

I

Citations are not only frequently found in the work of the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, they are central to its structure and meaning. Among the figures he cited are artists and thinkers, but most prevalent are literary authors from the nineteenth century, including Rimbaud and Valéry, Poe and Wilde, and, especially, Baudelaire and Mallarmé. In this essay I will focus on the citations contained in one particular work by Broodthaers, the artist's book *Magie: art et politique* that he published in 1973.

The first half of this slim volume reproduces an open letter addressed by the artist to Joseph Beuys the previous year. The open letter itself transcribes a fictional letter supposedly written by the composer Jacques Offenbach to Richard Wagner, Beuys's representative in Broodthaers's allegorised critique of his German contemporary. Unfolding Wagner's significance is the purpose of my essay's first half.

In *Magie's* second half, Broodthaers reproduces photos of a magic writing slate inscribed with his initials. This device, used by Freud (a relatively rare twentieth century reference) to illustrate the workings of the unconscious, consists of a wax sheet covered by a plastic film. Where drawn on with a stylus the wax adheres to the film, showing up as a dark line which can be erased by removal of a drawer that separates the outer screen from the 'unconscious' inner surface. In the second half of my essay, I will discuss these slates alongside another citation.

In the prologue that introduces Offenbach's fictional letter, Broodthaers's writes that he has copied it out by hand 'to show upon the written honour of my handwriting that this letter is truly genuine'.¹ The citation of Stendhal and his novel *The Red and the Black* then in the letter's postscript, as I aim to show, thematises this 'written honour'. Stendhal's appearance at this point seems at first marginal, and those commentators who have remarked it have rarely dwelt on it. Offenbach and Wagner are, after all, the main characters in the puppet theatre Broodthaers stages. Nonetheless, as letters copied, falsified and disguised play key roles in its plot, Stendhal's novel holds up a mirror to *Magie's* epistolary form and its emphasis on the handwritten.

II

¹ Broodthaers, Marcel, *Magie: art et politique* (Paris: Multiplicata, 1973), 13. Citations from Broodthaers's 1973 open letter to Beuys in what follows are all taken from this one page of the artist's book *Magie*, for which reason I will not footnote them unless I have to add other information. For reference, the text of this letter can also be found, although with typos, in Marcel Broodthaers, Gloria Moure (ed.), *Marcel Broodthaers Collected Writings*, (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 386-387

The size of a paperback novel, *Magie*'s beige card cover is adorned with no more than the work's title and the artist's name, which are enclosed in the perimeter of a rectangle described with a fine red line. That is to say, even before we open it, its design as a visual object, approximating that of French literary publishing houses Gallimard and Les Éditions de Minuit, connotes 'literature'. The fact that 'MAGIE' is an anagram of 'IMAGE', and that the large red capitals that spell out the word appear at the centre of the rectangle like a picture in a frame, imply, in addition, a relation of literature to art—a constant preoccupation for Broodthaers.

Inside, its twenty-four pages are divided into two parts. The first, entitled 'Politique', reproduces the open letter Broodthaers had written to Beuys on 25 September 1972 and distributed copies of a few days later.² The artist circulated some forty open letters between 1968 and 1972. Most were typed. Only a few were handwritten, like this one. In addition, Beuys was the only recipient to have two addressed to him, the first having been written in September 1968. In *Magie* the manuscript letter appears in facsimile in French, German and finally English, each time accompanied by a typed transcription.

Framed by a brief preamble and postscript addressed to Beuys, the main part of this text is made up of the transcribed letter addressed by Offenbach to Wagner, which Broodthaers writes he has discovered 'in a dilapidated Cologne slum tenement'. This letter, which like its discovery is an invention, begins with Offenbach (Broodthaers) writing that he is putting 'the finishing touches to "La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein",', which would date it to 1867, the year of this operetta's premiere. This was the high point of the composer's success and fame, never to be regained after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. The first Parisian performances of *La Grande Duchesse*, however, drew the French emperor, Napoleon III, and his Prussian antagonist Bismarck among other potentates and politicians from throughout Europe to the Théâtre des Variétés, all keen to work out whether they or the others were being lambasted in Offenbach's farce about the proclivities and machinations in the aristocratic and military circles of a fictional central European duchy.³

In the next sentence Offenbach distinguishes his operetta from one of Wagner's operas:

How far I am from Tristan und Isolde!

² This date is recorded on the last page of this section: Broodthaers, *Magie*, 15. It is also the date given in the French version of the letter on pages 2 & 5. The German and English translations on pages 9 & 13, by contrast, are dated 28th September. I take the date in the French original to be the correct one. The later date may correspond to the date the translation was made.

³ Kracauer, Siegfried, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994) 267-271

Tristan und Isolde's medieval setting and the pathos of Tristan's demise followed by Isolde's Liebestod with which it ends, are indeed markedly different to the burlesque parody in Offenbach's work. With the mention of these two composers and their respective works, Broodthaers establishes the allegorical setting with which he intends to approach contemporary events.

