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Marcel Broodthaers  
*Fémur de la femme française*, 1965

Laughter

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In 1965 Marcel Broodthaers acquired a femur, painted it with the colors of the Belgian flag, and entitled it *Fémur d'homme belge* for the purpose of artistic exhibition. In all its colorful ghoulishness, the object seems to set up Belgian identity as the target of a visual joke: the nation-state as skeleton, or perhaps a Belgian-style bone to be given to a dog. Or perhaps the target of the joke is not Belgium itself but something like *belgitude*, the recently-coined term designating “a sense of belonging to a no man’s land, a country in the void that can only get out by privileging the imaginary”<sup>1</sup> Even if the term is new, it reflects an old understanding of the vacuum known as Belgian identity: as Charles Baudelaire wrote in the mid-1860s (thirty years after the state’s founding): “There is no Belgian people, properly speaking”—but also, “A Belgian is his own hell.”<sup>2</sup> It follows from such characterizations that the symbolic manifestation of a hollowed-out national identity—an identity in search of an entity—would be only as “real” as it is “over,” and only as iconic as it is pathetic.

Broodthaers’s *Fémur* is deeply engaged with the legacy of Magritte. It transforms a unique “relic” with an infinitely transferable and recognizable sign—a flag. What is more, the marriage of the somatic and the readymade happens instantaneously: the object is just paint on bone; it is quick, resisting deep contemplation or extended viewing. There are fertile painterly enterprises like Jasper Johns’s *Flag* paintings, which convert the iconic flatness of the Stars and Stripes into depth and complexity; and then there is the *Fémur*. Taking the strongest bone in the human skeleton and draping it in unmixed, straight-from-the-can col-

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Stroobants “La Belgique genie du rêve et de la derision,” *Le Monde*, March 7, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire “Divertissements Belges,” in *Fusées. Mon cœur mis à nu. La Belgique déshabillée*, ed. André Guyaux (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-86) 234, 278.

ors, Broodthaers arrests any sense of the potential infinity of artistic signification with a kind of flat “that’s all, folks”

But why? Doesn’t Belgium merit the kind of rich painterly endeavor that Johns’s United States did ten years before? Is that the question here? In 1965 Broodthaers’s tricolor signified a state that had just lost its claims to empire. But Belgium’s claims to nationhood have always been peculiarly contingent, having been first drawn up by international treaty, then legitimated only as a seat of political “neutrality” in an eternally divided Europe. Always rooted in an administrative definition of statehood, always outside anything like even a fantasy of linguistic or cultural unity or coherence, Belgium’s claims to nation-state identity can appear as a kind of joke. But the operation of the one-liner that Broodthaers exploits with the *Fémur* does more than merely tease or mock: it suggests, rather, that his national identity is one that cannot be said “straight.” For what the joke-form articulates is that what it wants to say is actually unsayable—that for which jokes provide the necessary cover.

What remains unclear is whether the problematic nature of national identity as it is revealed in Broodthaers’s work is peculiar to certain European states in the 1960s or whether it describes a more general condition for the expressibility of national identity in the postwar period. Since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* in 1983, it has become almost a truism to refer to nationality as a site of “imagined community” Anderson defines such a community as one that is not so much phantasmagorical or nonexistent as one that is consolidated through the disseminating, civilizing factors of print culture, vernacular languages-of-state, and correlative shifts in conceptions of time.<sup>3</sup> And, as the writing of James Joyce or John Dos Passos suggests, modernist literary form eventually constructs an audience that admits to the boundaries, dialects, and conventions of “imagined communities” as one of its founding conditions. In other words, the book-site through which such “imagined communities” come together eventually becomes reflexive, making the conditions of community-formation into the forms it identifies as its own. What I would like to investigate are the ways that the joke-form can retread and perhaps constructively *mess up* these footsteps. The project of discerning the reflexive forms of (prewar) literary modernism from those that I detect in jokelike (postwar) visual experiments demands a kind of cautious history that I can only suggest here, with Broodthaers as a natural point of departure, his investment in literary modernism one of the most striking and singular features of his work.

