

Travail de visite

Jan De Cock and the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts

Wouter Davidts

So hätte das haus nichts mit kunst zu tun und wäre die architektur nich unter die künste einzureihen? Es ist so. Nur ein ganz kleiner teil der architektur gehört der kunst an: das grabmal und das denkmal. Alles andere, was einem zweck dient, is aus dem reiche der kunst auszuschließen.

Adolf Loos

Il est certain que je ne suis pas d'accord d'être "paresseux" (parce que je ne sais pas si je suis paresseux d'ailleurs, cela se pourrait bien). Mais la question inverse peut se poser aussi: pourquoi un tel est-il travailleur. Il entre beaucoup de composantes dans ces définitions de la paresse et du travail.

Marcel Broodthaers

[0.]

For several years now, the Brussels artist Jan De Cock has been making elaborate sculptures from wood, chipboard, and fibreboard, all of which he calls *Denkmal*. His constructions are indeed monumental; they emphatically take up their position in the museum or gallery space; and their formal vocabulary is classicist. But does that make them monuments, as De Cock seems to claim with their title? Monuments are supposed to commemorate something or someone, such as a public figure, a value, or a historic event. But none of De Cock's *Denkmäler* are built 'für' anyone or anything. They are erected in the institutional context of art shows and not in key places in the city or the landscape. The clients are art galleries and institutes, and not the government. They are not made from durable or precious materials, but from low-grade woods and derivatives. And they are not built to last; in fact, each of these constructions is torn down once the show is over. So what does De Cock want to honour or commemorate with his works? Whom or what does he hope to save from oblivion? Could it be art? Or the artist himself? Because De Cock makes all his works *in situ*. Or perhaps, in more general terms, it is the bygone glory of art, the age in which the artist was still valued as a 'master signifier' or a 'genius'? De Cock's work is often dismissed as megalomaniac, formalistic, as pretentious and proficient at the same time. The combination of grand scale and technical skill seems to be considered presumptuous. But why should a work of art not be large and well-made these days? Why is it not done for an artist to be proud of having mastered his craft? Is art not *by nature* arrogant and conceited, irrespective of whether or not it involves skilled craftsmanship? Whoever takes the floor is expected to speak loudly and clearly, and to articulate well.

[1.]

In May 2003, Jan De Cock was selected as one of the nine laureates of the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge/Prijs Jonge Belgische Schilderkunst, a biennial exhibition that has been organized in the Palais des Beaux-Arts/Paleis voor Schone Kunsten ever since the award was instituted in 1950. His installation looks like the entrance to a classicist building, possibly a museum. The sculptural quality and the proportions of the portico, the double

colonnade, the majestic staircase; everything seems to indicate that this is the grand entrance to an important building. It is, in fact, an abstracted scale model of the monumental entrance to the central hall of the Palais des Beaux-Arts (PBA), known as the Sculpture Hall. The sculpture clearly repeats the structure and articulation of this interior portico. It is a large rectangular niche from where the central staircase leads out into space, flanked by a double colonnade. The opening between the second row of columns has been reduced, producing an enforced but inviting perspective. With this combination of plasticity and mannerism, De Cock captures the characteristics of the ambiguous Art Déco style utilized by Victor Horta in the Palais des Beaux-Arts, and in particular in the Sculpture Hall. Both the hall and the work unite modernist simplicity with classicist monumentality and exotic ornament. But De Cock's *Denkmal* is more than a solemn tribute to Horta's design for the Palais. For the entrance to the Sculpture Hall, which was recently renamed the 'Victor Horta Hall', embodies the 'distorted representativeness' of the PBA. A great many planning and architectural programme restrictions prevented Horta from giving the exterior of the Palais des Beaux-Arts the typological elements that traditionally represent the lofty ambitions of an institute of such status and purpose. The Palais lacks a square, a monumental façade, and even a grand staircase or colonnade. However, it does have a Sculpture Hall in which all these elements have been 'interiorized'.

Consequently, the 'main entrance' has no great symbolic value. Entry to the PBA cannot be symbolically blocked by occupying a particular square, staircase, or portico. The building embodies the awareness that, in the end, an institute can only be attacked 'from the inside'. In the turbulent days of May 1968, when the PBA was contested as a bastion of bourgeois culture, the Sculpture Hall therefore naturally became the scene of the confrontation. By erecting a monument of, or for, this most symbolically charged part of the building, inside the very same building,

De Cock appears to be reminding us especially of this particular episode and the story of its protagonists. Because the story acquires special relevance this year, now that the Palais is being thoroughly rejuvenated. The institute has a new name (BOZAR), a new organizational structure, a new director, a new ambition, and a new programme. What's more, this institutional transformation coincides with a thorough renovation of Horta's building, in which several rooms and halls are being restored to their original condition. A project called *Revolution/Restoration* is providing the theoretical framework. De Cock has now intervened in it, uninvited and from the sidelines, as the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge goes back to the pre-BOZAR era and today, many consider it an anachronistic exponent of the petit-bourgeois Brussels art world of the twentieth century. But precisely this peripheral context enables De Cock to reflect critically on the 'context and conditions of change' present here.