It is surely not by chance that the figures and works cited in his open letter sketch an overview of major political events of the nineteenth century in francophone Europe: *Tristan* and *La Grande Duchesse* presage the end of the Second Empire and the brief period of the Paris Commune in 1871. Wagner's essay 'Art and Revolution', also mentioned, take us back two decades. It was written in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions that started in Paris and led to the foundation of the Second Republic. These uprisings also spread to Dresden where Wagner's active involvement 'ensured the end of his social existence as well as his professional career in Germany' for the next fifteen or so years.⁴ Then, in the open letter's postscript Broodthaers introduces another citation. Lying beside Offenbach's letter 'in the rubble on the floor,' he writes, he found a copy of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* 'with notes in Offenbach's hand'. This novel, which Stendhal subtitled 'Chronicle of the XIXth century', was published in 1830, taking us back another twenty years to the July Revolution in France and the deposing of Charles X, the last of the Bourbon Kings. In a manner not dissimilar to the indirect satire of *La Grande Duchesse*, Broodthaers conjures an allegorical frame for his parodic parable of events in the present by citing the nineteenth century.

The actual occasion for his open letter is signalled at the top of the manuscript version, where Broodthaers indicates he is writing to Beuys in the context of an exhibition in which both artists were included. *Amsterdam Paris Düsseldorf* was to open at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York on 5 October 1972, that is, ten days after the date on Broodthaers's letter. The museum, however, was embroiled in a controversy over its cancellation in spring 1971 of a show planned with Hans Haacke. As critic Barbara Reise reported at the time, it had done so ultimately because Haacke intended exhibiting work that used 'political means to achieve political ends'.⁵

Broodthaers evokes these circumstances within the loose weave of his allegorical fiction when he writes:

⁴ Treadwell, James, *Interpreting Wagner* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 70.

⁵ Reise, Barbara, 'Which is in fact what happened: Thomas Messer,' *Studio International*, v.182, n.935 (Jul-Aug 1971), 35. The fullest account of this episode is Gremer, Stefan, 'Haacke, Broodthaers, Beuys', *October* v.45 (Summer 1988), 63-75. *Interfunktionen*, an art magazine published in Germany and in which Broodthaers also published texts, partially reproduced the offending piece by Haacke at the time, too. See Christine Mehring, 'Continental Schrift: The Story of Interfunktionen,' *Artforum*, May 2004.

King Louis II had Hans H. sent away [from] his castles. His majesty prefers you to this specialist of compositions for the flute.

The historical allusion here is to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, an ardent fan who became Wagner's patron from 1864 on, enabling him finally to stage *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich in 1865 and subsequently bankrolling the construction of the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth that was to be dedicated exclusively to the staging of the composer's works. The letter continues:

But is not the enthusiasm that his Majesty displays for you motivated by a political choice as well?

The implication is, of course, that those included in the Guggenheim show are compromised by being so. As he records in a 'publisher's note' printed over the end of the manuscript letter, Broodthaers withdrew his contribution to the exhibition before it moved on from New York to its next two venues. This he did, however, only after writing to Beuys. It is thus appropriate that Broodthaers includes himself when he then writes:

What ends do we serve, Wagner? Why? How? Miserable artists that we are.⁶

Broodthaers became acquainted with Beuys through Anny de Decker's gallery, Wide White Space in Antwerp, where he arranged the cameraman for the filming of Beuys's action *Eurasienstab* in February 1968. By late 1970 Broodthaers had moved his activities to Düsseldorf where Beuys had been teaching at the Kunstakademie for almost a decade. When Beuys spear-headed a direct political attack on the monopoly of the Cologne Art Fair the following year, Broodthaers chose not to join it but rather made the satirical announcement, on the stand of the Michael Werner Gallery within the fair, that his fictional *Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles* (1968-1972) was up for sale due to bankruptcy.⁷ In the summer of 1972, when both artists were invited to participate at documenta in Kassel, Beuys moved his *Organisation for Direct Democracy through People's Referendum* from its storefront in Düsseldorf to the Fridericianum, while Broodthaers set up his *Section Publicité* in the Neue Galerie next door. The tenor of their two contributions could not have been more divergent: on the one hand Beuys's earnest efforts to communicate directly his practical if not necessarily practicable political principles, which he discussed daily with all-comers during the documenta's 100 days; on the other, Broodthaers's satirically elliptic collection of photographic

⁶ Emphasis added. I've altered the translation here to correspond grammatically with the French original on page 5 of *Magie*. Where the first 'we' appears in the translation I give above, *Magie's* translation has 'you'. I take the French original to be correct. I would like to thank Sara Kleib at this stage for her help comparing the French with the English translations.

⁷ Cras, Sophie, *The Artist as Economist: Art and Capitalism in the 1960s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 180-184

reproductions of eagles, as if advertising for his museum's concurrent *Section des Figures* at the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle.

In lieu of a fuller history, I will use an incident that took place within this last exhibition to exemplify the differences between the two artists. Probably Broodthaers's most well known exhibition, the *Section des Figures* consisted of 266 objects and images, all of which in some or other way represented eagles, loaned from 43 private and institutional collections of different stripes.⁸ In the exhibition's catalogue the artist had written of the 'magic power' attributed to the symbol of the eagle in the 'visitor's narcissistic projection'. His aim had been to 'tear [the eagle] from this imaginary sky in which it had been circling for years'.⁹ A few days after the opening in May 1972, however, Broodthaers discovered Beuys giving a television interview stood beside one of his loaned exhibits.¹⁰ On request Beuys broke off the interview, but Broodthaers's annoyance is not hard to understand: how different his eagles would appear with the German in his habitual flak jacket and felt hat next to them, rather than the ironic plaques Broodthaers had supplied them with reading 'this is not a work of art'. By using them to stage his own shamanic image, Beuys was reviving the aura the Belgian had sought to dispel.

