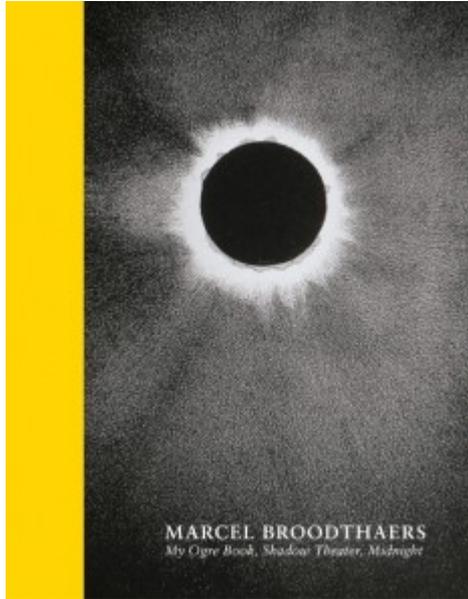


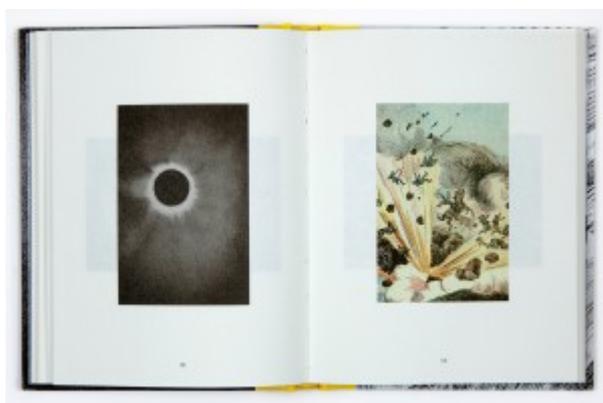
Midnight Sun: Marcel Broodthaers and the Art of the Occult

written by Joseph Houlihan | March 4, 2016



My Ogre Book, Shadow Theater, Midnight by Marcel Broodthaers
Siglio Press, 2015
160 pages – [Silgio](#) / [Amazon](#)

Marcel Broodthaers first published *My Ogre Book*, an assemblage of poetic text fragments, in 1957. The content, gothic, like chapters from an unknown fairy tale, recall a historic folklore and occult fascinations, the poetry of the Romantics, the poetry of the Symbolists, Mallarmé, Nerval. While the form, almost an Objectivist catalog, shows the influence of modernity. This interplay, between futurism and traditional themes of folklore, persists across the whole of Broodthaer's work, and continues to influence the aesthetics of experiment today.



Just republished by Siglio, *My Ogre Book* introduces a sensational new Marcel Broodthaers anthology, that also includes his photo assemblage *Shadow Theater* and the poetry collection *Midnight*.

Communicating Vessels

Born in Belgium in 1924, Broodthaers became affiliated with the official Surrealist group in the 1940s. His work incorporated found objects and assemblage, emphasizing the hermetic. *My Ogre Book*, describes a dark world, reflecting Andre Breton's exhortation: "I demand the profound, veritable *occultation* of surrealism."

"If you look at yourself too much in the glass," my mother said, "you will see the devil and become just like him."/Along the beveled edges of the mirror, I saw two times two eyes supine heading out over a glass raft." (Broodthaers, "At the Adventure")

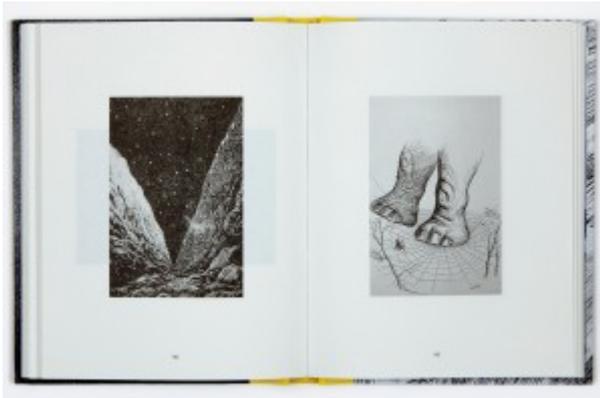
The surrealist project was founded in communicating vessels. It was an aesthetic based on interrogating our wells of inspiration. Breton wrote admiringly of Robert Desnos, who, early in their experiments of automatic writing, was able to enter the deepest trances. Desnos famously read palms before his execution in a Nazi concentration camp. Denying the eminence of technological authoritarian reality even at his death.

Automatism is inherently performative. And the movement towards automatism, soothsaying, demon possession, the out-of-body experience, diablerie, occupies a place between literary technique and social experiment.

In automatism, Surrealism builds on centuries of tradition and experiment, especially spiritualism and the occult. In his 1933 essay, "The Automatic Message," Breton discusses this history, but also seeks to build on the exploration. He finds the regenerative and hallucinatory aspect of automatism the power of the mediumistic frenzy, "Lautreamont and Rimbaud did not see what they described...They threw themselves into the dark recesses of being; they heard indistinctly, and with no more comprehension than any of us had the first time we read them, certain realized and realizable works."

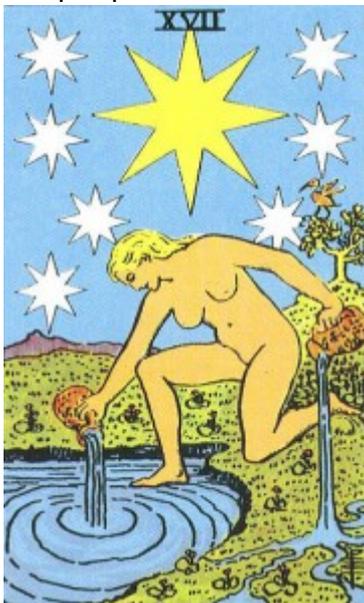
Assemblage

Building off the notion of automatism, Broodthaers employed cut-up and assemblage techniques throughout all of his work. *Shadow Theater* is a series of found images juxtaposed in series.