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<sup>3</sup> “Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search [for ‘a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together’] nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso 1991), 36.



Marcel Broodthaers Panneau de Moules (Panel of Mussels), 1966.

In the following pages I address the reflexive, joking forms that national identity takes in the work of Broodthaers and his younger, Italian colleague, Piero Manzoni. The two met in 1962, just before Manzoni's death and just before Broodthaers—poet, rare-books dealer, and museum docent—turned to artistic object-production in 1963. Most of Broodthaers's early works, produced from 1963 to 1966, exploit the “materials” that he named in the title of his 1966 exhibition at the Wide White Space Gallery: *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon*. All share an *echt*-Belgianness that his audience—an audience still extremely local in the mid-1960s—would have instantly recognized. The most iconic of these are the mussel shells, whose qualities he venerated in “La Moule,”“ poem included in the 1964 volume, *Pense-Bête*: “This trickster has avoided the mold of society /

She's cast herself in her very own / Others, look-alikes, share with her the anti-sea. / She is perfect"<sup>4</sup> In 1965, Broodthaers began placing emptied, glued mussel shells onto painted canvases, suggesting a kind of ultra "Belgian" response to the proclaimed universality of the monochrome.

Rosalind Krauss has pointed to the sea as "a special kind of medium for modernism, because of its perfect isolation, its detachment from the social, its sense of self-enclosure, and above all, its opening onto a visual plenitude that is somehow heightened and pure, both a limitless expanse and a sameness, flattening it into nothing, into the no-space of sensory deprivation."<sup>5</sup> In her description of the "visual plenitude" associated with the modernist canvas, Krauss gives us one sea: pure, limitless, and almost monotonously uniform ("the no-space of sensory deprivation"). Upturned and amassed on the *Panneaux* are messengers from another sea: the hidden world of mollusks and bottom feeders, those creatures that live on drifting debris and reproduce while attached to other objects. In the *Panneaux*, the shells of these creatures invade and encrust a particular kind of painting, whose uniformity and blankness ("limitless expanse and sameness") epitomize the alleged autonomy ("perfect isolation") of the art-object.<sup>6</sup> If mussels are self-regenerative yet utterly dependent, parasitical in their sovereignty, then they signify a special twist on "autonomy" that they transmit to the painted canvas, overturning the analogy between "sea" and "pure seeing."<sup>7</sup>

But the *Fémur*, that "joke," is not a painting, it is an object, as are most of Broodthaers's early works containing mussels, eggshells, coal, or *frites*. In some, mussel shells hold up the lids of casseroles, while in others eggshells appear like blank eyes staring out of old-fashioned cabinets and mirrors. When, in the early- to mid- 1960s, Arman and Warhol were collecting metro tickets and soup cans, Broodthaers chose traditional *objets ménagers*—spindly chairs and enameled casseroles. These objects of the domestic everyday flaunt their histories as salable and resalable commodities, alluding to the obsessive, specular dimensions of

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<sup>4</sup> This poem "La Moule," forms the basis of Jaleh Mansoor's masterly essay "Piero Manzoni: 'We Want to Organicize Disintegration,'" *October* 95 (Winter 2001): 29-54. My own reflections here owe everything to years of friendship, collaboration and art-viewing with Jaleh.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>6</sup> The *eggshells* that Broodthaers spreads on canvas during this period fare no better. Thanks to their smoothly monochromatic, neutral coverings, eggs are perhaps nature's other "special kind of medium for modernism." But once cracked drained and glued to canvas Broodthaers's eggs are dispossessed of precisely those qualities that Krauss associates with the sea and which modernism—"perfect isolation...sense of self-enclosure...plenitude that is somehow heightened and pure." If all those qualities can be imputed to *whole* eggs—as I believe that they are in *Uovo con impronta*, the carefully packaged eggs with thumbprints that Manzoni made in 1960 and in the related 1960s performances in which Manzoni's art audiences ingested the signed, and boiled, eggs that the artist offered to them (see Anna Costantini, "Piero Manzoni in Context, 1933-63," in *Piero Manzoni*, ed Germano Celant [London: Serpentine Gallery; and Milan: Edizioni Charta 1998], 270-71)—then their cracked and useless shells in Broodthaers's works of the mid 1960s deduct those very qualities from the canvases they decorate.