In sum, by the time Broodthaers penned his open letter two weeks before documenta closed its doors, he was very well acquainted with Beuys's political stance and activities. Just as Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century had referred to his former idol Wagner as 'this old magician,' whose 'art offers us a magnifying glass' through which 'everything looks big, *even Wagner*,' so now in this letter Broodthaers articulated his critique by associating Beuys with the composer under the rubric of magic.¹¹ In particular, he has Offenbach object to Wagner's essay 'Art and Revolution' (1849), citing which was an indirect but nonetheless precise means to evoke Beuys's merger of art and politics, as there are striking resonances between Beuys's views and those the composer articulated.

Firstly, *both Wagner and Beuys were detractors of the art of their day*. Wagner despised the bourgeois entertainment Offenbach epitomised. He proselytised an art that would speak to a

⁸ Borgemeister, Rainer, 'Section des Figures: The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present', in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (ed.), *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1988), 137. The full title of Broodthaers's show was *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures. Der Adler von Oligozän bis heute*.

⁹ Broodthaers, Marcel, 'Section des figures', in Gloria Moure (ed.), *Collected Writings*, (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 345-346

¹⁰ Harten, Jürgen, *Marcel Broodthaers, Projet pour un traité de toutes les figures*, (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2015), 135, fn. 43

¹¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, 'The Case of Wagner', in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 160

‘deeper, nobler, natural instinct’ and rescue society from ‘the man-destroying march of culture’.¹² In his eyes, this cultural malady was embodied by Offenbach’s satirical operettas, which he loathed because, as Laurence Senelick explains, their success ‘spoiled the taste of the age for Wagnerian music.’¹³ Beuys, too, often spoke of the need to replace traditional, or ‘expired art’,¹⁴ which he viewed as spiritually and socially defunct, with the holism of an expanded concept of art, or what he once, echoing the title of another of Wagner’s essays, equated with ‘the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER’.¹⁵

Secondly, *Wagner and Beuys both desired a return to a state of what they thought of as natural and spontaneous interiority*, from which a purified art would spring. The untainted ‘true art,’ Wagner wrote, ‘lives... and has ever lived in the individual conscience,’ free of the depravities of culture.¹⁶ Likewise Beuys spoke of the need to follow the process of cultural evolution (read degeneration) back to a point where there was ‘no external image’.¹⁷ ‘A successful sculpture’ would therefore require ‘that an inner form first come into being in thought and understanding,’ i.e. spontaneously in the interiority of individual consciousness.¹⁸

Wagner, like Beuys after him, saw art in this utopian sense as a force for revolution. ‘It is for Art... above all else,’ the composer wrote, ‘to teach this social [i.e. revolutionary] impulse its noblest meaning and guide it toward its true direction’.¹⁹ With the same hubris, Beuys referred to art as ‘the only revolutionary power.’ ‘I want to show,’ he said, ‘that only art can create a future’.²⁰ In the

¹² Wagner, Richard, ‘Art and Revolution’, *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works, vol. 1: The Art-Work of the Future*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1892), 55; 56

¹³ Senelick, Laurence, *Jacques Offenbach and the Making of Modern Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 65

¹⁴ Beuys, Joseph and Michael Ende, *Kunst und Politik, ein Gespräch*, Rainer Rappmann (ed.), (Wangen: Freie Volkshochschule Argental, 1989), cited in Koepplin, Dieter, ‘Fluxus, Bewegung im Sinne von Joseph Beuys’, in Barbara Stieder (ed.), *Joseph Beuys: Plastische Bilder 1947-1970*, (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1990), 20. Beuys’s original phrase is ‘die zu Ende gegangene Kunst’. Translations of citations from Koepplin’s essay are my own.

¹⁵ Beuys, Joseph ‘I am searching for field character, 1973’, in Carin Kuoni (ed.), *Energy Plan for Western: Joseph Beuys in America*, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990), 22. The essay by Wagner alluded to in Beuys’s phrase is the composer’s ‘The Art-Work of the Future’ from 1849.

¹⁶ Wagner, ‘Art and Revolution’, 51

¹⁷ Beuys, Joseph and Friedhelm Mennekes, *Beuys zu Christus: Eine Position im Gespräch*, (Stuttgart: Katholisches Biblewerk, 1989), 49, cited in Koepplin, ‘Fluxus, Bewegung’, 21

¹⁸ Beuys, Joseph, ‘Talking about One’s Own Country: Germany’, in Timothy Nevill (tr.), *In Memoriam Joseph Beuys: Obituaries, Essays, Speeches*, (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1986), 37

¹⁹ Wagner, ‘Art and Revolution’, 56

²⁰ Bodemann-Ritter, Clara (ed.), *Joseph Beuys, Jeder Mensch ein Künstler: Gespräche auf der documenta 5, 1972*, (Frankfurt and Berlin: Verlag Ullstein, 1997), 120; 114. Translations from this text are my own.

