

ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE EXHIBITION

LECTURE

Art and Utopia. Action Restricted

JUNE, THURSDAY 3rd, AT 19.30 h

By **Jean-François Chevrier**, curator of the exhibition

Convent dels Àngels (c/ dels Àngels, 7).
Free admission. Limited number of seats.

COURSE

Mallarmé effect

The Poetical language in Modern Art Utopias

JUNE, FRIDAY 4th

By **Jean-François Chevrier**, curator of the exhibition

Previous inscription. Limited number of seats.
The course will be in French.

Preinscription:

3 - 21 MAY

Further information:

Tel. 93 412 08 10,
from Monday to Friday, from 10 to 14h
servcult@macba.es / www.macba.es

TO "WHOMEVER..." Jean-François Chevrier

1 Many art historians, discussing the origins of abstraction, have studied the symbolist background of modernism. Mallarmé's work seems central to this reconstitution. In the 60's, the tendency was rather to take Mallarmé out of symbolism, showing how his thought went far past the aesthetics or the ideology of the literary and artistic movement situated in the 1880's. Already in the years around 1910, numerous participants in or observers of avant-garde art had attached Mallarméan poetics to the most advanced forms of post-Cézannian art, and cubism in particular. We cannot now reexamine the effects of that poetics upon modern art – the object of this exhibition – without taking into consideration these two moments of the interpretation called "modernist" in the 1960's and 1910. But we have also to take into account what has been omitted or marginalized from that interpretation. In order to do this, it is not sufficient to invoke Symbolism as an alternative system. We have to make an attempt to single out the exceptional "cases," the most significant ones. Odilon Redon, for example, had been almost systematically neglected by the theoreticians of modernism. Yet, Mallarmé was not only a close friend of Manet, he was also very interested indeed by the suggestive art of Redon, whose plentiful echoes can be traced during the entire twentieth century.

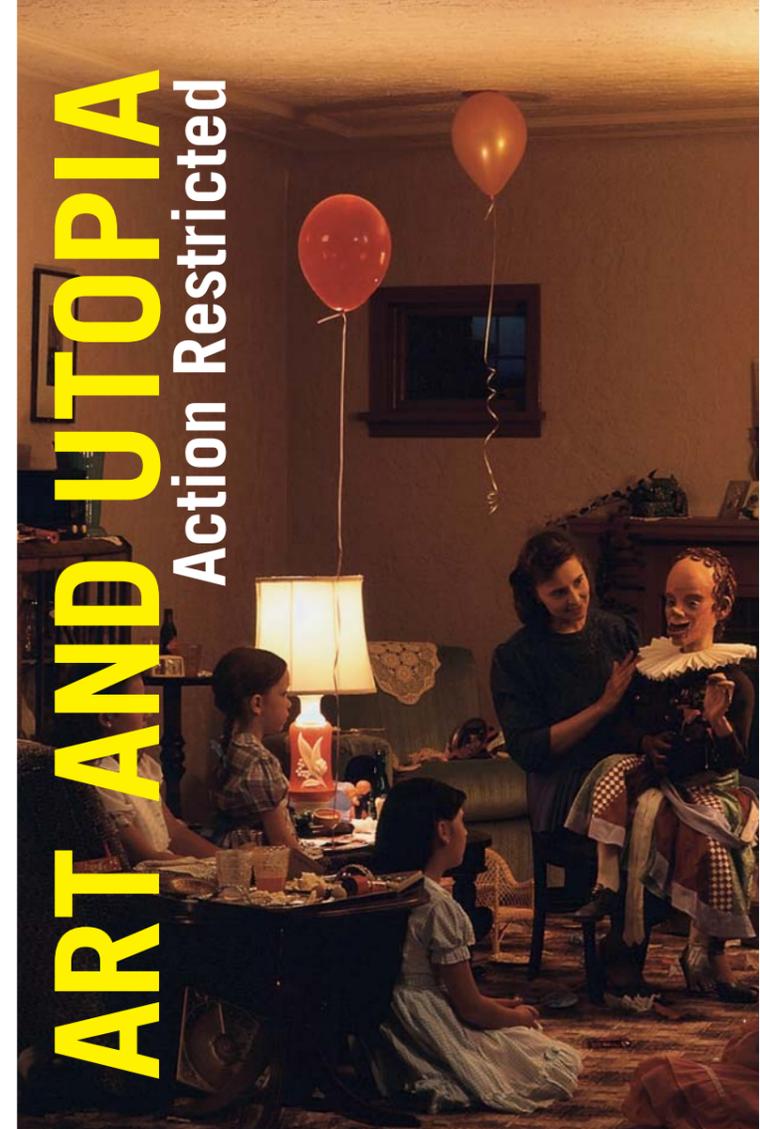
2 The effects of Mallarméan poetics cannot be reduced to the myth or the legend of a poet in search of the absolute, even if this image benefits from a long tradition invented by the nineteenth century in the flush of the first Romanticism. The effect of this poetics depends above all on its extraordinary openness, of which the modernist theory represents only a limited interpretation. Mallarmé is not the herald of the "pure poetry" celebrated by Valéry. However effective, the modernist thesis of a poetry that would have as an essential or exclusive object language itself reduces and stultifies the poetics of Mallarmé. In reality, the force of this poetics has been to reveal, after the great romantic explosion, a tension between the idea and the actuality. This tension is only partially reflected in the opposition between the ideal and the daily. The Mallarméan idea is an interpretation of the power of abstraction of language concretized in poetic writing. It is summed up in the famous saying: "I say: a flower! And besides the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from any bouquet." But we mustn't get it wrong, Mallarmé loved flowers. The poetic flower is not only a rhetorical fact, it is a synthesis of the experience of all bouquets." Actuality itself we have to understand in the sense in which Émile Zola speaks of "actualism," referring to impressionism. It is also for Mallarmé a dimension of experience which sends us back to the misunderstanding of the subject and of its own impossibility of defining itself entirely by the conventional forms of the daily. Mallarméan actuality is a criticism of the daily and of the présence à soi. "Misinformed, anyone who would proclaim himself his own contemporary."