<sup>7</sup> I am particularly grateful to Maria Gilissen for her suggestions on this point.

the shop-window, and to Belgium's particular proclivity for the recycled and recyclable. Once Broodthaers's objects enter a gallery, the framework of reclaimed, repainted, and resold discards enlarges to include historical tropes, such as the surrealist *objet trouvé* and the Duchampian readymade. There, the possessive power of these historical tropes is (or appears to be) reduced to a simple pecuniary matter, initiating one aspect of Broodthaers's frequent satire of the art market.

Broodthaers was often called a "Belgian Pop artist" in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Given that Pop art gained its notoriety by "recycling" postwar popular culture, it faces a perverse obstacle in a culture that is itself built out of a recycled (prewar) material culture. Anticipating such absurd handles, his early works seem to ask what "Pop, an utterly American idiom, would look like in a country devotedly shopping at flea markets. More fundamentally, they ask what it would mean for an artist to translate an artistic idiom from one national context into another. Such a "translation" would have to admit to a kind of reflexivity of the sort I mention above, which builds its audience through recognition of the conventions of its "imagined community." After all, the artworks that precede the *Panneaux*, that break up lines of direct historical filiation through the framework of the discard, demonstrate the impossibility of a "Belgian Pop art" But as the *Panneaux* fit Broodthaers's use of mussel- and eggshells into the framework of the pristine modernist canvas, they infect its utterly "reflexive" pure space, making it only as self-determined as it is parasitical. The critique of modernism that they perform is both insistently local and perpetually laughing, for Broodthaers's audience would have to admit not only to its "Belgian" collective identity, but to the aesthetic handicap that identity imposes.

At the moment of their encounter in 1962, Piero Manzoni presented Broodthaers as a signed and certified work of art—a "joke"-like artwork if ever there was one.<sup>9</sup> But the more complex reading of Manzoni's work performs a strong critique of historical agency, and along with it a reconceptualization of authorship. Manzoni's work breaks with the kind of uninterrupted, uncorruptible physical immediacy, resolutely outside commodification, that served as the basis of a (largely American) model of authorship, as described in Robert Rauschenberg's retrospective discussion of his time at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s: "I could have gone on painting with my hands, I think, and making messes forever because I really loved painting. I guess the physicality of my personality was emerging, and so I had to paint with my hands. I couldn't stand a

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<sup>8</sup> See the first few sentences of the interview by Jean-Michel Vlaeminckx, "Entretien avec Marcel Broodthaers, in *Degré Zero* 1 (Brussels, 1965): "Marcel Broodthaers, vous êtes Belge. Vous faites du Pop...Ouelles sont, d'après vous, les origines du pop'art?"

<sup>9</sup> On February 25, 1962, Manzoni signed Broodthaers, making him a *Sculture viventi* (*Living Sculpture*), a transformation authenticated by Manzoni's "Certificate of Authenticity No 71." See Michael Compton, "In Praise of the Subject," in Marcel Broodthaers, ed. Marge Goldwater (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1991), 21.

brush coming between me and the canvas. Naturally I cleaned my ‘brushes,’ which were my hands, on my clothes”<sup>10</sup> As radical as Rauschenberg’s practice was—and as influential for emerging European artists—his model for authorship in the 1950s could not have been more neo-Pollockian or, by 1960, more obsolete, as Manzoni’s practice would demonstrate.