context of 'social sculpture,' the artist's role would then transform into being that of a 'shaper of the social body'.²¹

Fourthly, *both thought politics should be subordinate to art*. From the early 1970s on, Beuys seemed never to tire of denigrating party politics. He envisaged that 'future politics will become more of an art'.²² Here, yet again, he resembled his countryman, who wanted to see art guiding society to 'a fair and lofty goal,' which it would do 'more effectually and impressively than an incapable statesmanship which has long since lost its compass'.²³

Wagner and Beuys shared the conviction that the various arts needed to be unified. Wagner had written of 'the one true Art,' which 'must be *born anew*' from the 'dissevered arts'.²⁴ In terms distinctly reminiscent of this, Beuys spoke of 'the traditional disciplines... entailing architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry, the group of muses which here too appear from behind an iron curtain so that a child may be born: social art, social sculpture'.²⁵

Lastly, even the Beuysian slogan that everyone is or should be an artist (jeder Mensch ein Künstler) finds its counterpart in Wagner's essay: the composer wrote that 'when... our education more and more becomes an artistic one, then shall we be ourselves all thus far artists'.²⁶

Wagner had significance for Broodthaers beyond his function as a cipher for Beuys, however. The composer was appropriated in at least two other places in Broodthaers's work, including in his last film *The Battle of Waterloo* (1975), which uses the prelude to the opera *Tristan und Isolde* in its soundtrack. Wagner's music—whose mood can be aptly summed up as 'an opium dream, painted on a backdrop of darkness,' to borrow Baudelaire's characteristically vivid words—accompanies images shot during the Trooping of the Colour showing British soldiers as they parade in their distinctive ceremonial uniforms of red coats and black bearskins, apparel stemming from the nineteenth century.²⁷ The conjunction of the dark, narcissistic self-absorption of Wagner's opera, which ends with the death its two lovers have yearned after for most of its length, with martial displays of state

²¹ Beuys, Joseph and Michael Ende, *Kunst und Politik, ein Gespräch*, 107 and 110, cited in Koepplin 'Fluxus, Bewegung', 20

²² Bodemann-Ritter, *Jeder Mensch ein Künstler*, 79

²³ Wagner, 'Art and Revolution', 64

²⁴ Wagner, 'Art and Revolution', 53

²⁵ Beuys, 'Talking about One's Own Country', 38

²⁶ Wagner, 'Art and Revolution', 64

²⁷ Baudelaire, Charles, 'Richard Wagner and *Tannhäuser* in Paris', *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 117

power astutely insinuates the notion that the latter are ‘organized imitations of magical practices’ designed to provoke our imaginary identification.²⁸

It is also surely no coincidence that the two most frequently cited figures in Broodthaers’s oeuvre, the poets Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, both wrote essays assessing Wagner’s example. Baudelaire was a fan. After witnessing a performance of instrumental excerpts and overtures in 1860, he wrote Wagner a letter expressing his appreciation.²⁹ In his subsequent essay, ‘Richard Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris’ (1861), he wrote of experiencing, at this first concert, a pleasure ‘so powerful and terrible that I could not prevent myself from ceaselessly wanting to return to it’.³⁰ In this essay he also, significantly, associated the synaesthetic connection between word and music in Wagner with his own notion of poetic correspondences.

By contrast, Mallarmé’s essay ‘Richard Wagner, The Reveries of a French Poet’ (1885) is more circumspect.³¹ As for Wagner, the relation between the arts was of importance for Mallarmé too, particularly that between language and visual media as exemplified in the preface to his famous poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, where he described the white page as an image intervening in the text and thus integral to the work.³² However, he questioned Wagner’s recourse to myth and the emotional veil cast by his opulent scores, much in the way that Broodthaers was to object to Beuys’s mysticism.³³

Broodthaers’s citation of Wagner should be seen with this lineage in mind. A former poet, who as an artist described himself as the ‘result of a taste for literature’, Broodthaers frequently referred to the relation between literature and art.³⁴ He did not, however, seek to unify them as the Wagnerian ideal required. Baudelaire had written that for Wagner it was impossible ‘not to catch sight of each idea in two simultaneous forms, one of the two arts coming into play at the point where the frontiers of the other were marked out’.³⁵ Although attracted by the correspondence between word and music, Baudelaire’s phrasing nonetheless retains their distinction. In similar terms, Broodthaers,

²⁸ Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 152

²⁹ Miner, Margret, ‘Music and Theatre’, in Rosemary Lloyd (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 147

³⁰ Baudelaire, ‘*Tannhäuser in Paris*’, 117

³¹ Mallarmé, Stéphane, ‘Richard Wagner, The Reverie of a French Poet’, *Divagations* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 2007), pp.107-113

³² Mallarmé, Stéphane, ‘Preface,’ *Collected Poems*, translated by Henry Weinfield, (Berkeley CA.: University of California Press, 1994), pp.121-122

³³ See also Stark, Trevor, *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé*, (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2020), 243

³⁴ Broodthaers, ‘Interview with Marcel Broodthaers by Marianne Verstraeten’, *Collected Writings*, 410

³⁵ Baudelaire, ‘*Tannhäuser in Paris*’, 119

in a late interview, spoke of feeling able to express himself ‘at the very frontier where [visual arts and poetry] part’.³⁶

There is as much political import to the chiasmic relations between word and image staged in Broodthaers’s work as there is in the merging of the arts called for by Beuys’s social sculpture and the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. As we will see, they are implicit within the handwritten form of Broodthaers’s letter and his signatures on the magic slate, to which I turn next. Both of these, in turn, will bring us to the theme of authenticity, itself invoked in Broodthaers’s citation of Stendhal’s novel and the reflection it offers his own epistolary fiction.