3 The effects of Mallarméan poetics have also had a negative result. The criticism of actualism in the name of the idea could be interpreted in the sense of a going past the present and of a utopia, but it has also appeared as a retreat of the artist into his ivory tower. The avant-gardes (all the "isms" of art since futurism) have been tempered to oppose to Mallarmé the idea of an immediate projection into the future, a sort of transfiguration, a utopian irradiation of the present. These esthetic and political utopias have often developed through an interpretation of the model of the "total work of art" (the Gesamtkunstwerk) Wagner put forth. Mallarmé did not believe in the Wagnerian solution. His scepticism results from his conviction that the nihilism stemming from the death of God cannot be surmounted by the reconstitution of a belief system as the foundation of a new community. This scepticism is the irreducible condition of a utopian thought which constantly reinvents rupture, against the temptation of an imaginary closure. Mallarméan poetics is thus the critical measure of avant-garde utopias. It implies a viewpoint of anthropological reconciliation (the human community ought to be able to get along without the idea of God) but each human being in his singularity multiplies "a singularity constructed on the multiplicity of internal pulsions", each individual ceaselessly experiences his own finitude and the dissatisfaction resulting from it. This individual experience is the basis "stripped of its theological foundation" of an interaction between the one and the many, the individual and the crowd. Utopia tends to resolve this interaction in an imaginary community. For Mallarmé, the community remains in the future, the artist glimpses it in the flash of poetry, the "lightning streak" which illuminates the dark depths of the virtual. The great tradition of "concrete art" in the twentieth century, whatever utopias have underlain it, depends on this possibility of actualizing a virtual richness.

4 The avant-garde utopias never stopped mobilizing the leftover mythologies, or, in a more ambitious mode, the perspective of a new mythology. André Breton sidelines Mallarmé, who inspired him greatly in the beginning, when he was imagining the building of a modern myth. Before surrealism, for Apollinaire and the futurists, the modern myth was summed up by the figure of an Icarus who triumphed over gravity and his destiny. The human being, that is to say, man without woman, was going finally to be able to transfigure his flesh and his finitude by projecting himself into a mechanical Eden. But Mallarmé had already reduced the polytheism of the "Gods of Yore" to a solar drama of death and resurrection. This reduction corresponds to a quest for sobriety opposed to romantic eloquence and great utopian bursts of energy. It is a dissolution of myths, an evacuation of iconography and of the accessories of mythological representation in favor of the fundamental elements of an action limited to the scene of writing. For the attraction of myth there is substituted a table, a sheet of white paper (the model of the "empty paper" where the poem is formed and sketched out), the pen and inkwell ("with its drop, in the depths, of shadows relative to something existing"). This scene of writing is the "theatre of our mind." It's the revelation of a matricial emptiness responding to the nothingness of abolished beliefs. After the Second World War, in 1947, Artaud radicalized the Mallarméan position by refusing to participate in the esoteric exhibition organized by Breton. The person who had, in the 1930's, imagined bringing about the power of revolutionary anarchy in a "theatre of cruelty," concentrates from now on all his poetic action in what is traced and punched out. Occupied with "remaking a body," he incarnates the concrete poetry of Mallarmé in an experience of suffering like a travail of the flesh. This actualization of "limited action" separates itself from all the appeals to an irrational depth, formerly evoked by fascist ideologies and nazi terror. With the precise and specific violence of Artaud, Mallarméan sobriety is accomplished in the exorcism of terror.