[II.]

In the late sixties, the Palais des Beaux-Arts was almost the only forum for contemporary art in Belgium. No wonder that it was also a favourite target for contemporary criticism of the dominance and power of conventional art institutes. The Palais was seen as a bastion of this bourgeois culture and its attendant artistic values and reputations – the 'establishment'.

Led by Marcel Broodthaers, Serge Creuse, Raoul D'Haese, and Roger Somville, a group of about two hundred artists and intellectuals occupied the Sculpture Hall of the Palais, which was also known as 'la salle marbre'. On

29 May, these occupiers distributed a joint pamphlet, in which they inveighed bitterly against 'the set-up of the ministry and the cultural centres' and 'the way in which all forms of art are commercialized [and] treated as commodities.'

The existing forms and the organization of the dissemination of culture were to be liquidated. Artists were to return to real life, as 'cultural workers', and fight the marketing and bureaucracy that was increasingly enveloping art with all the means at their disposal. Although Marcel Broodthaers was one of the co-authors and signers of this pamphlet, these calls to arms must undoubtedly have sounded naïve to his ears. Especially the loathed commercial exploitation of art was an aspect that Broodthaers considered inherent to modern art. In fact, his motivation to take up art was largely fed by his expectation that an artist's career would finally earn him an income. He took part only in the first rounds of the discussion, and quite early on, he dissociated himself from other activities that were set up, such as the creation of works of art *in situ*. Broodthaers no longer shared the dream of the historical avant-garde to tear down the walls of the institutions and eliminate the borders between art and life. In particular, he could not agree to the attacks on the very institute that had been the first to legitimate and recognize him as an artist.

Eight days after the occupation started, he sent an open letter to his 'friends' at the Palais, deploring their naïve misconception that their actions would be effective in producing any far-reaching changes. The fundamental insight Broodthaers gained from the whole episode was that, all in all, culture is an obedient thing: 'Un geste fondamental, ici, a été fait qui jette une lumière vive sur la culture et les aspirations de quelques uns à son contrôle – de part et d'autre – ce qui veut dire que la culture est une matière obéissante.' But the most remarkable phrase is to be found towards the end of the letter: 'Mes amis, avec vous je pleure pour Andy Warhol.'

Broodthaers was undoubtedly expressing his sympathy with the sad fate of Andy Warhol, who had been shot three days earlier in his loft by Valerie Solanas. But his sadness was of a different nature. Broodthaers commiserated with Warhol's complete identification with those conditions, which the occupiers of the PBA still wanted to fight or at least change in extremis.

Broodthaers refused to follow his artist 'friends' in their naïve attack on 'the system', but he also condemned Warhol's total embracing of it. He realized that he would have to accept the conditions of the art institute as soon as he had decided to move from the political to the artistic sphere. But he did not simply take them for granted. He knew he was condemned to the institutional domain of art, embodied by the institute of the museum. Consequently, Broodthaers never forswore the museum context, but instead, opted for a critical identification. Five weeks after his open letter to the occupying artists, he sent a letter to his friend Joseph Beuys, in which he laconically announced the foundation of a museum of his own, which he would call the *Musée d'Art Moderne*. 'Personne n'y croit.'

On 27 September 1968, Broodthaers opened the first department of this museum, the *Département des Aigles / Section XIXème siècle*, in his own house on 30, rue de la Pépinière in Brussels. Although Broodthaers's museum was 'fictitious', this was precisely the reason why it was able to function as an institution that could play 'the role at one time of a political parody of art institutions and at another of an artistic parody of political events.' Especially with the latter, his target was the naïveté of occupying museums and other art establishments, and of course, the Palais in particular.

By transforming his own studio into a museum, Broodthaers was doing exactly the opposite of the artists occupying the Palais. He did not go and 'produce' in a place where the public would get to see the art, in order to achieve a temporary but more direct connection of art with life. Broodthaers no longer cherished the vague hope of bridging the permanent gap between art and life that had become institutionalized in the museum since the onset of modernity. On the contrary, he had resigned himself to this gap and had decided to instrumentalize it. He simply superimposed the public condition of the museum on his studio. Broodthaers realized that the phantasm of escaping from the double stranglehold of the museum and the capitalist system and the vain hope of gaining a voice in the current political discourse both had their roots in the institutionalization of art in the 19th century. And it was this origin that Broodthaers brought to light, as an 'archaeologist of the present', in his four-year museum fiction, the first episode of which was, not surprisingly, that of the 19th century.