III

The second part of *Magie*, which is entitled ‘Art’, includes four photos of a magic slate.³⁷ The first three of these have been inscribed with the initials ‘M. B.’ and bear a legend describing the working of the device:

The writing slate is based on the following principle: each inscription can be wiped off just by pulling out the plate. Yet it remains engraved [gravée] invisibly on a film inside the device.³⁸

Although not a direct quotation from the text, these two sentences accurately summarise the description given in Freud’s essay ‘A Note on the “Mystic Writing Pad”’.³⁹

The significance of Broodthaers’s inscription of the slate can be gleaned from the text that is printed on the facing pages of the book.⁴⁰ This consists of two lists, each of four items. The first, headed ‘Being Narcissus’, alludes to the narcissistic spell cast by the image on the artist. Here we read of ‘the book as it transforms itself into images’ (echoing Broodthaers’s move from poetry to visual art in 1964), of everything becoming ‘mirrors’ and the artist, presumably gazing into them, being ‘fascinated with [their] image as with a snake’. Mention of vipers and grass snakes suggests that the

³⁶ Broodthaers, ‘Interview with Marcel Broodthaers by Marianne Verstraeten’, 410

³⁷ Broodthaers, *Magie*, 19, 21, 23 and 24

³⁸ Broodthaers, *Magie*, 23. The French version appears on page 19, the German on page 21

³⁹ Freud, Sigmund, ‘A Note upon the “Mystic Writing-Pad”’, in James Strachey (tr. and ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 227-232. I also checked the French version of Broodthaers’s legend against the standard French translation of Freud—‘Note sur le “Bloc magique”’, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. XVII, (Paris: PUF, 1992), 137-143—and the German version against Freud’s original—‘Notiz über den Wunderblock’, in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*. XI. Band, Heft 1, (Wien 1925), 1–5. In neither case are Broodthaers’s words a direct citation. However, in a note Broodthaers wrote for his exhibition *La Signature de l’Artiste* at the Galerie Grafikmeyer, Karlsruhe in 1972, he alluded to the psychoanalyst’s use of the magic slate to explain the ‘conscious/subconscious mechanism’—cited in Dickhoff, Wilfried, ‘Magie: Art et Politique: On the nowtime of a book by Marcel Broodthaers published in 1973’, *Parkett* no. 80 (Zurich, 2007), 23—which corroborates my assumption that the reference to Freud in *Magie* was intentional.

⁴⁰ Broodthaers, *Magie*, 22. The French appears on page 18 and German on page 20

image in the mirror is a lie, as in French 'vipères' connote slander and the phrase 'avalier des coleuvres' signifies tolerance of nonsense or insults.⁴¹ Finally, the dark screen of the slate suggests the pool in which Narcissus not only sees and is fascinated by his reflection, but in which he also drowns.

The second list, 'Being an Artist', enumerates activities associated with artistic practice: 'sculpting', 'painting', 'drawing' and 'engraving'. Here a process of substitution leading to inauthenticity and reification is suggested. Stage 'properties' (accessoires) stand in for sculptures, alluding to Broodthaers's penchant for using ready-made objects appropriated much like texts are cited. Next, under 'painting', the artist finds themselves, as in a dream, on the 'stage' suggested by the props, playing a role beside their dealers and collectors. At the third stage the signature, the sign of authenticity meant only to underwrite the work, replaces it. Lastly, just as Broodthaers's signature is literally engraved on the wax film inside the magic slate, the final destination for the artist's image is 'engraving', which is glossed simply with the phrase 'market study'. The signed slate thus suggests both the reflection of Narcissus in the pool where he finds his end, as well as the reified form for which the artist's work is destined and that simultaneously conditions its appearance on the market's stage.

In the fourth and final photo of the magic slate on the last page of the book, the plate or drawer, which is shown in the process of being removed in the third photo, has been pushed back inside the device. The signature has disappeared, but presumably remains incised in the wax film within it. Now, at the foot of the page, the initials 'M. B.' appear signed by hand in blue ink. By the time Broodthaers started deploying his signature as a motif in 1966, the artists of his milieu were not as a rule signing their works. Nonetheless, though the signature is no longer visible on its surface, the idea of the work as a unique, authored production persists within the market and in the wider social understanding. The signature is retained in the work's unconscious, as it were, invisible like the signature inside the writing slate: 'Whether he signs his oeuvre or not, it is still signed just the same,' as Broodthaers said when rebuffing Daniel Buren's claim that his work was anonymous.⁴²

