



# ART AND UTOPIA

## Limited Action

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**Dates:** From June 3 to September 12, 2004

**Curator:** Jean-François Chevrier

**Co-Production:** Fòrum Barcelona 2004 - Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

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**"Limited Action" (*L'action restreinte*) is the title of an essay by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) compiled in *Divagations* in 1897. This formulation designates not only the limits but also the focus of poetic action. "Art and Utopia. Action Restricted" reexamines some of the key moments in the exchange between art and poetry in the twentieth century up until the end of the 1970s. The Mallarmean poetic serves here as a medium for a history of modern art in its relation with language and its dispersion.**

***Art and utopia. Limited Action* sets out to rethink the art of the 20th century from a review of the role of the poet Mallarmé in the construction of the pillars of contemporary creation. Throughout the 20th century two apparently antagonistic phenomena occurred, confronting the will for formal experiment with the tradition of trying to educate society in order to transform it. That is the dichotomy between Marx and Mallarmé, between politics and poetry, which, in the context of this exhibition, is considered a solved problem, since there can be an art which is both poetical and political at the same time. The only utopia is in language, in the limited action of the poetic act.**

**The exhibition will include 108 paintings, 36 sculptures, 340 works on paper, 140 photos, 24 films, as well as sound works and rare books, from: Josef Albers, Pierre Albert-Birot, Carl Andre, Guillaume Apollinaire, Adolphe Appia, Hans Arp, Antonin Artaud, Hugo Ball, Giacomo Balla, Rafael Barradas, Ingmar Bergman, Umberto Boccioni, Alighiero Boetti, Georges Braque, André Breton, Marcel Broodthaers, Joan Brossa, Trisha Brown, Günter Brus, Camille Bryen, John Cage, Haroldo de Campos, Francesco Cangiullo, Carlo Carrà, Blaise Cendrars, Clark Coolidge, Joseph Cornell, Edward Gordon Craig, René Daniels, Giorgio de Chirico, Guillermo de Torre,**

Claude Debussy, Robert Delaunay, Sonia Delaunay, Marcel Duchamp, François Dufrêne, Sergueï Eisenstein, Max Ernst, Walker Evans, Alexandra Exter, Öyvind Fahlström, Jean Fautrier, Lyonel Feininger, Morton Feldman, Esther Ferrer, Robert Filliou, Hermann Finsterlin, Robert Flaherty, Simone Forti, Loïe Fuller, Naum Gabo, Gego, Jean-Luc Godard, Eugen Gomringer, Julio González, Dan Graham, Juan Gris, Philip Guston, Hans Haacke, Raymond Hains, Richard Hamilton, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Ferdinand Hodler, Vicente Huidobro, Max Jacob, J.-M. Junoy, Vassily Kandinsky, Ellsworth Kelly, Velimir Khlebnikov, Paul Klee, Alexei Kruchenykh, Frantisek Kupka, Fernand Léger, Helen Levitt, Sol LeWitt, El Lissitzky, René Magritte, Vladimir Maïakovski, Stéphane Mallarmé, Edouard Manet, Piero Manzoni, Filippo T. Marinetti, Roberto Matta, Mikhaïl Matyushin, Paul McCarthy, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Henri Michaux, Joan Miró, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, F. W. Murnau, Bruce Nauman, Jorge Oteiza, Amédée Ozenfant, Pablo Palazuelo, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, Francis Ponge, Lioubov Popova, Ivan Puni, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg, Man Ray, Odilon Redon, Pierre Reverdy, Hans Richter, Roberto Rossellini, Dieter Roth, Olga Rozanova, Joan Salvat-Papasseït, August Sander, Erik Satie, Kurt Schwitters, Gino Severini, Victor Sjöström, Tony Smith, Nancy Spero, Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Yves Tanguy Antoni Tàpies, Joaquín Torres-García, Tristan Tzara, Béla Uitz, Bart van der Leck, Georges Vantongerloo, Jean Vigo, Jeff Wall, Wols, Rémy Zaugg, Ilya Zdanevitch (Iliazd).

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At the end of the nineteenth century, after the death of Victor Hugo, the poet can no longer claim to operate directly in the political arena or even designate himself as moral conscience. He can mention the world, but he cannot change it. His activity, however, is not purely contemplative. He realizes an action in a restricted but essential field, which does not belong to him but which he can reevaluate and even redefine. This is the field of language and languages; it is the space of the book as a "spiritual instrument."

In March 1970, the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, also coming from the poetic field, declared: "Mallarmé is the source of contemporary art. He unconsciously invents modern space." Broodthaers was thinking above all about the word constellation constructed in *Un coup de dés* (1897). After its belated publishing in book form (1914), the poem effectively became the prototype for all investigations in the confluence of poetry, typography and visual art. Appollinaire's calligrams, contemporary with cubist *papiers collés*, the Futurists' words in liberty, and the word as such of Russian poets are derived almost directly from this poem or differentiate themselves from it through a dynamic of avant-garde radicalization. This genealogy 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. At the same time, the fantastic of Odilon Redon turned to the idea of suggestion, which defines symbolism as well as description and literary narration. The dialogue between art and poetry also opens onto other forms of visual creation such as in photography and film. 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.

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 the stage (theatre and dance) while refuting the Wagnerian model of the total work of art. Mallarmé had already imagined an anthropological reconciliation of modern art, liberated from religious representation. But that union was revealed to be just as precarious as the practice of poetry. In the 1930s, the distressing pressure of the times made the model of myth return to the debates as well as attempts at the synthesis between rationalist utopias and a somewhat reasoned neo-primitivism, between constructivism and surrealism.

Immediately after the Second World War, Antonin Artaud's return to poetry corresponds to a necessary strengthening of the myth about the "restricted action" of line and expression. In 1933, Artaud had defined Mallarmé's exemplariness: "Nothingness that is infinitely worked out after having passed through the finite, the concrete and the immediate; music based on nothingness since the sonority of syllables affects one before understanding its meaning." With the war and the concentration camps, nothingness acquired a resonance of terror and the inhuman.

In the 50s and 60s, the publication of *Correspondence* and fragments on the Book occurs concurrent 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". The book, "total expansion of the letter" (Mallarmé), continues to be the countermodel to the media of mass communication, but it has lost its sacred dimension due to contamination: it has been vulgarized. At the end of the 70s René Daniels's painting *La Muse vénale*, modeled on a poem by Baudelaire, indicates the exhaustion of the cultural alternatives proposed by the neo-avant-gardes. It likewise shows the actuality of a poetic gaze that knows how to detect the anachronisms of the present. "Poorly informed," Mallarmé writes, "is the one who proclaims himself his own contemporary."

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**Further information and/or photos:**

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