All the other departments which Broodthaers subsequently founded, successively in Antwerp, Düsseldorf, Cologne and Kassel, were crammed full of objects – such as chests, potted palms, display cases, frames, pedestals, name-boards and miscellaneous paraphernalia – that represent and evoke the idea of the museum, and especially its form and the typical accoutrements it acquired as an institutional device in the 19th century.

[III.]

In 1974, when Broodthaers started a series of large-scale retrospectives, he returned to the place where his fictitious museum had once originated: the Brussels Palais des Beaux-Arts. On 24 September 1974, the show *Catalogue - Catalogus* opened there. On entering the Sculpture Hall, however, he was confronted with a hideous inheritance from May '68. As a reaction to the museum's occupation and the demand for more participation – the slogan of the occupation had been 'open to all' – the directors had decided to transform the Sculpture Hall into a dynamic, flexible and fundamentally public space, and had rechristened it 'Animation Hall'. Architect Lucien Jacques Baucher had designed a spatial framework of steel tubes and modular mobile blocks covered in sand-coloured carpeting. A restaurant and a shop had been integrated in this structure, and it was used for a wide variety of events, including concerts, conferences, art shows, children's events and parties. The framework was a rather literal translation of the ideology of flexibility that had caught on in the early seventies and culminated in the Centre Pompidou.

Its 'multifunctional and flexible' character embodied the promise that 'anything was possible anywhere at any time', that artists and the public could give free reign to their creativity here, and that anyone could adapt the structure and infrastructure (or institutional structure) at will. This isotropic structure was supposed to aid the implementation of the programme of demystification and popularization adopted by the Palais des Beaux-Arts, and make the dream of flexibility come true. Broodthaers must have abhorred it. For this structure exemplified exactly those ideals from which he had fled during the occupation of '68. To Broodthaers, any attempt to enliven or reanimate the museum, or institutional space in general, was naïve and futile. On being asked 'what space hides', he once compared the search for a definition of space (in particular, the institutional space of art) with the children's game that French children know as 'Lou est-tu là?': 'En effet, le loup dit chaque fois qu'il est ailleurs, et cependant il est là. Et l'on sait qu'il va se retourner et attraper quelqu'un. La recherche constante d'une définition de l'espace ne servirait qu'à cacher la structure essentielle de l'Art, un processus de réification.'

In this game, the other children ask the main player – ‘the wolf’ (*le loup*) – who keeps its face turned towards the wall, whether it is there. As long as the wolf denies its presence, the children can approach it. But as soon as it replies in the affirmative, the wolf can turn round and catch the players. With this response, Broodthaers was referring to the fundamental self-deception involved in the game. The children can see with their own eyes that the wolf is there, but nevertheless, they keep asking whether or not he is present, to which the wolf, furthermore, usually replies with a no. But when the wolf confirms that he is there, or, in other words, tells the truth, the players run. Since the end of the sixties, museums have been developing the most varied concepts of space to deny the institutional conditioning of museum space. However, they led to deliberate attempt at obscuring the essence of art, which is, its institutional encompassment and its resulting reification. The quest for a new concept of space for the museum is no more than a misleading game in which the players – artists, museum staff, but also architects and others – go to great pains to evade the true answer. All the time, architecture is asked to meet the problematical desires of museums and other art establishments. They believe that architecture will enable them to transform themselves from a scene into a workshop, from a place of passive spectatorship into a locus of active and animated cultural production, into an institute that is as un-institutional as possible. Inevitably, though, this results in a cheap form of window-dressing. These changes can never be more than superficial: the scenery may be different, but the underlying institute remains the same. And that was especially true of the PBA in the beginning of the seventies. The accessibility and openness demanded by the occupiers in 1968 were conceded, but in purely formal terms.

The demand for institutional flexibility and versatility resulted in a grotesque installation of pseudo-architecture, a box of building blocks, pipes and loose panels.

[IV.]

The illusory identification with the architectural setting is one of the central themes of Broodthaers’s retrospective shows, all of which bore the apt name of *décors*.

They contain a myriad allusions to the way in which a specific context conditions the perception of a work of art both in space and in time. For each episode, he would investigate the institutional nature of the guest institute, its general exhibition conditions, the contact with the organizers, and the available infrastructure, down to the layout of the building. In the Palais, he focused his attention on the architectural schizophrenia displayed by the contrast between the imposing exhibition halls and the grotesque Animation Hall.

His installation started in the room immediately behind the stairs of the former Sculpture Hall, the Monumental Art Hall. That was the place where the hybrid condition of the building was most manifest. As a result of Baucher’s installation, the floor level of this hall had been raised and the stairs to the two side wings had been hidden. Originally, the entrances to the side wings consisted of four columns with impressive mouldings resting on four capitals. Only the central opening was still there; the other two openings had been filled in with a false wall. Remarkably enough, Broodthaers did not proceed to a ‘restoration’ of the original situation. On the contrary: while ‘stage-managing’ the entry to his exhibition, he carefully added a décor of his own.

