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Eagle Pipe Urinal

On the exhibition *The Eagle from the Oligocene to the Present*
by Marcel Broodthaers

He clearly invokes the authority of two of his predecessors. With one photograph each, Marcel Broodthaers references Magritte's pipe and Duchamp's urinal. Are his claims justified? And if so, what are the similarities and differences between the three artists?

Each, in his own way, is an optical semiotician. Before making the comparison, therefore, it is helpful to recall a few principles established by the founders of semiology, Ferdinand de Saussure (1915) and Roland Barthes (1957). Saussure discovered the tripartite principle of the linguistic sign, Barthes its simultaneous operation on two levels - and the fact that other types of signs, not just linguistic ones, operate in this way. Let us briefly illustrate these basic principles with an example.

The sign one *Deutschmark*. The 1 on the obverse of the coin and eagle on the reverse are the signifiers (*signifiant*). The signified (*signifié*) is the value of the coin in Germany: the 1 stands for the coin's denomination and the eagle for the fact that it is a German coin. The sign (*signe*), a combination of signifier and signified, is the One Deutschmark coin. So much for Saussure.

According to Barthes, this represents the 1st level, the colloquial or object language of the One Deutschmark coin. But almost every sign also exists simultaneously at a 2nd level, a meta-linguistic or, more succinctly, a mythical one. On this level, the sign becomes an empty signifier. The One Deutschmark coin (sign) can signify, for example, German prosperity or the *Wirtschaftswunder* of the postwar period. To a certain extent, this new signified displaces signified of the 1st level (value of one of the coins in Germany). The gap between the signified of the 1st level (use value of the coin) and the signified of the 2nd level (symbolic value of the coin) is what I call the mythical surplus value of the sign *One Deutschmark*.

These are the semiological principles around which the works of Duchamp, Magritte, and Broodthaers revolve. Magritte illustrates the insights of F. de Saussure; Duchamp and Broodthaers, in different ways, those of Roland Barthes. The former is concerned with the tripartite nature of the sign; the latter with switching between the first and second levels of meaning, that is, from a material reading to a mythical one and vice versa. Let us examine this in detail.

Duchamp makes evident the transition from an object of utility (1st level) to an art object (2nd level). A porcelain receptacle that at its typical destination means nothing more than a men's pissoir is signed by him and sent to an exhibition jury: in so doing, he flatly declares it to be an art object. To give the title *Fountain* to a

urinal with a flushing system is as logical as it is funny, since artworks normally have titles and the word *fountain* is in itself a signal of art. With his declaration, Duchamp creates an inflationary effect in the mythical surplus value of the so-called artwork; implicitly, he finds the judgments of art agents (gallerists, museum people, art historians) guilty of self-interested arbitrariness. The fact that he chose his object of utility from the lowest possible tier of such objects makes his action all the more mocking and effective. As an artist, Duchamp takes the consecration of the object - which qualifies it to enter a museum—into his own hands with a lighthearted blessing: the “exemplary” aspect of the readymade.

Duchamp demonstrated the transformation of a profane level of meaning (a men’s urinal as an object of utility) into a mythical one (the fountain as an art object) in a playful manner that robbed this transformation of its self-evidence. For Magritte, by contrast, it is primarily a matter of using negation to unpack an apparent tautology. *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* contains three statements. 1. This is not a pipe; it is a visual representation. At stake here is the relationship between a three-dimensional object (pipe) and its two-dimensional reproduction (naturalistic representation of a pipe). The representation of a thing is not identical to the thing itself. 2. This is not a pipe; it is a linguistic message. In this case, the relevant relationship is between the three-dimensional object or two-dimensional figure and the inscription *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. Writing is not an image but, at most, a constituent part of an image – and certainly not a pipe. 3. This is not a pipe; it is an optical thought process that, when rendered as an image, becomes an art object. At stake here the relationship between the entire image (figurative representation + linguistic message) and what it triggers in the viewer.

