IT IS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT, in a political landscape where deliberate confusion—alternative facts and fake news—holds sway, to determine precisely where the boundary between the artificial and the actual is to be drawn. Yet this seemingly contemporary condition was foreseen almost half a century ago by Marcel Broodthaers, who made this dialectic into the very substance of his practice: “When a work of art finds its condition in lies or deception, is it then still a work of art? I do not have the answer.” In a sense, this fundamental uncertainty is intrinsic to the endless staging and restaging of his own work that was exemplified most famously by Broodthaers’s museum series—the celebrated Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Arôges, 1968–72—and, in particular, his various décors, as he called them. Starting with Catalogue-Catalogus, 1974, these functioned as “retrospectives” in which Broodthaers curated constantly shifting iterations of his output, just as he tended to reedit and recombine his films for various screenings. So what are we to make, today, of an artist/disssembler who was constantly reshuffling the deck, rearranging the alphabet, or rescrabling the puzzle, to use a few of his favorite metaphors?

These were some of the questions prompted by “Marcel Broodthaers: A Retrospective,” which was on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this past spring and at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid this past winter. The exhibition provided a welcome opportunity to rethink the artist’s oeuvre in our present context, and its implications were sometimes surprising. For a while now, we have relied on three readings of the artist’s practice, which, to a degree, are supplemental: Broodthaers as Allegorist of the Avant-Garde (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh), Broodthaers as Counter-Genre of the Collector (Douglas Crimp), and Broodthaers as Postmedia Artist (Rosalind Krauss). Although they diverge on some significant points, what these readings all have in common is their reliance on Walter Benjamin’s critique of modernity. But just as the chaos and confusion of today’s politics seem to have outstripped the most somber predictions of the Frankfurt School, Broodthaers’s work now seems to resonate less with the utopian dreams of the industrialized modernity of Benjamin’s day than with the fantasies of an automated, postlabor future ushered in by the digital networks of neoliberal capitalism.

In Madrid, where the exhibition unfolded across a series of windowless rooms at the junction between the old and new wings of the museum, two works, Monsieur Teste, 1975, and Figures of Wax (Jeremy Bentham), 1974, were installed in isolation, in a stimulating coincidence. The former, named for the famous character invented by Paul Valéry, consists of a mechanical doll reading a copy of L’Express while seated in front of an enormous poster of a tropical island; the latter is a film that provides a one-sided interview with the “Auto-Icon” of Jeremy Bentham, a somewhat uncanny artifact consisting of a wax head affixed to the philosopher’s actual skeleton, which is dressed in his clothes. Prepared according to Bentham’s instructions after his death, the figure is now preserved in a cabinet at University College London. Figures of Wax includes a tongue-in-cheek caveat: “Any identification with reality is entirely incidental and not the intention of the author.” But of course it was precisely this ambiguous relation to reality that was at the core of Broodthaers’s work.

Indeed, there is no doubt that Broodthaers’s critique operated precisely on the level of identification: One of his main allegorical devices was a Regency mirror, on which an eagle perched. This, Broodthaers warned us, is a “mirror of misunderstanding,” which tricks us into mistaking an imaginary scene for a real one. (Yes, he was an avid reader of Jacques Lacan.) The artist’s work thus remained within the complementary, posthumanist frameworks of psychoanalysis and Marxism—in 1947 he had signed the manifesto of Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire, led by Christian Dotremont—but his dialectics were of an immanent kind. Broodthaers was already fully skeptical of the emancipatory mission of the avant-garde, and he never proposed that there was a simple trapdoor by which one could exit the stage of representation. Instead he would exploit cinema’s main trick: its suspension of disbelief.

But then what of the object in Broodthaers’s practice? Is it a mere prop, a foil for his intertwined interrogations of subjectivity and a mediatized reality? Not quite, but it would be too much to suggest, on the other hand, that the object acquires its own agency. In referring to his Théorie des figures, 1970–71, an ensemble of objects, mostly film props, from the Section cinéma, Broodthaers stated that “the mirror and the pipe [are] submitted to an identical numbering system . . . [and] become interchangeable elements on the stage of a theatre. Their destiny is ruined.” In other words, these objects operate, first and foremost, as images, as representations. But what does it mean to say that their “destiny is ruined”? The fate of any such mass-produced product is to become a commodity fetish, an animistic object dancing of its own accord—a perfect windup doll. At times, Broodthaers seems to purposefully exaggerate this effect. In films in which the mirror and the pipe become the main focus of the camera, the objects sometimes do obtain a life of their own—as in the uncanny footage of a pipe smoking by itself in Céc ne serait pas une pipe (Un film du Musée d’Art Moderne), 1969–71, for example. Yet to understand these objects as fully animated in this way is to ignore the actual, material life of things, and Broodthaers never lets us forget the fact that commodities also always bear the traces of their own exploitation and abuse: They are not only fetishes but used goods. And, as he pointed out, he could never have achieved this complex duality “with technological objects, whose singleness condemns the mind to monomania: minimal art, robot, computer.” In the end, it is a confusion between the imaginary and the symbolic, as in Magritte’s The Treachery of Images, 1929, that Broodthaers attempts to stir in the viewer.