Tarot

In 1944, Breton wrote his pacifist masterpiece *Arcanum 17* on the isolated Gaspé peninsula of Quebec.



He meditated on tarot and the 17th major Arcanum, the star: “Melusina after the scream, Melusina below the bust, I see her scales mirrored in the autumn sky...The left hand stream.— I burn and I rouse, I carry out fire’s bidding. The wind will never cease peeling misty rings off the trembling vases of fire I well from...The right hand stream.— I bewitch and I multiply. I obey the freshness of water, capable of erecting its palaces of mirrors in one drop and I’m heading for the earth which loves me.”

In *Midnight*, Broodthaers offers another vision: “The star is pure in the

constellation of the black cat/ On the island of the Watch the birds circle/
On the island of the Damned I disgorge blue, it hurts." (Broodthaers, "The
Star")

The Acéphale

Other early avant-gardists, especially the Acéphale, Bataille, and Leiris, strike a similar note. Investigating the political and cultural implications of frenzy and ritual.

The Acéphale was a French Avant Garde, based around a magazine of the same name. The group had strong occultist leanings. They incorporated many traditions of historical "secret sects," Merce Eliade describes the way they held meetings at the site of oak trees struck by lightning; the group famously sought to participate in human sacrifice, and was hampered only by the fact that each member volunteered his body for decapitation.

Bataille wrote extensively about the role of sacrifice in human history. He connected the burning of an offering, the destruction of a fetish idol, with a symbolic death. Through ritualistic sacrifice, our erotic compulsion towards death (death drive) becomes understandable. We're able to experience ecstasy, the sensation of dissolution and continuity, in spite of an otherwise discontinuous world experience.

The Grotesque

"The Ogre is in the forest/ No one can catch sight of him/ Suddenly/
there are no more leaves/ on account of the wind/ One sees the Ogre well/
he is on his knees/ giant of misery.../his sack overflows with little
peasants/ It is winter/ The Ogre at the bottom of the ravine dreams
before Love/ Each one awaits him with a solid pitchfork." (Broodthaers,
"End of the Ogre")

Mikhail Bakhtin famously identified the emancipatory aspect of carnival in the writings of Rabelais. This concept clarifies much of the seemingly paradoxical traditionalism of certain themes in avant gardes.

So while folklore, occultism, and carnivari appears to promote a certain kind of traditionalism, its represents an alternate history, a folk tradition outside the confines of the formal political and religious power structure.

The grotesque of ogres is a defining theme of carnival. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque celebrates corporality. Excessive bawdy, solipsistic, and scatological humor promotes a material understanding of the world. Celebrating and exaggerating the excesses of bodies, is regenerative, and ultimately communitarian.

Fairy Tale

“Shattered eyes a Gothic king/ strides without end the paving stones/ of an ivory cathedral./ Clouds and death embroider his costume.”
(Broodthaers, “A Dream”)

By the mid-century, the performance of fairy-tale became a site of major investigation. Surrealist Leonora Carrington wrote epic fantasias, largely speaking the language of fable and fairy-tale. San Francisco scene poet Helen Adam interrogated folk-traditions through various genres; including magic incantations, and ballads.

These fascinations highlight the ambivalent connection between folk-traditions and avant gardes. While many folk traditions were traditionally in the service of power structures, artists also saw these practices as alternatives. This is not to say the occult is inherently emancipatory. It has certainly been used in the service of continued exploitation. The Salvadoran author Horacio Castellanos Moya writes a scathing critique of the country’s Fascist dictator Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez in *Tyrant Memory*, calling him a “Nazi Warlock.” So while the occult may not be inherently emancipatory, occult practices present the possibility of authority outside of the traditional structures of church and state.



Painting by Hermann Nitsch

The Viennese Actionists, like Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Hermann Nitsch, are brilliant interrogators of the ambivalent connections between avant-gardes, folk, and religious rituals. Hermann Nitsch stages elaborate happenings, “Orgien Mysterien Theater,” complete with ceremonial slaughter and sacrifice.

Through the performance of these ritualistic reveries, he highlights the way compulsions towards ecstasy manifest inside and outside traditional structures of authority.

Midnight Sun

As a sad postscript, David Bowie passed away since I began work on this article. The release of his last studio record *Blackstar*, crystallizes a lot of the aesthetic tension between futurism and folk-traditions in avant-gardism. The *Blackstar* music video reiterates many of these avant-garde fascinations with esotericism.

It begins with an image of a midnight sun. The Marcel Broodthaers collection uses this same image on the cover. The midnight sun was an important symbol for alchemists, setting the stage for portentous alignments. From there, we see a young woman approach a spacesuit. Inside the spacesuit, is a jeweled skull, suggesting the deification of Major Tom. Major Tom has ascended to the heavens and become a god.



After this, the skull is revered, and worshippers whip themselves into ritualistic frenzy around the object.



It's a terrific video, and it captures so much of the folk aesthetics that persist through avant-gardes.



Broodthaers captures the Surrealist fascination with esoteric traditions. And in his experimentation reflects a desire to establish a language outside the traditional hierarchies. The futurism of Bowie and Broodthaers arrives with the notion of the possibility of alternate worlds. In *The Man Who Fell To Earth* and *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie offered visions of alternate possibilities. So that even the very traditional notion of a messenger fallen from the sky has the power to challenge our systems of control. Skewering the status quo, celebrating alternative visions and the plurality of worlds represents the critical core of poetics. And Broodthaers champions this tradition.