The fact that Broodthaers used his initials alone—not only on this slate, but also other works deploying his signature including prints, inscribed pedestals, a film and several slide-carousel works—and never his full name, is significant. It turns his signature into a cipher, as initials are an invitation to pseudonymity. A serendipitous example of the latter in Broodthaers's oeuvre is

⁴¹ Hakkens, Anna, 'Introduction', in *Marcel Broodthaers: Projections* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1990), 23

⁴² Broodthaers, 'Meuwissen or Anybody', *Collected Writings*, 293

Untitled, 1970, a painting of a general to which he added an extinguished cigar butt. The canvas, which Broodthaers had bought at a flea market, was signed, and fortuitously the painter's name began with the initials M. B.⁴³

Pseudonymity was an interest of Stendhal's too, but of quite different proportions. 'It is useless to enumerate Stendhal's pseudonyms,' wrote Jean Starobinski, because through his life he had recourse to 'more than a hundred'.⁴⁴ Baron Frédéric de Stendhal was but one. In *The Red and the Black* he has the novel's hero, Julien Sorel, true to his 'code of hypocrisy', present the world with a series of different faces. Broodthaers, similarly, treated identity as a performance or citation from the start—anticipating Judith Butler by some two decades. He wrote, in the invitation to his first solo show in 1964—namely at the point when he appeared publicly to exchange the role of poet for that of artist—of how he came up with 'the idea of inventing something insincere' when, like Stendhal's protagonist, he reflected on how he was to 'succeed in life'.⁴⁵

In the first of *The Red and the Black*'s two parts, Julien transforms himself from his proletarian beginnings as an illiterate carpenter's son in the provinces to seminarian in the provincial capital. Napoleon is his role model, but growing up during the Bourbon Restoration he has decided his best chance of advancement is the clergy, much as Broodthaers opted for the art world over the unremunerative province of poetry. Feigning piety to the priest and local society, Julien gains a position in the house of the town's mayor, M. de Rênal, as tutor to his children.

The scenography of the novel's second half moves from the bourgeois world to the vacuous insincerity of the aristocracy. Julien transfers from the seminary into the Paris mansion of the Marquis de La Mole to act as his secretary, where despite the increasing trust the marquis places in him, his ignoble secretary becomes embroiled in a turbulent relationship with his daughter, Mathilde. Julien fantasizes of being the illegitimate child of an aristocratic father, a fantasy abetted by the marquis's desire to see his daughter marry an aristocrat and aided by his prospective father-in-law's efforts to supply Julien with an aristocratic name. In this context, 'a name,' indeed, as Starobinski writes, 'alternately appears as something full and something empty, in some cases fraught with great density of existence, in others reduced to a superficial and meaningless verbal construction'.⁴⁶

⁴³ Chaffee, Cathleen, 'Emblems of Authority', in Manuel J. Borja-Villel and Christophe Cherix (eds.), *Marcel Broodthaers: A retrospective*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), 249

⁴⁴ Starobinski, Jean, 'Truth in Masquerade', in Victor Brombert (ed.), *Stendhal: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 116. Stendhal's given name was Henri Marie Beyle.

⁴⁵ Broodthaers, 'I, too, wondered whether I couldn't sell something...', *Collected Writings*, 138

⁴⁶ Starobinski, 'Truth in Masquerade', 116

Stendhal's novel also resonates with the epistolary dimension of *Magie*. Two anonymous letters play a substantial role in its first part. In the mayor's house, an affair develops between Julien and his employer's young wife. Fearing her husband has received an anonymous letter exposing their tryst, Mme de Rênal conceives a double bluff: she fabricates a letter addressed to herself, whose fictional author claims to have exposed the affair and thereby claims power over her. She has her lover transcribe it with words cut and pasted from a book, and then she shows this disguised letter to the mayor. The salient effect of this collaged letter lies not in how it disguises its actual origin, however. On the contrary, it is used to conjure rather than obscure: it convinces the mayor that both it and the genuine anonymous letter he has received about his wife are the malicious invention of one of his rivals among the town's elite.

When Matilde realises, in the novel's second half, that Julien's aloofness is a mask below which he is anything but indifferent to her, her infatuation turns to contempt. Tormented by this turn in his fortunes, Julien is convinced by a Russian acquaintance to attempt winning Matilde back by paying court to another woman in her circle. For this purpose he is given a stash of love letters that he is to copy out. He has only to change the name of the addressee and any circumstantial details, and then deliver the transcribed letters to the person he selects as the decoy, for whom he chooses the insipid Mme de Fervaques.

As these episodes demonstrate, *The Red and the Black*, like *Magie*, is a fiction within which characters (in *Magie*, Broodthaers himself) use letters to deceive. In their scenarios, either a person disguises what they have written and passes it off as having been written by someone else (as with Mme de Rênal's anonymous letter and Offenbach's letter Broodthaers feigns having copied), or else they change the addressee of a letter originally composed for another recipient (as Julien does with the letters he copies out for Mme de Fervaques and the fictional Broodthaers does for Beuys).