Just behind the central opening, he installed a man-sized freestanding panel. By inserting this panel, not only did he deny visitors a central view of the exhibition space, he also forced them to take a zigzag route. But what was even more striking was the winding row of potted palms bordering the panel. In a playful way, they guided the

visitors from the central hall into the exhibition space. With this elegant setting, Broodthaers made it clear to visitors that, essentially, nothing had changed at all. The Palais des Beaux-Arts was still the bourgeois institute it had always been, in spite of the revolution and the promises embodied by the new framework of the public forum in the Animation Hall. Broodthaers's décor evoked nostalgia for a period when a walk through the Palais was a pleasurable pastime for the well-to-do middle class instead of an afternoon of forced cultural participation for the general public. It reminded spectators of the 19th-century roots of the institute. At the same time, the exhibition *Catalogue-Catalogus* filled the space with a phantasm. With his panoply of showcases, name-plates and potted palms, Broodthaers managed to create the illusion that a museum was housed in the PBA. The PBA was never conceived as a museum. Its concept was that of a multidisciplinary arts centre, or, in other words, an arts hall. Broodthaers showed that the right décor is sufficient to evoke and simulate an institutional conditioning of a place – in this case, that of a museum. He installed the negative equivalent of the structure in the Animation Hall, conceived to convey the notion, through its monumental cosiness, that there was no trace of institutional conditioning. Only, Broodthaers knew that he was playing with a piece of fiction. He was aware that the space he created was nothing but a *construct*. Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne* was pure frame: it was imaginary and empty. It contained no works of art, but only the fiction of its own existence. And it is this allegory that Broodthaers staged again and again. Within this institute-within-the-institute, Broodthaers was able to bend the prevailing limits, regulations and rules to his will, play with them and question them. His fictitious institute instrumentalized the awareness that a system can only be criticized from the inside, by being a part of it with critical wilfulness.

[V.]

The occupation of May 1968 has always been considered a major point of reference in the history of the Palais des Beaux-Arts. It represents the contested position of the institute in those days. (Its position is far from contested nowadays.). At that turning point, it was no less than the epicentre of the artistic section of the May '68 revolution in Belgium as a whole. No wonder then that the event serves both as a model and as a reference for the institutionally critical project *Revolution/Restoration*. This project, which claims to be 'multi-layered and multidisciplinary', has the ambition of 'making space available for critical and artistic reflection, in order to redefine [the] position [of BOZAR] in its relations to the current changes that are sweeping the world'.

Now that BOZAR again wishes to be an experimental and critical arts centre and achieve a 'cross-fertilization' between music, the visual arts and film, contestation and dissension are at the top of the institutional wish list. Nor is it surprising to learn that *Revolution/Restoration* does not wish to manifest itself as a one-off exhibition, but takes the form of a long-term programme that is to develop in a multidisciplinary and accumulative fashion. The public will not get to see any traditional 'works of art'. Instead, it can take part in discussions, attend lectures, consult a website with a newsletter, and participate in the spatial recycling project of the artists Nico Dockx and Christophe Terlinden. As the spatial and graphic 'format' for the project, these artists have installed a large inclined plane, which they call a 'promenade', in the newly-reopened exhibition rooms surrounding the large Concert Hall, built from demolition waste recycled from the ongoing restorations. It is no accident that these are the rooms where the works selected for the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge are shown. From the start of the installation of his *Denkmal*, De Cock immediately slates the 'new exhibition framework'. Not out of artistic envy,

nor out of indignation with the structure of Dockx and Terlinden being 'in the way', nor out of any conservative reflex. His prior 'restoration' is not aimed – in contrast to the regular conservation of monuments – at consecrating any kind of 'original state'. It is a radical gesture expressing a critical and broad understanding of the present context. Behind the visible complexity of the sculpture lies a sharp analysis and 'processing' of the most contested room of the PBA. De Cock is not tempted to spout unequivocal criticism of the fossilized exhibition policy, nor to launch into a diatribe against the neglect of the Horta's masterpiece of Art Déco, nor to plead for more room for contemporary art in Brussels, nor to proceed to an avid appropriation and occupation of the available institutional space. In a masterful and, especially, a 'visual' way, De Cock's *Denkmal* reminds one of the institutional, architectural and artistic history of the staircase between the Sculpture Hall and the exhibition rooms. The deliberate changes he has made to his 'model' make it clear that De Cock is not presenting us with an architectural *objet trouvé*.