5 Around Mallarméan poetics, there has been a great deal of discussion about art as a substitute for religion or the sketching out of a new communitarian link; about enigma and the occult, the value or legitimacy of "obscurity," the mysterious and the marvelous, secrecy, circles and secret societies. But modern utopias take into account the great number and individuality of the mass, thinking norms, standards, prototypes. Adapting themselves to the criteria of industrial society and to the triumph of mechanization, utopias have chosen to be constructive and productive. Marcel Duchamp was the one to transpose Mallarméan mystery into the image and the metaphorical circuits of the machine. In so doing, the creator of the Grand Verre, an expert in mystifications of all sorts, never stopped adjusting little anti-utopian machines, proposing an ironic version of fin-de-siècle eclecticism opposed by the ideologues of "Modern Style." So he has been seen as the father of post-modernism. But he is as ill-fitted to this role as is Mallarmé to that of the ancestor of modernism.

6 In reality, what lasts, from Mallarmé to Duchamp, but also, in a longer history, from Baudelaire to Jeff Wall passing through Marcel Broodthaers, is this anarchic freedom of art opposed to the search for a collective style. This freedom was affirmed with the great innovation of literary symbolism, the polymorphism of a literary symbolism, the polymorphism of free verse, in a break with the norms of prosodic tradition. In 1967, George Kubler, the author of the Shape of Time (1962) said this: "When flow and change are ignored, and when development is disregarded, style remains useful as a taxonomic convenience. But wherever the passage of time is under consideration, with its shifting identities and continuous transformations, the taxonomic notion, represented by the term style, becomes irrelevant." That explains why modern art consecrated a mysticism of formal innovation, in the idea of rhythm. Going far past the cadence of productive activity, rhythm "organic or mechanical, but also lyric and cosmic" has been celebrated as the alternative to the project of a Modern Style supposed to have the same capacity of synthesis as the great styles of the past. Unlike Modern Style, rhythm permits us to integrate the anarchic diversity of individual freedoms as well as the game of difference, beginning by sexual difference. Associating poetry to dance and music, rhythm is the condition of a space of language overflowing the spatial fixation of the object and the reification of the image. The mobility of reading set to work in Un Coup de dés manifests the uncertainty and variation principle that characterizes the public aspect of the modern work. Mallarmé admits that this relation participates in "communication," but he adds that the work, rather than forcing attention to itself or supposing a public made to order is addressed to whomever...



JEFF WALL. A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947, 1990 (fragment). ©Jeff Wall, 2004

3 June - 12 September 2004

In 1897, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) published his essay, *Limited Action* (L'action restreinte) in *Divagations* where he describes the limits and the concentration of poetic action. At the end of the nineteenth century, after the death of Victor Hugo, the poet could no longer claim to operate directly in the political arena or even to set himself up as a moral conscience. He could talk about the world, give it a verbal equivalent, but he could not change it. His activity, however, is not contemplative. He realizes an action in a "limited", but boundless, realm which does not belong to him but which he can reevaluate and even redefine. This is the realm of language and language; it is the scene of writing and the space of the book as a "spiritual instrument."

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Plaça dels Àngels, 1
08001 Barcelona
Tel.: 93 412 08 10
Fax: 93 412 46 02
www.macba.es

Museum hours
Weekdays, 11 - 19.30 h
(from June 25th, until 20 h)
Saturdays, 10 - 20 h
Sundays and holidays, 10 - 15 h
Closed on Tuesdays
Monday open

Sponsor:

Communication sponsors:

With the collaboration of:

EPSON®

el Periódico

33

BnF

Forum
BARCELONA
2004

MAC BA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

« Je considère *Un coup de dés* jamais n'abolira le hasard un peu comme le traité de l'art contemporain, fait au dix-neuvième siècle. »

« La liaison de l'image du mot avec le sens du mot, et cette liaison-là avec un objet qui s'appelle livre, correspond pour moi à une démarche contemporaine. Mallarmé a influencé fortement un de nos peintres très importants, à savoir René Magritte, parce que chez lui aussi, la liaison du mot et de l'image joue un rôle essentiel. »

Marcel Broodthaers, 1969

In an era in which progress is measured by information, the book is often related to the newspaper, but it should be differentiated from it in the same way that poetic language is differentiated from the instrumental definition of language as a means of communication and propaganda. In 1921, the Russian poet Ossip Mandelstam echoes Mallarmé when, in the context of a postrevolutionary society and culture, he writes: "Social differences and class antagonisms pale before the new division of people into friends and enemies of the word..."

