's work to Belgium's ignominious colonial past in the Congo.

Much of Broodthaers's art seems to be about education, especially the way things are drilled into us as children in school, and de-education—a Rimbaud-esque unhinging of all the senses. Synesthesia abounded in the MoMA show: a woozy piano sound track from Broodthaers's film *Un Jardin d'hiver (ABC)* (A Winter Garden [ABC], 1974), in which a camel from the Antwerp Zoo is briefly led in and out of the Palais des Beaux Arts, wafted through the palms and much of the exhibition, infecting the other installations with its air of fateful '60s French New Wave cinema. Taste, appetite, and consumption seemed to be addressed by the many images of mussels, French fries, and eggs. The highly collectible and fragile assemblages (exhibited at MoMA in prodigious numbers) incorporating real mussel shells and eggshells are Broodthaers's novel formulation of Belgian Pop, *moules-frites* being a classic national dish and egg tempera—to which the artist's relief paintings with eggshells (one end neatly broken off but otherwise intact) are a knowing nod—being a material commonly used by the early Flemish masters.

Broodthaers also emerged in the MoMA show as a '60s body artist: more like Jack Smith than like Rene Magritte. Haptic body memories are extruded and exhibited like relics in a natural-history vitrine. In *Fémur d'homme belge* (Femur of a Belgian Man, 1964-65), a human thighbone is overpainted with the tricolor of the Belgian flag; *Fémur d'une femme française* (Femur of a French Woman, 1965) is slathered in turn with the three colors of the French flag. The longest bone in the human anatomy thus becomes a measuring stick, or cudgel, for national rivalries, not to mention gender discrepancies.

In the film *La Pluie (Projet pour un texte)* (The Rain [Project for a Text], 1969), we watch the artist sitting in the rain and trying to write as showers soak his white chinos and his ink text is continuously dispelled. Broodthaers, the existential poet, here has a homoerotic comeliness analogous to Jean-Pierre Leaud's presence in Francois Truffaut's early films.

Broodthaers's art sometimes resembles a jabberwocky bestiary. Among the works at Paul Kasmin was the installation *Ne dites pas que je ne l'ai pas dit—Le Perroquet* (Don't Say I Didn't Say So—The Parrot, 1974), where a live African gray parrot perched in a cage was accompanied by two palms, Broodthaers's exhibition catalogues, and audio of the artist reciting one of his poems; the bird did not deign to speak the day I was there. A big stuffed python taxidermied to suggest a six-foot rearing cobra appeared in the two-room installation *Décor: A Conquest by Marcel Broodthaers*.
(1975) in the MoMA retrospective. Gin, rum, slavery, Napoleon’s defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, not to mention Belgium’s recent encounters with terrorism, are all conjured by the props assembled for this work, including a chilling lineup of semiautomatic rifles and handguns in vitrines.

*Le Corbeau et le Renard* (The Crow and the Fox, 1967-68), a film installation that the artist produced in the form of a limited edition boxed kit, was on view at the three venues, to different effects. The piece takes as its subject the titular fable written by seventeenth-century French poet Jean de La Fontaine—a parable about vanity, flattery, and pointless pride that every French-speaking schoolchild knows by heart. The installation puts Broodthaers’s deliberately spastic use of language on display. Comprising a film, a projector, assemblage objects, and movie screens overprinted with words (and on which words are in turn projected), the edition can be configured in any number of ways. It was like a newfangled ’60s art package that could be sold and resold in its rather perfunctory installation in a partitioned back space at Kasmin. At MoMA, however, we were enveloped in a kinetic environment, the flickering film imagery impacting several freestanding objects and a wall relief, *Planche à Charbon* (Coal Board, 1967). All seemed to strive for a total immersion in Broodthaers’s poetic language. At Michael Werner, the cinematic and graphic elements of *Le Corbeau et le Renard* had the air of a secret cache. Included was the marvelous, word-covered box the edition comes in, as well as a unique marbleized cardboard portfolio with a postcard depicting La Fontaine on its front. The Werner show, focusing on the theme of writing in Broodthaers’s art, allowed you to watch images (and meanings) drifting across mediums, from photos to paintings to films to objects to sculptures.

Broodthaers’s printed ephemera at Alden Projects made a strong case for his role as an agitprop artist; his mail art and manifestos—the postcards, posters, gallery announcements, and photocopied open letters—are all calibrated for maximum low-key dandyish effect. Broodthaers’s art can look dry, conceptual, dull, and austere without a place to sit, rest, read, and contemplate it. Or it can have sensuality, darkness, tactility, and tenderness, as it did at MoMA and Werner.