There are too many 'differences' to call it a copy. De Cock's portico is a freestanding object that does not offer 'entrance' to anything. It stands in the middle of the route along the canvases selected to compete for the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge, which makes its function more like that of a freestanding arch than that of a vestibule. The route one is forced to take through the sculpture is not central, nor is it symmetrically organized; instead, it leads one over a few almost trivial side stairs. The visitor is not given a ceremonial reception, but is led away to the side. To top it all, De Cock has covered the worn parquet floor with a shiny wood-patterned linoleum, a popular floor covering for chalets and holiday cottages. As in the theatre, he presents us with an 'adaptation'. Both materially and conceptually, the work can be analysed as an unusual interpretation of the situations *surrounding* the staircase, from the double perspective of space and history. The 'play' is the same, as is the stage, but the contents have been rearranged and the set is original: the plot and the protagonist have been adapted to current reality, as it were. Moreover, De Cock realizes that, before anything can be performed on the stage, the sets of the last performance have to be cleared away. As befits a good director, he knows exactly who has adapted the play in the past and which stars have been featured on the stage.

[VI.]

De Cock's work spontaneously reminds one of Broodthaers's staging of the entrance to his retrospective in 1974 at the PBA. Just like Broodthaers, De Cock concentrates on the pivotal relationship between the large hall and the exhibition rooms. Moreover, De Cock's contains an unmistakable reference to one of the main elements of this retrospective of Broodthaers. In 1974, the first space behind the man-sized panel contained the crucial work *Miroir d'Époque Régency*, hung straight across from the panel right in the middle of the wall. This convex mirror, with a gilt frame and eagle crown, reflected the entire room. With De Cock, the mirror is not to be found *in* the room, but is represented as an illustration on one of the four large black-and-white Cibachrome prints integrated in the wooden structure. The print hung frontally behind the slender columns shows a series of vases, various pictures (including one of an eagle and another of Constantin Meunier's *The Sower*), a grandfather clock (also with an eagle), and a neoclassical mirror with a fronton. In this mirror, one sees the backs of several framed paintings. Whereas the *Miroir d'Époque Régency*, which is considered one of the key works in Broodthaers's oeuvre, symbolizes the self-reflexive aspect of the retrospective, De Cock's mirror serves an entirely different purpose. He turns the situation around: the Palais des Beaux-Arts is no longer reflected in the mirror image, but

the mirror is integrated in an image of the Palais. It is not a real mirror, but a picture of a particular mirror that was once sold at an auction held in the PBA. Until shortly before the restoration in 2003, in fact, these art auctions, which are also the subject of two other Cibachrome prints, took up the exhibition rooms surrounding the large Concert Hall in which De Cock's *Denkmal* is set up. The picture with the mirror looks back at the past of the Palais and functions as a metaphor for the historical reflection incorporated in De Cock's work. Via Broodthaers, De Cock holds up a mirror to today's institute. The auctions symbolize the bankruptcy of the initial interdisciplinary programme, or the historical fatality that avant-garde agendas must always bow to commercial interests. The visionary concept of uniting, in one institute and in a single building, all possible forms of art, and presenting it through one team of programmers, was abandoned within a year of the opening of the Palais. The building was separated from the programme, or, in other words, the artistic management was split off from the real estate, and different associations were founded, each responsible for managing their own artistic domain. To finance its programme, the Exhibitions Association was forced, as early as 1933, to vacate the exhibition rooms surrounding the Concert Hall so as to rent them out all kinds of commercial enterprises, such as auctions and antiques fairs. By reminding us of this crucial aspect of the history of the Palais des Beaux-Arts, De Cock's *Denkmal* casts crucial doubts on the recent transformations, and especially on the reinstatement of the original 'interdisciplinary' mission from 1928. It warns for the shallow belief that the 'restoration' of Horta's building will also reanimate the institute. Implicitly, it criticizes the way in which architecture is still expected to solve an institute's identity crisis. It takes more than an architectural face-lift to transform an institution. The recently worded expectations of the restoration of Horta's building actually sound remarkably similar to those expressed in 1972 when the Sculpture Hall was going to be turned into an Animation Hall. Then too, 'new, public-friendly spots, (...) a cosy cafeteria and restaurant' and 'a lively central hall, with free access', were among the demands. In the new 'arts centre', bridges would be built across art forms, artists would be able to make an active contribution, and the institute would become a veritable hotbed of activity. These expectations sound downright pathetic today. The idea of bringing together all possible art forms in one institute might still have been visionary and avant-garde in 1928, but today it is simply a tried and tested institutional recipe. Today's art scene is afflicted with the cult of crossing borders.

These days, just about every art institution wants to make 'unexpected' connections between the different arts, engage in interdisciplinary collaborations, set up transgressive projects, etc. It is hard to keep up with the speed at which artistic and institutional 'borders' are continually being crossed. It is turning out to be a good marketing practice. The recent change of the name of the Palais des Beaux-Arts is a case in point. The original name has been reduced to a pseudo-acronym that is a purely phonetic evocation of an era when it still made sense to talk of disciplines. 'BOZAR' represents the total assimilation of the transgressive practices of the neo-avant-garde of the sixties. 'Ceci n'est pas un nom, c'est l'étendard d'une exigence artistique', reads the programme brochure, referring to Duchamp, Magritte, and Broodthaers all at once.