This exhibition reexamines some key moments in the exchange between art and poetry in the twentieth century until the end of the 1970s. The Mallarmean poetic serves here as a thread for a history of modern art with its hold on language and its dissemination. In March 1970, Marcel Broodthaers,



EUGÈNE DRUET. *Loie Fuller dansant*, ca. 1900



ODILON REDON. *La tentation de Saint Antoine*, 1938



ANTONIN ARTAUD. *L'Inca*, 1946. © CNAC/MANAM Dist. RMN, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2004



PABLO PICASSO. *Bouteille, journal et verre sur une table (Un coup de Thé)*, 1912. © Succession Picasso / VEGAP, Barcelona, 2004



MAX ERNST. *Sun over the Forest*, 1927. © Max Ernst, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2004



JEFF WALL. *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947, 1990*. © Jeff Wall, 2004

declared: "Mallarmé is the source of contemporary art. He unconsciously invents modern space." Broodthaers was thinking principally about the word constellation set up in *Un coup de dés* (1897). After it was belatedly published in book form in 1914, the poem effectively became the prototype for all investigations into the confluence of poetry, typography and visual art. Appollinaire's *Calligrams*, contemporary with cubist *papiers collés*, the Futurists' *Parole in libertà*, and the *Word as Such* of Russian poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, are derived almost directly from this poem or differentiate themselves from it through a dynamic of avant-garde radicalization. This genealogical thread continues with the emergence of concrete poetry in the 1950s.

Plein air impressionism since Manet and the prismatic structure of post-Cézannean cubist painting represent two poles of the Mallarmean poetic that were already achieved in the sonnet's concentrated form (especially in *Une dentelle s'abolit*) at least ten years before *Un coup de dés*. Braque's and Picasso's cubism was often called "hermetic," as were Mallarmé's poems. Gino Severini speaks of a "divisionism of forms" and a "copenetration of planes" analogous to the task of the word in poetry. The collaboration between Juan Gris and Pierre Reverdy participates in

this bipolarity of plastic writing. Parallel to this, the fantastic of Odilon Redon embodied the idea of suggestion, which defined symbolism in its opposition to impressionist optics as well as to description and literary narration. The promotion of a dream-state imagination in the twentieth century is inscribed in this tension between the optic and the symbolic. Here, collage and montage procedures used by post-cubist constructivism and surrealism, both derived from Dada, achieve historical depth. The dialogue between art and poetry – definitively condensed in Miró's *peintures-poèmes* – also opens onto other forms of visual creation such as photography and film. Rodchenko illustrates Mayakovsky's *Pro Eto* with photomontage, and the abbreviated signs of Paul Klee are akin to the disarticulations of the burlesque. Beyond that abstraction called "geometric," the emphasis on the essential constituents of painting – point, line, plane and color – participates in a speculation on the genesis of form that has much in common with poetic language. With Marcel Duchamp, a Mallarmé admirer and reader of Jules Laforgue, symbolist suggestion found its present form with mechanomorphic irony.

Nevertheless, as Duchamp's extra-pictorial activities indicate, the resonance of the Mallarmean poetic exceeds the genealogies of poetry and the visual arts. Mallarmé was also

interested in music and the arts of theatre and dance while refuting the Wagnerian model of the total work of art. What is more, the speculative demand of *Un coup de dés*' author aimed to reestablish mystery in poetic experience between the vestiges of faith and the ornaments of the everyday. This distance defines the opening of modern space: from the great theatrical reformations of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia to the "activities" of American post-modern dance, by way of the association between the biomechanical and grotesque in Meyerhold set against a symbolist backdrop.

In 1925, the collaboration between Hans Arp and El Lissitzky for *Die Kunstisten* (*Les ismes de l'art, The -isms of Art*, 1924-1909) witnessed a common search for synthesis in modern art at the two extremes of the European continent despite the differences in language. Similarly, the exemplariness of Sophie Taeuber's work is explained by the way it transcends the division between the fine and applied arts, establishing a new continuity between traditionally separated spaces: the studio, the domestic environment, the stage and the dance floor, at human or reduced scale. This corresponds to the most demanding formal investigations in the arts of the everyday in postrevolutionary Russia.

