

# JOAN BROSSA, POET OF THE IMAGINATION



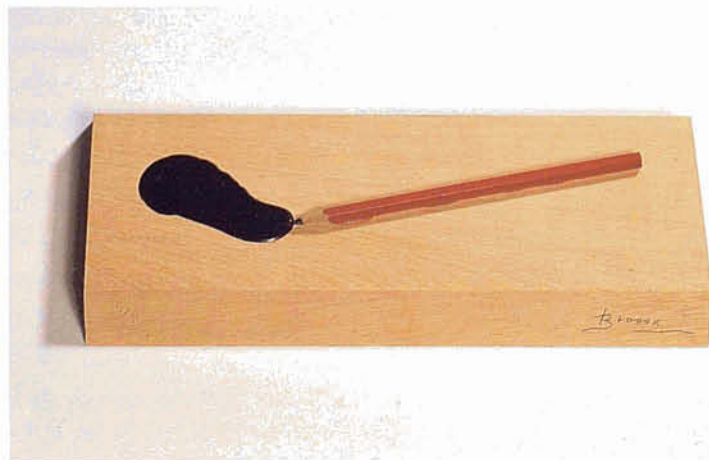
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OBJECT POEM (1975)



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OBJECT POEM (1988)



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LLAPIS. OBJECT POEM (1982)



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MARTELL I CARTA. OBJECT POEM (1951)



**T**he poet Joan Brossa (b. Barcelona, 1919) has been an essential reference for the successive generations of Catalan artists that have emerged since the Civil War. By bringing poetry within the bounds of ordinary life, he has looked forward each day to opening the door of art and finding something new, of "he himself being the first to be surprised by the discovery". The search for pure creation, in a playful and imaginative spirit, avoiding repetition and formalism, has been an objective and a slogan in his work, finally leading to a poetic *oeuvre* that is coherent, non-conformist and that has at all times given an experimental nature to a production that has broken all established literary codes. To Brossa is owed the continuity between the poetic and artistic avant-gardes of before the war and the post-war literature and art, in a cultural desert in which he encouraged the rise of other, similar creative attitudes that opened new paths in the Catalan art and literature of the forties and fifties. In 1941, Brossa started to experiment with "hypnagogic" images and automatic texts arising in the subconscious, an activity that stemmed from his discovery of Freud and psychoanalysis. He showed these experiments to the poet J.V. Foix, who was the maximum exponent of surrealism in avant-garde poetry. If his encounter with J.V. Foix in 1941 was to be decisive, the same goes for his meeting with Joan Miró and with the collector and patron of the avant-garde Joan Prats, co-founder of the group ADLAN (Amics de l'Art Nou), the name behind the most important surrealist exhibitions in Catalonia and owner of an extensive library of twentieth century art, an essential reference in Brossa's artistic training. The poet was present in almost all the avant-garde initiatives of the post-war years: first of all, with the publication of the only number of the magazine *Algol* (1946), forerunner to what two years later became *Dau al Set*, a joint poetry and arts venture of which Brossa was to be the catalyst, alongside the artists Joan Ponç, Antoni Tàpies, Joan-Josep Tharrats, Modest Cuixart and the intellectual Arnau Puig. None of these artists' subsequent ca-

reers would have been the same without their encounter with Brossa. The first to abandon Rouault-style expressionism was Joan Ponç, whom Brossa had met in 1943; next, Antoni Tàpies, who set aside the successful realism of his early work for a more magical form of painting, while Modest Cuixart and Tharrats introduced elements of formal abstraction into their work. Finally, *Dau al Set* was the first and most powerful move to successfully break out of the recycled nineteenth century realism of the Franco régime and develop art along more magical lines, under the more literary influence of surrealism. *Dau al Set* was therefore the foundation for solid individual careers.

In Brossa's work, scenic poetry, verse, visual poetry and object poems form a single conceptual whole which, taking reality as its starting point and applying a great capacity for concretion, offers us a broader range of readings of this same reality, and at the same time makes it possible to transform its usual meaning.

Starting in the forties, and alongside his scenic poetry, Brossa gradually moved into the world of visual poetry, first with calligrammes –we must not forget his admiration for the avant-garde poet Salvat-Papasseit– and later with his decontextualization of letters, which he took as signs with an interest in themselves, changing pen and paper for the world of the image. His richest period of visual poetry production was between 1959 and 1970. At first, Brossa conceived his poems in the form of "suites", with a beginning, a development and an end, and governed by an almost theatrical "tempo". To read them, they had to be physically opened up, or else they demanded some sort of action; later, it was the visual impact of the concept that governed the poem. In the long 1970 series "Poemes habitables", there is a wide range of semantic variations on the basis of objectual images or signs and characters from writing. Apart from the alphabet, punctuation signs and the graphic image of the writing, Brossa's visual and objectual poetry contains a blend of conjuring, music-hall, the circus, the theatre, the cinema and popular culture.

The move to the poem-object came about by chance, the inseparable companion of the work of this poet of illusion. In 1943 he put a piece of reddish tan-coloured paper with anthropomorphic shapes onto a piece of wood, thus making it his first poem-object. In 1951 he exhibited at the Sala Caralt in Barcelona the most enigmatic poem-object of his production: "Martell i carta"; later came the open black umbrella, with the *caganer* in the window of Gales in 1956. The conceptual production of most of his poem-objects can be placed between 1945 and 1969; nevertheless, the majority were not materially produced until the eighties, when Joan Brossa's conceptual work achieved widespread recognition in the light of a return to the practice of the object, first by the conceptual generation of the seventies and then by the neo-conceptualists of the eighties. His work is now recognized throughout Spain, following the two retrospectives held at the Fundació Miró (1986) and the Reina Sofía Art Centre (1991). In Europe, he has received considerable acclaim in Germany.

In his poem-objects, Brossa gathers everyday objects he finds that could rouse experiences or memories in the spectator. The poet does not manipulate these objects, he offers them to us in their true dimension and scale, so as to suggest relationships between objects with similar forms and different meanings and vice-versa, etc., in a game that links the ordinary and the imaginary and that shows the unexpected side of the banal, thus giving continuity to the ironic discourse of Duchamp's "ready-mades".

Halfway between poetry and art, Brossa has worked with a number of artists on the publication of bibliophile editions, intervening from the initial project, to which he contributes the idea, to the end. First with Joan Miró, then with Antoni Tàpies, with whom he has produced most of his illustrated books, and also with younger artists like Perejaume.

Transforming things –starting with the most immediate– and their meaning using his wit or the idea: this is what he proposes. ■