Just like Nike, Ikea, or Boss, BOZAR uses its logo as a 'visual flag'. Only here, it is, literally, a flag of convenience, as it is supposed to 'work well in any language'. Interdisciplinarity as the commercial Esperanto of the contemporary art world. The blending and mixing of disciplines has been reduced to a sales gimmick, a trick of the trade that is being performed over and over again these days, ad nauseam.

[VII.]

In his criticism of this illusory and hysterical attack on institutional limitation, De Cock pertinently refers to Broodthaers. At first sight, the two oeuvres – and the respective works in the PBA collection in particular – seem to have little in common. De Cock's work is large, emphatic, heavy and monumental, while Broodthaers's is light and ephemeral and makes a sparse and casual impression. But there is a profound affinity as regards their artistic strategy. These days, the monumentality and the craftsmanship of De Cock's sculptures make them liable to be dismissed, just like Broodthaers's installations were in his day on account of their so-called 'bourgeois' and 'frivolous' quality, as anachronistic and dated.¹ Allegedly, their formal vocabulary is out of synch with contemporary art. Partly, this can be traced back to their shared fascination with the 19th century. Just like Broodthaers, De Cock has a predilection for references, in both form and content, to this century. But in De Cock's case, this fascination has a different source, and is formally translated in a different way. For his perspective on the 19th century is marked by a thorough familiarity with the progressive aesthetic premises of artists such as Broodthaers. Although De Cock alludes to the way in which the museum, on its foundation in the 19th century, institutionalized the deracination and reification of art, he views this deracination from a contemporary perspective that is aware of the contribution of Broodthaers. He reflexively reiterates the social-institutional criticisms of Broodthaers and his contemporaries, as a reaction to their total erosion in contemporary art and in the art world. For today, their critical strategies have become fully institutionalized, reduced to cut-and-dried formulas for museal self-reflection and promotion.² Whereas Broodthaers, but also other artists of his generation, such as Daniel Buren, Robert Smithson, Vito Acconci, and Dan Graham, still tried to clear away the last remains of the beaux-arts classifications at the end of the sixties, there is no more need for that now, as they have evaporated and now live on merely as logos. The step towards working outside the museum in order to focus, each time anew, on the relation of the work of art to its institutional framework and test the elasticity of the boundaries of the institutional domain, has likewise lost its meaning. In fact, these days, museums and artists seem to be making a sport of leaving the museum, 'together', with the good intention of placing the museum space under discussion 'together', for the nth time. With that kind of tragicomic spectacle, though, museums are only fooling themselves, and in doing so, they demonstrate their complacent discomfort and structural amnesia. For the space of the museum has not been under any real discussion for ages. Museums have accapitated the critical strategies of artists so thoroughly that they ascribe the same interested to artists by definition. In the current post-industrial era, the museum is no longer experienced as an *inevitable* place of *alienation*, but is well-established as a *welcome* place of *seclusion*. Museums are seen as free zones in the capitalist system, refuges that offer resistance to the all-pervasive flows of the global economy. The museum is an asylum where the exchange value of objects is suspended and their utilitarian value, if any, is questioned. For those reasons, the

¹ According to Douglas Crimp (*This Is Not a Museum of Art*, p. 211-212) Broodthaers's work was frequently threatened by rejection on the grounds of this misperception: 'this altogether dated aura of 19th-century bourgeois culture that many of his works seem to bring to mind might easily seduce the viewer into dismissing his works as being obviously obsolete and not at all concerned with the presuppositions of contemporary art.'

² The catalogue of the collection of the Ghent Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (Steven Jacobs, *Het museum als mossel. Marcel Broodthaers*, in: Jan Hoet (ed.), *S.M.A.K. De Collectie*, Ghent, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst S.M.A.K. / Ludion, 1999, p. 96), for instance, claims that Broodthaers is a key figure in the collection 'because his work and his range of ideas lie at the basis of a tendency towards museal self-reflection that has shaped history of the Ghent museum to a large extent.' The author is clearly referring to art events such as *Chambres d'Amis* (1984) and *Over The Edges* (2000), for which the S.M.A.K. has gained a reputation. For a criticism of the museal plagiarism of artistic positions within phenomenon of the citywide art show, see Wouter Davids, *Het museum buiten spel gezet. Over stadstentoonstellingen*, in: *De Witte Raaf* no. 88, 2000, pp. 17-19.

museum is considered the ideal place for critical reflection.³ But the drawback of this analysis is that the museum is increasingly being used as a pleasant and, in particular, a 'safe' place, for cultural and political activism. The underlying idea is that, in the contemporary social order, the museum is one of the few places where one can still develop a critical practice. But this has been to the detriment of both the institute of the museum and the institute of art. It has devalued the museum and turned it into a kind of 'sheltered workshop', the only place where one can take well-meaning and subversive 'proposals for social change'. However, in practice, this is increasingly resulting in the production of half-baked theory disguised as art (and vice versa), or, in the context of museum criticism, of a covert and especially cheap form of social criticism (the museum as a meta-institute). This is the heyday of politically correct art. Just about every art show now features a project with an explicitly political or social agenda. Subjects such as war, refugees, homeless people, poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion are very popular. But in many cases, the museum is probably the only place left that is willing to house such projects and take them seriously. In the domains in which these artists would wish to make a claim via the roundabout way of art – political and social theory, anthropology, history – they would be derided and dismissed.⁴

[VIII.]