Broodthaers begins where his two predecessors left off. To a certain extent, he reverses them. Broodthaers travels the trail blazed by Duchamp in the opposite direction. Whereas Duchamp’s declaration made any object of utility into a potential art object, Broodthaers makes it possible for every art object (= every object exhibited in a museum) to be seen once again simply as an object. He makes his own declaration. Modifying Magritte’s statement, he declares of each exhibited object: this is not an... art object, regardless of whether it consists of a recognized piece of art, such as Magritte’s paintings *Les fanatiques* and *Fontaine de jeunesse*, beer glasses, packets of cigarettes, or Hindenburg lights. To mock the division between the trivial world and the art world, Duchamp let trivial objects storm the holiest site in the art world, the museum, which nevertheless did not really absorb them at the time. With Broodthaers, these objects have all long since been collected by the museum: advertising signs, consumer goods packaging, knick-knacks, posters, clothes, household items, decoration, Asian, Indian, European art.

Broodthaers’s objects thus have no need to fight for a mythical status, for they have one already. And doubly so: first, because they are exhibited as museum pieces, and second, because they are overloaded with signs. Whenever it is encountered as a figure, the eagle is strongly emblematic and filled with mythological significance. It variously connotes strength, virility, rigor, eschatological longing, freedom, authority. Put another way, the eagles exhibited by Broodthaers operate on the 2nd level. (This is partly true even of the taxidermy eagles, specifically where they express a particular ideology of nature). And it is precisely by showing this fact to us that Broodthaers brings the eagle back to the first level of object language.

Broodthaers incessantly defuses the mythical power of the eagle by using every conceivable eagle as evidence. He thus tames the mythical character of the domineering German imperial eagle by juxtaposing it with its weakened derivatives, such as the emblems of the DLRG (German Life Saving Association), the ADAC (General German Automobile Club), and the DFB (German Football Association). With some, or even most, of the contemporary everyday objects, the viewer is made to realize for the very first time that these eagles are in fact mythical creatures; this effect appears most clearly, perhaps, in the series of product labels from

German brands. Through the lateral connections constantly evoked by the serial arrangement, the eagles are forced to shed their mythical feathers.

Such a mythoclastic effect is the first result of the principle of serialization. The second, implicit in the first, is the dissolution of hierarchy among the objects. Each eagle on display becomes as important as any other, at least in the eyes of the beholder. As a result, the running caption *This is not an artwork* becomes almost superfluous. It is necessary, however, as a continuously overheard keynote, which makes the methodological intention resound anew with each object. No object stands alone: each is an element of the demonstration, a piece of the mosaic rather than a unit in itself.

A peculiar double action: by mercilessly subordinating all of the exhibited works, without exception, to his overall intention, Broodthaers strips them of their mythical surplus value. But it is precisely by employing them as equal-ranking tools in the context of his experiment that he frees the eagle objects from their usual overdetermination.

The methodological thrust of the exhibition is reinforced by its strategies of display. In the 1st room is a painting containing no eagle at all (cat. no. 0!). In the 2nd, a Japanese brush drawing is hung over the glass panel of a door in such a way that it serves as a curtain. It is thus a mix between an art object and an object of utility (curtain). In the 3rd room, a bag of sand is an eye-opener: as if left behind, forgotten, it disrupts the tranquility of the surrounding vitrines. *Ceci n'est pas un objet d'art* is an optical thought process that brings the relationship to Magritte full circle.

With his puzzle-picture, Magritte raised painting to the level of de Saussure's linguistics. The latter noted how the linguistic sign does not combine a thing with a name, but rather a concept (signified) with a sound-image (signifier). Magritte applied this insight to the optical sign, which does not unite an object (pipe) with its representation (figure of a pipe), but rather, once again, a concept with a visual representation.

Magritte was admittedly unable to protect his painting against the art-historical significance it would acquire as the visual formulation of a thought. This significance accelerated its transformation into a mythical object (*Treachery of Images* as art object). The artist intended the image of a pipe to operate on the level of object language, the purpose of which is simply to mean what it says. If it ended up nevertheless on the metalinguistic level, this effect was as unintended by Magritte as it was intended by Duchamp.

Both pipe and urinal are now highly valued fetishes, outfitted with the same halos that Broodthaers just tore away from his objects, the eagles. Urgently transmitted to the viewer, his semioclastic optics empty out the mythical or metalinguistic level, undoing it.