In 1961, Manzoni began covering his canvas with unbaked bread rolls. The use of bakery goods radically modified Manzoni’s two-year series of *Achromes*, “colorless,” unpainted canvases. Instead of preparing his canvas with gesso or kaolin and then creasing, pleating, pockmarking, scraping, or pebbling it, he piled on tight, constipated rows of small, doughy buns, coated them in kaolin, and let them signify the “achrome”—the absence of color, but also the artist’s own signature series. In place of the restraint inherent in working the canvas itself, Manzoni offers bread rolls, an outlandish accumulation and accretion that both hides and ornaments the canvas. The shift, more surprising than it at first appears, was wildly productive. Manzoni’s earlier *Achromes* seem to demonstrate only the canvas’s resilience to the artist’s rude tests. When he pleated and bunched the canvas, he emphasized its suppleness; when he combined it with cotton wadding stitched together in quilt fashion, he reiterated the grid structure fundamental to modernist painting. But when he introduces *pane* onto the surface of his canvas, this testing abruptly ends. From the moment of that initial Freudian joke, the *Achromes* become noticeably looser, weirder, perverse, and even, at times, explicitly flamboyant: the cotton wadding of 1960 is treated in lurid cobalt chloride in 1961, while backgrounds are suddenly painted scarlet, vivid blue, and chartreuse, enhancing the snowy, whiskery fiberglass fur or poodle-like pelts attached to the canvas. The qualitative shift that took place in 1961 with the introduction of little bread rolls consists precisely in covering up the canvas’s materiality. At last, the *Achrome* provides a means of perverting—rather than proving—the canvas’s resilience. In this way Manzoni sets up a kind of antiheroics of painting that is uniquely capable of unraveling the painting’s authority. By performing his antiheroics with a banal stuff of daily life—dough—he drags his canvas down into something even below the quotidian.

Bread rolls are by no means merely or even primarily “Italian”; they do not signify nationality in a manner comparable to Broodthaers’s *Moules Œufs Frites Pots Charbon* series. Manzoni’s obsession with the commodification of the somatic has to be read against Italy’s postwar struggle for solvency and economic independence. It is an obsession that extends well beyond the *Achrome*. In works such as *Fiato d’artista* (Artist’s Breath: deflated balloons pinned to wood panels bearing on a lead seal the title of the work and the artist’s name), *Merda d’artista*

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Rose, *Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 23, cited in Helen Molesworth, “Betore Bed,” in *October* 63 (1993). Jacques Charier has mentioned in an interview (2001) that Rauschenberg was one of the most influential artists among those whose works Broodthaers encountered in the mid-1960s.





Piero Manzoni. *Achrome*, 1962

(carefully labeled tins of “artist’s shit”), and *Uova con impronta* (signed and dated boxes for eggs that bear the artist’s thumbprint), Manzoni continually fabricates art out of packaging emptiness and relates that commodified emptiness to the body. Objects of no value—empty eggshells, deflated balloons, shit—signify worthlessness but also extend the body into the art object and its packaging. Yet it is the artist’s “extended” body as a packaging and labeling system that creates the self-sustaining, value-generating system of distribution. In this, Manzoni does more than point to art as something whose value rests in its immateriality; he parodies the notion of the commodity system as an ‘unnatural’ evil. Even the infinitely generative capacity of the commodity merely augments the human, the corporeal, the organic.

The parodic element in Manzoni’s work becomes even sharper when read against “national” goals. In the late 1950s, Italy attempted to shift from an agrarian economy to the competitive late-industrial global arena. Manzoni’s work, pointing out the “emptiness” of packaging, appears almost obscenely antinationalist. Arguably, the bread roll *Achromes* are the most forceful of these parodies inasmuch as they evoke a system of manual production that has been subjected to industrial standards of uniformity and efficiency. On the painter’s canvas, where manual skill is normally displayed, Manzoni gives us manual production that

simulates industrial production. What is more, the gridded uniformity and “perfection” of his bread rolls knot together the anality of obsessive kneading and the orality of consumption.