On the face of it, De Cock's *Denkmäler* do not seem to raise any burning social issues. They do not proclaim any explicit political views, nor do they propose any social improvements. They stand autonomously in the museum space and show themselves as art. But even though not immediately obvious, they do contain artistic and critical reflection on the conditions of their existence and reception. This reflection is 'incorporated' in a structure that is not primarily aimed at making a critical, smart or witty impression, but, first and foremost, wants to be present in space, expressively, and *impressively*. In their material appearance, De Cock's sculptures categorically bathe in the aura they derive from the museum. De Cock explicitly opposes the way in which much contemporary art, as a heritage of conceptual art, makes the form and appearance of a work completely subordinate to its 'content'. In this, again, he follows Broodthaers, who was always critical of the naïve belief of many of his contemporaries – in particular conceptual artists – that 'immaterial' art escapes the dominant mechanisms of institutionalization, reification, and commercialization of art. As early as 1974, he expressed his fundamental distrust of any art proclaiming a political message: 'A mon sens, il ne peut y avoir de rapport direct entre l'art et le message et encore moins si ce message est politique sous peine de se brûler à l'artifice. De sombrer. Je préfère signer des attrapes-nigauds sans me servir de cette caution.'⁵ Art that pretends to be 'really' political is deluding itself. For it can only operate by the grace of the institute. Broodthaers does not fall into this trap, but makes it the subject of his artistic practice. The lucid and critical identification with the art system that pervades Broodthaers's practice is lacking from most neo-conceptual art, or, when present, it is most often inverted into ironic opportunism. Under

³ Boris Groys, lecture at the symposium 'Museum in Motion', 27 May, De Balie, Amsterdam, organised by the Mondriaan Foundation, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and Metropolis M. For a criticism of this symposium, see Wouter Davidts, *Museum in Motion?*, in: De Witte Raaf, No. 104, pp. 27-29.

⁴ This is most certainly true of the internet project www.pieceforpeace.net by Christophe Terlinden, which was eventually nominated as the laureate of the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge. Terlinden redrew the territories of Israel and Palestine along the lines of the federal model of Belgium, with the noble aim of giving a substantial impulse to the debate on the Israeli-Palestinian question. The political messianism and bourgeois cynicism of this project are in marked contrast to the formal complexity and the aesthetic aplomb of De Cock's sculptural works.

⁵ Marcel Broodthaers, *Dix Mille Francs de Récompense. Une interview d'Irmeline Libeer*, p. 64.

the guise of social commitment, it wallows in formlessness. De Cock reacts to the self-delusion that characterizes many of such practices. For although contact or interaction with the participants is often claimed to be the main issue of the 'work' in question, the actions performed are usually meticulously recorded and documented, in order to produce something that can subsequently be presented in the art space as a 'work'. De Cock no longer puts the content first. Instead, he puts form 'back to work': 'It is the form that thinks in contemporary art. In bad contemporary art, it is the thought that constructs the form. To reshape this problem today is already a good work of art.'⁶ De Cock also rejects the avant-garde adage of breaking down the barrier between art and life. His works of art do not claim any social or so-called 'relational' function, to which the form is subordinated.⁷ At first sight, though, De Cock's structures seem to be rather similar to the interior or furniture designs of artists such as Andrea Zittel, Apolonija Sustersic, Tobias Rehberger, and Jorge Pardo, which invite being 'used', for lounging, conversing, reading or debating. In De Cock's *Denkmäler*, the 'functionality' of the form is suspended. They honour the concept from an artistic point of view. As Adorno pointed out in his text *Funktionalismus Heute* from 1966, the question of functionalism does not coincide with that of a practical function.⁸ As soon as an object is 'designed', that is, given a form, one faces the question of what is necessary and what is superfluous, irrespective of whether the thing has an external function. A work of art is burdened with this reflection too. In his text, Adorno was reacting in particular to the radical distinction between the fine arts and the applied arts, between aesthetic autonomy and functionality, made by Adolf Loos in his text *Architektur* from 1910. In Adorno's view, this radical starting point is understandable in the context of the fight that Loos had to put up against the popularity of the applied arts in his age, and against the ambitions of the Arts and Crafts movement to subjugate art and make life more pleasant. Loos reacts against what Adorno calls 'the art-foreign art-ification of practical things', and advocates going back to a self-respecting craft that makes use of technical innovations without having to borrow forms from art. But Adorno goes further and shows that Loos's opposition is both too radical and inadequate. For in Adorno's view, the opposite is just as true. Art suffers just as much when its 'imperturbable protest against the domination of functions' is wilfully nipped in the bud. This is a trend that is affecting much contemporary art, and that De Cock is challenging with his structures, as he avails himself precisely of one of the two architectural categories which Loos classified as art. According to Loos, only two types of 'buildings' qualified as 'works of art'. They were, by definition, non-functional structures, namely, the gravestone and the memorial stone, '*das grabmal und das denkmal*'.⁹ De Cock refuses to be associated with what, following Adorno, could be called the 'world-foreign world-ification of artistic things', or the subservience of the arts to social or political ideas. At the same time, De Cock's 'memorials' escape the functionality of real monuments. They do not represent any political or social comment. The 'functionality' celebrated by De Cock's sculptures lies in their detailed finish and their skilful design, or *form*. The elaborate wooden sculptures reveal the awareness that it is no longer a feat to create works of art that openly try to break away from the material from which they are made. His creations fully express their materiality. Their 'functional' materiality is a metaphor for the way in which they want to position and manifest themselves in the world: as 'work'. De Cock's impressive

