

BROSSA POETRY

Exhibition from 21 September 2017 to 25 February 2018



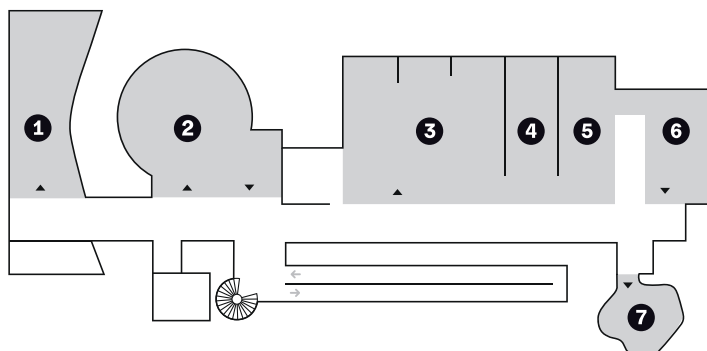
Joan Brossa, *18 de juliol*, 1970. MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium. Joan Brossa Fonds. Long-term loan of Fundació Joan Brossa

‘These verses, like a score, are nothing but a group of signs to decipher. The reader of the poem is an executor.’¹

Joan Brossa

Recommended itinerary

Meier Building. Level 1



¹Joan Brossa: 'Prelude', in *Joan Brossa: Listen to This Silence* [curator: Glòria Bordons]. Barcelona: Fundació Joan Brossa, 2013.

BROSSA POETRY is a survey of the work of the Catalan poet Joan Brossa, which was largely visual and performative, but above all the work of a poet. Saying that Brossa was above all a poet may seem superfluous, but it is the key to understanding his way of doing, his *poiesis*.

The exhibition looks at Brossa's work from three main angles: orality, the performative and anti-poetry. From his early books to his final visual experiments, the show includes theatre, cinema, music, action art and gestures of which he was a pioneer. One of the main aims of our proposal is to counter the rigidity of museum conditions with orality and performance. On the one hand, the challenge of confronting the orality of a Catalan poet when translated into other languages: English, French and Spanish. It is here that the power of the spoken language is made visible, not only by translating the meaning of the words, but by emphasising the qualities of diction. On the other hand, the performativity of the poetry when it is transformed into theatrical action. It is certainly not easy to establish the limits between action and representation, but our display requires us to at least disturb the static reception of texts and documents.

Brossa spoke and wrote in Catalan at a time when Spanish was the politically imposed language. When we talk about bilingualism in Brossa, we don't mean that he expressed himself in two languages; we refer to the way he expanded the meaning of language, of the spoken and written word, but also acted and visual. From the beginning, texts in Spanish appear in his work as quotes, readymades, *détournements*, taken from the press, official speeches or bureaucratic announcements of the Franco regime. This is a constant strategy in his production and it broke away from the normalisation of Catalan poetry since modernism. It opened a new space, his *coup de dés*, in which poetry includes actions, images and objects.

This made me Joan Brossa

HE BEGAN WRITING during the Spanish Civil War: an account of the combat at the Front, near the Battle of the Ebro, with a copy of Federico García Lorca's *Romancero gitano* – the edition of 1937 – in his pocket. The Republican defeat, the shard that damaged his eye, the time wasted during his military re-training in the barracks of Salamanca, where he entertained his fellow soldiers dressed as a Chinaman, are all things that marked him profoundly. Brossa came out of the war with all the traits of his poetry already well defined.

His distinctive position within the Surrealism of Dau al Set, where he became a follower of Miró; his materialism versus the Informalist shift of Tàpies and other fellow travellers; and the relationship and long-standing influence of João Cabral de Melo, are some other themes in our survey. The exhibition is not only an invitation to read the Marxist classics, the socio-political undertones of his poetry or to recover the artisan aspect of his language, as the poet Pere Gimferrer defines it, but a system that connects Brossa's work with world poetry, with other Surrealist, Conceptual and Concretist tendencies.

Game of images

OTHER IMPORTANT ASPECTS of Brossa's universe are his critique of merchandise from the viewpoint of communism, something that prevented him from being assimilated into the Pop spectacle, and a poetic concept of language, which kept him close to, and yet at a distance from, Conceptual art and institutional critique, much in the same way as Marcel Broodthaers. His *Suites* (1959–69) and *Poemes habitables* (1970) are series of books in which the inclusion of elements that play and dialogue with the page, die cutting, objects and words configure a vast poetic language based on minimal interventions. Equally, the script for the film *No compteu amb els dits* (1967) reveals an overlapping of languages in Brossa's practice. The first and one of the most productive collaborations with the filmmaker Pere Portabella, every frame in the film is a recapitulation of Brossa's work, his texts, his images, his constant bilingualism.

Other itineraries

READING BROSSA as anti-poetry is essential. We stated it at the beginning: orality and performativity are at the centre of the implosion of the poetic text that leads Brossa toward the visual. It marks the difference between the written and the spoken in a poet who, as well as favouring the popular and plain register of the Catalan language, tries to recover the language of the world of work and craft, the political use of the language, and, therefore, the necessary theatricality of speech and enunciation. Hence Brossa's interest and professional ambitions in the theatre, in the deconstruction of Catalan bourgeois theatre, in experimenting with the stage, in the cinematographic *cinematism*, excuse the redundancy, of actions and words, performances, happenings, whether from the high-culture tradition of Dada and Surrealism, or the more popular traditions of magic, circus and variety shows.

Conventional extrapolated and interrelated languages; the blurred limits of an infinite, perhaps unnecessary, taxonomy; the unusual, the humorous, the playful and the irregular, are the main traits of Brossa's way of doing.