This is the very same confusion that is produced by the figures in Monsieur Teste and Figures of Wax. And it is for this reason that these two works could be seen as paradigmatic for Broodthaers’s practice. For what is an automaton, after all, if not the physical embodiment and visual image of “bad faith,” the “idea of inventing something insincere,” with which the artist famously began his career as a visual artist? In a corner of the gallery, Broodthaers’s Teste silently moves his head back and forth: Is he reading the bourgeois tabloid and buying into its average dreams of exotic paradise (spectacularly present in the tropical backdrop behind him), or is he endlessly shaking his head to say no? Writing in the 1890s, Valéry originally presented Teste as an emblematic figure of rational self-control, a typically—indeed profoundly—bourgeois professional who, as the poet put it, seemed to have “killed his puppet.” Some twenty years later, Walter Benjamin would return to Valéry’s curious brainchild, suggesting that Teste represented a missed encounter with history. For Benjamin, this seemingly unremarkable creature represented the negation of everything human, a subject “who is ready to cross the historical threshold marking the dividing line between the harmoniously educated, self-sufficient individual and the technician and specialist who is ready to assume a place within a much larger plan.” Yet Valéry never answered the revolutionary call to collective action, and his spiritual automaton was therefore doomed to remain a private person, compounding the “melancholy secret” of Teste.

Today, we might interpret Teste in another manner: If the character still seems to recall some “larger plan,” it is no longer the industrialized rationalism of fin-de-siècle modernity but rather that of the “general intellect,” as the informational and collective forms of cognitive labor driving the post-Fordist system of global capitalism have been termed. As postautonomist theory claims, the valorization of the general intellect by capital has led to the expropriation of our own mental faculties. The next step in this process would be the implementation of artificial intelligence to replace not only manual but intellectual labor.

But first, human subject and digital object must learn to see eye to eye—suggesting a looming confrontation that is already being staged in the work of some contemporary artists. In a recent exhibition at the Neuer Berliner
La Fontaine’s moral fable “The Crow and the Fox”) has been printed. The work, in other words, sets up a confrontation between what Kittler called the “discourse network of 1800,” which sought to “alphabetize” the new bourgeois subjects of the emergent nation-state through the assignment of specific writing exercises, and the “discourse network of 1900,” in which the writing machine itself usurped the authorial voice of Romantic poetry, blocking its supposed open channel of communication with nature. In the latter structure, signification was no longer grounded within an organic, “signature” style, but was an effect of a particular assemblage of discrete signs; that is to say, by 1900 there was no longer any truth outside a “theory of figures.”

Bad faith itself is rooted in this inscription of the modern subject within a symbolic system—like Broodthaers, Kittler read Lacan. Jean-Paul Sartre, who also had much to say on the subject, warned us that an existence lived under the condition of bad faith is a precarious one, or, as he called it, “metastable.” The English editor of Being and Nothingness claims that this term was invented by Sartre, but it was derived from physics and chemistry, where it is used to describe an intermediary, stationary phase in a dynamic system—a liquid crystal, say, or a viscous fluid. More recently, it has been applied to cybernetic systems, referring to the moment when a circuit does not revert to zero or one, but gets stuck in a state of unstable equilibrium that is neither true nor false. For a computer, a metastable condition is similar to the predicament of Buridan’s ass, which starved because it could not decide which pile of hay to eat: It is a technological glitch that might result in unpredictable behavior.

Broodthaers never used an explicitly cybernetic language, but he often stated his wish to disrupt circuits of communication, producing noise within systems of information. In part, his perspective was determined by a well-established tradition of ideological critique and a suspicion of the manipulative powers of the mass media. In 1968, for instance, he expressed his sympathy for “the dishonesty of these extraordinary means that we have at our disposal: the press, radio, black [sic] and color television” in the name of “revolutionary critique.”

Broodthaers was equally skeptical, however, of the territorializing drive of the avant-garde and was therefore concerned with keeping the spacing between signs as well as the translation between media open-ended. And yet the control mechanisms of cybernetics were developed precisely to close such gaps, such moments of indecision, in communication. Thus Broodthaers’s work was not only located on the border of past fantasies—avant-garde as well as mainstream—of democratized media but was also hemmed in by a dire future of digitization, where technology would erase the very concept of the medium and cause, in Kittler’s words, “absolute knowledge [to] run as an endless loop.” Implicit in Broodthaers’s practice, then, was a vision of a posthuman future in which the digital object has become sovereign, and all that is left of the artist is not the manual trace of a signature but the computational product of an algorithm. Broodthaers’s bad faith, it seems to me, offers a useful antidote to the good faith of those who would embrace the sincerity of a cybernetic loop in which subjectivity and brand become one.

NOTES

1. Figures of Wax was shot “between the elections” in the UK following the oil crisis and the collapse of the gold standard. These dual events ushered in the reign of neoliberal politics and a financialized economy that caused speculation to drive the art market to untold heights. But in 1974, the signs on the wall were still those of marked-down products in shopwindows and deflated prices on the board of the stock exchange. In October 1971, in the wake of the “Nixon shock,” which installed a financial regime of freely floating fiat currencies, the Musée d’Art Moderne had been threatened with bankruptcy, prompting its Section Financière to issue the sale of gold ingots (stamped with an eagle imprint). But, of course, this was a losing proposition, and to preempt further speculation, the “Draft for the Purchase Agreement” of 1973, following the final installation of the fictitious museum, sought to include a provision that there be “no accumulation of wealth from capital gains.”

2. In various texts, such as “Comme de beurre dans un sandwich” (Like Butter in a Sandwich, 1965), Broodthaers employs the notion of bad faith. A classic definition of bad faith is found in Sartre’s Being and Nothingness, where it relates to the inability of an individual to fully identify with his professional function, resulting, according to Sartre’s famous example, in the automaton-like movements of waiters in a café.