⁶ Jan De Cock, interview with the author, Brussels, 27 June 2003.

⁷ For the popular concept of relational art, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, les presse du réel, 1998.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Functionalisme vandaag (1965)*, in: Hilde Heynen, André Loeckx, Lieven De Cauter and Karina Van Herck (eds.), *Dat is architectuur. Sleutelteksten uit de twintigste eeuw*, Rotterdam, 010, 2001, pp. 367-370.

⁹ Adolf Loos, *Architektur* (1910), pp. 101-103.

structures represent the fact that art, so far, has been a labour of producing meaning, a domain in which, even though it is ruled by other freedoms than the ordinary 'market', there is nevertheless 'work' to be done. The freedom acquired by art with the advent of modernism, which Duchamp appropriated so masterfully and Broodthaers incessantly played with – i.e., that you do not need expertise, craftsmanship or knowledge to transform material into a work of art, but an institution – has become such a commonplace today that it has become fatal. De Cock realizes that he can no longer claim a 'craft', as the beaux-arts tradition of artistic craftsmanship has been lost forever. But that does not prevent him from deciding to be skilful and to master his materials. De Cock opposes all art that, again as a kind of diluted version of Broodthaers, is merely ironic, clever, graceful, witty or nonchalant. It often amounts to no more than a trick, a happy find, or a feeble joke. But even a joke needs to be told well. De Cock's work is more than artistic *Spielerei*, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. First, it is 'well made' and it makes no secret of that. But secondly, it continuously plays on the elusiveness and the incontestable appeal of such a thing as artistic craftsmanship. It does not make a moralizing appeal for more seriousness in art. It is, quite simply, made in a serious manner, and in that respect, it makes a bid for credibility.

[IX.]

Undoubtedly, the Palais des Beaux-Arts, which Horta himself considered a high point in his career, is one of the major monuments of Belgian architectural history. Its restoration is therefore commendable. Over the years, the many conversions and alterations had robbed the building of much of its splendour. The great merit of Jan De Cock's *Denkmal* is that it holds up the mirror of history to this operation of architectural restoration. It reminds us that many of the architectural interventions had an institutional background and motivation, and that this applies to the last series too. The work functions as a device that 'visualizes' the past of both the building and the institute that has been housed in it all these years. This is not done in a documentary manner, but from a personal angle. Via a protagonist, the past is 'revisited' and 'imagined', or 'incorporated' in an image. The resulting story is personal, and the product of interpretation. But this is precisely where De Cock does honour to the role of the monument: it is a place of contradiction and conflict, a battleground.¹⁰ The past, and any common or public quality the place may have aspired to, is not just perpetuated, consecrated or restored, but is challenged over and over again. And that happens to be the ambition of the architectural and institutional renovation of the PBA, and in particular of the *Revolution/Restoration* project. De Cock's *Denkmal* takes the 'reflection on the Palais des Beaux-Arts as a building and as an institute' seriously in every respect, even though it does not constitute a part of it.¹¹ But De Cock does not accept the invitation 'to build on the research conducted by a number of artists in the past on the Palais des Beaux-Arts'. Instead, he *processes* it, reflexively and, above all, visually.

In the personal visual language De Cock has developed, the work wrests autonomy from its context.

¹⁰ Bart Verschaffel, *Monumenten, resten, herinneringen*, in: *Figuren/Essays*, Vlees en beton, 28-29, Mechelen/Leuven/Amsterdam, aa50/Van Halewyck/De Balie, 1995, pp. 121-127.

¹¹ Press release *Revolution/Restoration* (BOZAR 28/03/03), p. 1.