Transformism is therefore seen as a political act, in reference to Fregolism; and striptease as an act of transformism that is performed before an audience, not in pursuit of nudity, but in search of the occult, as a game and gesture that eliminates some elements to make others visible, or that inverts the process by adding items of clothing. In a context in which nudity was forbidden, simply showing one's own body constituted a space for freedom.

Political gestures and actions, such as the tram strike of 1951, when people revolted against price increases in the middle of the dictatorship, or the staging of an assembly of intellectuals in Montserrat in 1970 to protest against the Burgos trial, are some of the 'study cases' demonstrating the richness and complexity of Brossa's *poiesis*. Or the 'Anti-Tourism Itinerary' around Barcelona, an alternative night-tour of the city organised for the first time in 1979. Lluís Permanyer described it as a 'peculiar secular pilgrimage' that should become a regular event, since Brossa had more than enough 'originality, knowledge, experience and, above all, malice, to create itineraries showing the *other Barcelona*.' Political/poetic gestures that often come, not from the language of fine art, but from its subversion, rupture or expansion.

A visual recapitulation

A MAJOR VISUAL RECAPITULATION of Brossa's poetic production in the eighties took place with the three exhibitions of 1988 and 1989 in the galleries Mosel & Tschechow in Munich, Joan Prats in Barcelona and La Máquina Española in Madrid, exhibitions that are reconstructed here. Using a re-enactment device allows us to avoid anachronisms and unnecessary historicisms that could become banal by being decontextualised. It was a moment of intense irruption of the object, of the visual poem.

Brossa constellations

AFTER THIS visual recapitulation, we situate Brossa's work in a global constellation of this way of making poetry. On the one hand, in a continental European context with the late-Surrealist work of Marcel Mariën. On the other, in an Anglo-Saxon context with the Concretist practice of the Scottish artist Ian Hamilton Finlay. And finally, in a Latin-American context with the anti-poetry of Nicanor Parra. Selecting Mariën, Hamilton Finlay and Parra has to do with the poetic phenomenon of mimesis. Without knowing each other, these three poets and Brossa have numerous formal and thematic coincidences and an equal assimilation of forms: what Erich Auerbach described as the global capacity of poetry to give the same answer to the signs of a particular time.

Of special interest is the importance of the concept of anti-poetry in Brossa's work. Nicanor Parra attributed his own anti-poetry to a reflection on the language: Why write in Spanish, instead of English or Quechua? From this question arises the need to bombard the idiomatic normality of language with humour, colloquial language, resounding sounds, visual finds, performative events, etc. The point is to emphasise a certain strangeness in one's own language. Not to write in another language, but to undermine the semiotic normality of the system of signs of the vernacular language. Curiously, Marcel Mariën and Ian Hamilton Finlay also write in contexts where there is a discussion and political exclusion of different languages.

In *A Theatre without Theatre*, an earlier exhibition produced by MACBA including Brossa's work, there was an attempt to relate a certain documentary philology to the currency of his performative poetry. Brossa was seen not only as pioneer of action art – since his poetry soirées in the forties – but as an artist whose poetry should be read from these theatrical qualities. Theatre understood as a device, as a fundamental agent for reading Brossa, whether it means having to turn the book round to read a particular stanza, or due to the introduction of visual elements, or because the poem suggests performing an everyday action, a political gesture, a gag.

Brossa's objects and visual works relate to the spoken word, a connection that sometimes comes from a duplicity of Roussellian and Duchampian roots, to mention the most pertinent, and at other times from a dialectical relationship with strong political undertones of Brechtian effect, as in his theatrical jargon, or Benjaminian, as in his image practice. To reaffirm the coexistence of duplicity and dialectics in his poetry and in his visual, performative and objectual practices reveals the complexity and, to a certain extent, the current validity of Brossa's poetry.

Evidently, as Cabral de Melo suggested, the path between Marx and Mallarmé is one of the main routes of twentieth-century poetry and art. Mallarmé and Marx, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, are the counterpoint to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art, another keystone of the century. Always in a humorous key, Brossa's love and hate relationship with Wagner is essential for understanding his poetics, his way of doing, his *poiesis*.

To go back to plain, popular language, what people speak. Yes, people speak with or without a hat, exaggerate an A, say a lightbulb, a railway ticket, a playing card, handcuffs, confetti. People speak Brossa.

Curators

Teresa Grandas
Pedro G. Romero

Publication

Brossa Poetry. With curatorial essays by Teresa Grandas and Pedro G. Romero, a selection of texts, works and poems by Joan Brossa and a glossary by Roger Bernat, Isabel de Naverán and María Salgado. 180 images approx. Barcelona: MACBA. 260 pp. Catalan, Spanish and English editions.

Guided visits

(from 30 September)
See times and languages at www.macba.cat.

La Mercè

Open Day, presentations offered every hour
Sunday 25 September, 10 am to 8 pm.
From 11 am to 1 pm, guided tours in Catalan sign language

Let's Talk About...

Brossa
See specific programme at www.macba.cat.

Living Arts

Cabaret

Curated by Pablo Martínez and José Luis Villalobos

Friday 27 October, 3 and 10 November. Capella MACBA. 10 €/session. Free with Amic card. Previous booking at www.macba.cat.

Course

People Speak Brossa
By Pedro G. Romero

Monday 11 and Tuesday 12 December, 6 to 8 pm
Meier Auditorium. 10 €. Free with Amic card. Registration at www.macba.cat.

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Opening times

Monday, Wednesday,
Thursday and Friday,
11 am to 7.30 pm
(from 24 June to 25
September, 11 am to 8 pm)
Tuesday closed
Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm
Sunday and public holidays,
10 am to 3 pm

The museum entry ticket is valid for a month. Activate it at the ticket desk and visit us as often as you like.

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