A suspicion of 'direct communication' seems to have made such fictional devices attractive to Broodthaers. He evidently had an intuitive understanding of the Lacanian principle of the 'truthful lie'. Lacan located a truth of this ironic form in the circular relationship between 'a certain lie' and the 'dimension of truth', the irony existing in the notion that the lie both founds the dimension of truth—by instituting the truth/fiction opposition—and is enunciated against it.⁴⁷ This helps explain why Broodthaers's censure of Beuys could not be delivered directly, instead having to take the form of being 'quite simply a lie, a deception,' as he said of his fictional museum: it is the fictional

⁴⁷ Lacan, Jacques, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, (London: Penguin, 1977), 144; 138

dimension in *Magie* that, in linking statement and enunciation, 'allows one to capture reality at the same time as what it conceals'.⁴⁸

But what do handwriting and the signature have to do with this? The signature is 'not only the ultimate guarantee of authentication by the individual,' as the linguist Roy Harris points out, 'but the most basic form of individual self-expression as well'.⁴⁹ By the same token, perhaps more so in the past and nonetheless today too, handwriting has commonly been thought to reveal aspects of a person's character. This is why Julien, when he receives the first letter from Matilde that begins their liaison, studies 'the shape of the handwriting' and is entranced by her 'fine, small, English-style hand'.⁵⁰ In both cases, it is in their production rather than their content that the handwritten and the signature have their significance. What I mean is, it is not sufficient to say that a signature, for example, consists in an inscribed name; rather, although an apparently unique and uncoded production, a signature is a sign, even if reduced to a few letters or illegible, inscribed by a specific person under certain conditions. Signatures are, in this sense, citations; they cite the conventions of signing with all their implications for identity. Handwriting's status as an authentic expression is similar. Although nineteenth-century graphology and popular wisdom might see it as a sign of innate character, it takes conventional forms that are socially transmitted, a fact particularly true in Stendhal's day.⁵¹

Through this double structure, in which authentic expression is shadowed by citational convention, the handwritten sign distils an ideology of individual identity and its authenticity. On the one hand, in their apparent spontaneity, handwritten signs mirror the image of the individual as itself apparently spontaneous and free of social determinations. On the other, the conventionality of handwriting and of the contexts of signing correspond to the paradoxically social and historical nature of individuality. Ultimately, handwriting's part in the social construction of the individual is cloaked in an appearance of naturalness by the image of spontaneity it simultaneously presents.

This brings us to the relation of statement and enunciation in the handwritten sign. The signature, as Harris writes, 'signifies by reference to its own making and the identity of its maker'.⁵² What this amounts to, however, is that a signature is a sign that vouches for the status of its own production.

⁴⁸ Broodthaers, 'Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Sections Art Moderne et Publicité', *Collected Writings*, 354

⁴⁹ Harris, Roy, 'On the Dotted Line,' *Rethinking Writing*, (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 168

⁵⁰ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, 337

⁵¹ Kittler, Friedrich A., *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, (Stanford CA.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 77-88; Koehler, Karin, 'Judging by the Hand: Handwriting and character in Victorian literary culture', in James Gregory, Daniel J.R. Grey, Annika Bautz (eds.), *Judgment in the Victorian Age*, (London: Routledge, 2018), 220-240.

⁵² Harris, Roy, 'On the Dotted Line,' 162

Thus there are aporetic implications to the signature, which lie in the improbable circularity by which 'its signification coincides with its own act of enunciation'.⁵³ For this reason, we can say of the signature what Theodor Adorno says of authenticity per se, namely that 'in postulating itself as genuine,' the signature, too, 'becomes a lie'.⁵⁴ It asserts the individual as an authentic and unique being, but does so, contradictorily, by citing the generic form of a socially mandated representation. This perhaps helps us to understand what Broodthaers meant when he called the signature 'the beginning of a system of lies'.⁵⁵ The artist's narcissistic identification with the image of individuality that the signature represents masks all those phenomena that Broodthaers took aim at, including museums and the art market, which in making up the larger social system actually determine the artist's cultural meaning. Considering his many works featuring 'the artist's signature', it is no wonder that Broodthaers was to reflect that: 'Maybe the only way I can be an artist is to be a liar.'⁵⁶

In parodic fashion, Broodthaers wrote of wanting to use a signature to serve as a mirror he could gaze into to contemplate himself.⁵⁷ A self-defeating circularity, however, evacuates his signatures of the image of authenticity and individuality that would act as the point of imaginary identification. The monograms on the magic slate and in other of his works play on the co-incidence, in the phenomenon of the signature, of the textual level of the statement, on the one hand, and the meta-textual level of its enunciation on the other. The point here is that they are usually 'ignorant' of one another, so to speak. We overlook the textuality of the signature because we are directed by it to the text it supplements. Appended to a document (a letter, say) or an image (of an eagle, say) its metatextual role is to the fore. It says 'this letter was authored by me', or 'this image was made by me', which, in fact, is very close to the form that signatures in medieval European art frequently took.⁵⁸ By contrast, Broodthaers's monograms drawn on slides, clustered on pedestals or inscribed on magic slates, rather than supplementing a text or work of art, are presented in their own right. Removing their object in this way, he makes their own textuality and objecthood evident. It is here, where text and metatext become apparent in one and the same sign and the signature signs itself, as it were, that the distinction between these levels threatens to collapse and along with it the signature's ideological and imaginary content.