Mallarmé had already imagined an anthropological reconciliation of modern art, liberated from religious representation. But that anchorage was revealed to be just as precarious as the practice of poetry. *À propos* of Georges Braque, Carl Einstein wrote at the beginning of the 1930s: "Art has meaning only in so far as that with it one defines and also creates a vision of the world, a myth. That is why the old optic has for a very long time no longer corresponded to psychic structure." The same author confirmed "the collapse of rationalized man" and denounced the superstitious belief in a utopia of technological progress. In the 1930s, the distressing pressure of the times brought the model of the myth back to the debates as well as to the attempts at a synthesis between rationalist utopias and a somewhat reasoned neoprimitivism, between constructivism and surrealism. Echoing the work of James Joyce, photography became the privileged medium for a poetic anthropology of the quotidian and the sacred (Evans, Sander, Hausmann, Albers, Levitt).

Immediately after the Second World War, Antonin Artaud's return to poetry – after the failure of his theatrical attempts in the 1930s – corresponds to a necessary retightening of the myth into the "limited action" of trace and proferation. In 1933, Artaud had defined Mallarmé's exemplariness: "A nothingness which resolved into the infinite after having passed through the

finite, the concrete and the immediate; a music based on nothingness since one is struck by the sonority of syllables before understanding their meaning." With the war and the concentration camps, nothingness acquired a resonance of terror and inhumanity. Wladyslaw Strzemiński produces his collage series *To my Friends the Jews* and Rossellini realizes the film *Germany, Year Zero*. In those European art circles centered on *art informel*, primitivism is more than ever underwritten by a desire for exorcism (Henri Michaux, Wols, Jean Fautrier). Antoni Tàpies dramatizes Miró's writing. In the United States, what Rauschenberg revives at the end of the 1940s is rather the legacy of Dada and Duchamp transmitted via John Cage, while an American painter living in France, Ellsworth Kelly, continues the trajectory of concrete art.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the augmentation of the Mallarmean corpus (with the publication of the *Correspondance and notes on the Book*) coincides with the introduction of the linguistic model in the humanities and the emergence of the artistic culture of the neo-avant-garde. Roland Barthes describes a common "structuralist activity" in literature, music and the visual arts. The impersonality extolled by Mallarmé ends in "the death of the author": a slogan-formula for conceptual art inspired

by structuralism, some representative pieces of which were selected from various fields and published in *Aspen*, no. 5-6 in 1967. Inspired by information theory and the structure of serial music, Umberto Eco substitutes symbolist suggestion with "the open work," which he defines as "a field of interpretive possibilities." Yet limited action must still differentiate itself from new technological utopias in an era of economic expansion. In *La Ricotta* (1963), Pier Paolo Pasolini makes Orson Welles say: "I am a force of the past." From his retreat on Utopia Parkway in New York City, Joseph Cornell renews the poetic object and the surrealist marvelous, relating them to the symbolist imaginary.

The book, which Mallarmé calls the "total expansion of the letter," continues to be the counter-model to mass media, but it has lost its sacred dimension due to contamination: it has been vulgarized. The inclusive logic summed up by Jean-Luc Godard – "everything should be put in a film" – contrasts with the "archaic silence of the book" (Walter Benjamin) whose plastic equivalent is Tony Smith's black cube, *Die* (1962). Parallel to Broodthaers and his *Peinture littéraires*, another poet-artist, Öyvind Fahlström, proposes a synthesis of the Mallarmean tradition transformed by surrealism (Roberto Matta) and popularized by pop. Detours of play and humor disrupt the confrontation between the pictorial and the conceptual. Dieter Roth's *Munduculum* responds to Piero

Manzoni's fixed *Alphabet*. With his torn posters, Raymond Hains finds proof in the street of a Matisse-Duchamp-Schwitters alliance under the sign of Mallarmé.

At the end of the 1970s René Daniels' painting, *La Muse vénale*, inspired by a poem of Baudelaire, indicates the exhaustion of the cultural alternatives proposed by the neo-avant-gardes. It likewise demonstrates a poetic gaze that knows how to detect the anachronisms of the present. "Misinformed," Mallarmé writes, "anyone who would proclaim himself his own contemporary." Artaud denounced the "lie of being". *Mettere il mondo al mondo* (Alighiero e Boetti) does not participate in the production of material goods or signs: formal invention is a symbolic activity, a concrete work within language. Drawing participates in this activity, as Philip Guston's graphic work since 1967 shows (often realized in collaboration with poets). It is likewise demonstrated by Nancy Spero's 1969 variations on the "written drawings" of Artaud and the *Image-poem* by Gunther Brus in homage to Odilon Redon. In his photographic work since 1978, Jeff Wall revisits the tradition of the painted theatre in order to interpret the conditions of speech and narration, as well as the conditions of any act of poetic expression, in the enigmatic environment of the everyday.