Manzoni, much like Broodthaers, was not making antinationalist work: he made work that jokes. A joke’s success, as Freud explains, lies in its ability to protect itself from being taken “seriously,” as if being said “straight.” This is why jokes cannot be explained without losing their funniness. But while Freud defines a joke’s meaning as lying in its *form*, he acknowledges the way in which the nature of the joke handicaps the jokester: “It seems as though...the *other* person has the decision passed over to him on whether the joke-work has succeeded in its task—as though the self did not feel certain on its judgment on the point” (italics added).<sup>11</sup> There is, in joke-telling, an excess of the dialogic. But it is humor that works to undermine the traditional vectors of sense-making: “I mean x” is emptied from language itself, so that another meaning, ‘y,’ can operate, *without* having been authorized by “I.” “I” gets off scot-free (his reputation as a joketeller enhanced), while the audience is exactly what is named by the phrase “in on the joke.” The decision that is passed over to a second person as to whether a joke is “funny” robs the joker of his sovereignty.

But besides being “in on it,” the audience is formed by the joke: the audience is comprised of whatever individual or collective gets the joke’s meaning. When Henri Bergson set out to define laughter (just six years after Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*), he too argued that it “appears to stand in need of an echo.... Our laughter is always the laughter of a group.” But he soon qualified the makeup of that group: laughter’s “secret freemasonry, or even complicity” turns out to mean that we laugh only “with other laughers, real *or imaginary*” (italics added).<sup>12</sup> There is nothing sacred or necessary about the *reality* of laughter’s community. According to Bergson, it can just as well be *imaginary*. What counts is that the community exists as a set of boundaries in the mind of the subject; that it creates its own rules of exclusion and inclusion. To make his point, Bergson resorted to this anecdote: “A man who was once asked why he did not weep at a sermon, when everybody else was shedding tears, replied ‘I don’t belong to the parish!’ What that man thought of tears would be still more true of laughter”<sup>13</sup> What counts in Bergson’s anecdote is that he does not describe merely ephemeral groups: laughter can suggest even a community as formal as that of a parish.

The resurgence of comic structures in artworks of the 1960s need not be regarded as innocently playful or defensive, though they might be that as well.

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<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious” (1905) In *Sigmund Freud*, Standard Edition, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 176.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwall (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1 999), 12 (first published by Macmillan and Co. [London], 1911).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.



They represent Belgianness and Italianness rather straightforwardly, and yet also jokingly. The paradox leads to several hypotheses. One is that the construction of national identity in postwar Europe, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, was a nervous process. As even the notion of a local material culture was being voided by the increasingly global face of postwar consumption, Broodthaers's and Manzoni's work reacts almost like mimetic echoes. They riff on "emptiness" in a way that parodies the celebration of the supposedly "heroic and original"—universal and internationalist, in modernist art. Yet even as they maintain the blankness of the canvas or the regularity of its grid, they also insist on a notion of the national become fatuous, corny, all-but-obsolete. The send-up of emptiness and the send-up of the national turn out to be mutually dependent, even entwined. The "snapshots" of material culture in Broodthaers's and Manzoni's works—the artisanal backwardness of Broodthaers's *objets ménagers* or the clichés invoked by his *moules-frites*; Manzoni's obsessively kneaded and gridded pane—show off the hackneyed quality of their signifiers and the obsolescence of what they signify. The "national" becomes empty, and "emptiness" becomes packaging. It falls to Manzoni to underscore the unbearable truth of packaging—the manner in which it is merely an extension of our most bodily selves.

And it falls to Broodthaers to refine the form peculiar to jokes. Joking relieves the artist of sovereign responsibility for a work's meaning by extending that responsibility to an "imagined community." To laugh, as Bergson writes, the group has to be "real or imaginary": even if the entity is unreal, it must exist in the imaginary of the laughers. A deadpan work like the *Fémur* calls this contingent, utterly unreal group into being, "as though the self did not feel certain on its judgment." It waits for this group to assemble in order to come into being; as with a joke, the audience's recognition is necessary for the *Fémur* to function as a work of art. Yet there is little, if anything, that is anticipatory about Broodthaers's wooden chairs and iron casseroles. These objects are antiquated, bygone. They represent a pastness to the identities they configure, and they transmit that pastness to the "group" they name. They anticipate collectivity, imagine it, but they also undermine it by suggesting that the "unity" to which one might now belong has already passed by.

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