⁵³ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 2008), 109

⁵⁴ Adorno, Theodor, W., *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, (London: Verso, 2020), 157

⁵⁵ Broodthaers, 'Interview with Marcel Broodthaers by Freddy De Vree', *Collected Writings*, 312

⁵⁶ Broodthaers, 'Section d'Art Moderne (Private Property)', *Collected Writings*, 359

⁵⁷ Broodthaers, 'On the Model of Narcissus...', *Collected Writings*, 282

⁵⁸ Bredekamp, Horst, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), 45-51

We can now return to Broodthaers's preamble to Offenbach's letter, which he suggests he has presented as a copy because of the frailty of the original, adding:

Yet I kept to the handwritten form to show upon the written honour of my handwriting that this letter is truly genuine.

Essentially the same logic is in play here as that to be found in the self-referential signatures on the slate. While seeming to assure authenticity, this sentence undercuts it; in its convoluted attempt to represent the authenticity of its own representation, it signals rather the vanity of claims to genuineness and Broodthaers's demurral from reliance on them. As a statement 'intended to be read on a double level,' it exemplifies the irony, in this precise literary sense, that pervades his work and marks its fundamental difference to that of Beuys, whose appeal to mythic, ahistorical origins necessarily excluded irony.⁵⁹

Because of their recourse to mythic authority, neither Wagner nor Beuys considered that the artist and art might be, respectively, a socially determined identity and an historical concept. The fact is, as Broodthaers observed in the summer of 1972, 'the functioning of art is very dependent on the social system'. It is no less informed by society and its institutions, such as the signature, than is the bourgeois individual which in many respects we still understand ourselves to be today. The artist's social identity is but one possible position within bourgeois society, of which they are a product. This is why Broodthaers can say that 'artists can only exist on a bourgeois level'.⁶⁰ It was only possible for Beuys to maintain his belief that everyone should be an artist, therefore, so long as he did not take cognisance of this fact.

While Beuys's propositions and activities suggested a desire for the dissolution of current artistic identity, he simultaneously cultivated a mythic image for himself as artist that had quite the contrary effect. If the ideals of 'social sculpture' and a society of artists rang hollow for Broodthaers, this was because 'art is dependent on so many other factors that it cannot achieve authenticity'.⁶¹ Art's institutions and the market 'have a bearing on the very structure of any work of art,' more so than any utopian ideals, which is why, Broodthaers added in what could well have been an allusion to Beuys, 'the "political" statements made by certain artists do not prevent their prices from rising'.⁶² A Broodthaersian diagnosis of the fact that Beuys did not see the contradictions might be that he was caught up in a 'system of lies,' one that denied the symbolic level at which the artist's identity is

⁵⁹ Broodthaers, 'Ten Thousand Francs Reward', *Collected Writings*, 414

⁶⁰ Broodthaers, 'Meuwissen or Anybody', 297

⁶¹ Broodthaers, 'A Few Common Places', 373

⁶² *Ibid*, 372-73

determined. He did not take on board the complicity of his artistic persona in the institutional and economic conditions he wanted to change—the very complicity that Broodthaers consistently foregrounded, not least in the signed slate and the feigning of handwritten honour in *Magie*.

IV

Beuys's 'jeder Mensch ein Künstler' could be said to 'feign to tell the truth when it is lying'. By its own lights, the statement is logical; but the position from which it is enunciated undermines that logic. Beuys's conviction, we might say, is bought at the expense of what its logic conceals. This need not stop us from respecting Beuys's convictions, as it did not Broodthaers, but the implication of *Magie* might be summed up as the recommendation that we also respectfully decline to share them. Broodthaers's declared intention of 'inventing something insincere,' by contrast, 'feigns to lie when it is actually telling the truth'.⁶³ Like *Magie*'s 'written honour,' it is an ironic fiction, a version of the liar's paradox: 'how can he sincerely state his insincerity?' Yet this is also the truth *Magie* points to: its openly fictional and citational structure adverts to the enunciative dimension occluded in statements, showing the limitations of direct communication.

This reminds me of Adorno's suggestion that Wagner was to be reproached not with play-acting, but with its denial.⁶⁴ That is to say, he faulted Wagner not for his inauthenticity but for blind conviction in his own authenticity. In a similar vein, Broodthaers wrote in a letter justifying his withdrawal from the Guggenheim show that he opposed Beuys's political view on art 'in spite of the courage (or the logic) with which this artist takes up his stance,' adding, 'but that's almost what I reproach him for'.⁶⁵ The citational fabric of *Magie*, in which playing-acting is emphasised throughout, from the mimicry of its cover to its fictional letter and even its handwritten form, represents a very different politics of art. In this, to put my argument in a nutshell, it responds to Beuys by inverting the priority of authenticity over fiction, direct statements over the implications of their enunciation.

If I wanted to choose one citation to sum up the sense I make of Broodthaers's book, it would be a line from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. There he wrote that 'anything that does not want to wither should rather take on itself the stigma of the inauthentic.'⁶⁶ The play-acting laid bare in *Magie*'s ventriloquised web of citations, real and imagined, would be the negative image of authenticity—the only one Adorno would have allowed for.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of my sister, Kirsty Penelope Chesher (1969-2021)

⁶³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object*, 224

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 164.

⁶⁵ Broodthaers, 'Dear Jürgen Harten...', *Collected Writings*, 309

⁶⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 164