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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

THE EXPANDED STAGE
MARCEL BROODTHAERS
AI WEIWEI
HOMI K. BHABHA & BEATRIZ COLOMINA
GUY DE COINET



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This page: Guy de Cointet, *At Service... à Cry*
Was Heard, 1976. Performance view, Baltimore
Hotel, Los Angeles, 1976. Mary Ann Duganne.
Opposite page: Guy de Cointet in his studio,
Venice, CA, ca. 1976. All works by Guy de Cointet
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Who Is Guy de Cointet?

From the late '60s until his untimely death in 1983, Guy de Cointet was an active member of the Los Angeles art scene whose encrypted works on paper and theatrical productions using readymade language—taken from both the high literature of his native France and the soap operas of his adopted land—were often as enigmatic as the man himself. Looking back on the life and work of this quintessential artist's artist, *Artforum* presents new assessments of and reminiscences about Cointet by curators [Marie de Brugerolle](#) and [Connie Butler](#), writer [Jay Sanders](#), and artists [Mike Kelley](#) and [Matthew Brannon](#), as well as Cointet colleagues and collaborators [Larry Bell](#), [Mary Ann Duganne Glicksman](#), [William Leavitt](#), and [Jeff Perkins](#); followed by a facsimile manuscript of Cointet's 1976 play *At Sunrise ... a Cry Was Heard*.

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Guy de Cointet, *A New Life*, 1981. Performance view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1981. Nile Yasici and René Ricard.

Enigma Variations

MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE

GUY DE COINETET'S FINAL PLAY was never performed during his life, but in a tribute to the artist shortly after his death in Los Angeles in 1983, at age forty-nine, one of his longtime actresses, Jane Zingale, and the mime Tery Arnold decided to stage and film the work. *The Bridegroom* was the very last writing that the enigmatic Frenchman ever put to page. The setting is quite ordinary—a family's living room, complete with a couch, a door that opens onto the street, and a curtained window. At the beginning, we meet Pamela, who is seated, wearing a white mask and black shirt and black leggings beneath a skirt. She is sad. Her aunt Harriet arrives; she tries to give her niece hope. Something, however, is immediately amiss: Aunt Harriet speaks in monologues, whereas Pamela answers in mime (and, just once, with a scream). And when Aunt Harriet points through the window to a young man, Peter, and suggests that he would make a nice boyfriend, Pamela quickly pulls out a suitcase full of shoes, dresses, makeup, magazines, jackets, and perfume—and then rushes out the door. Aunt Harriet, now alone, follows quickly but then stops at the window, where she turns to the audience and says sadly, even mournfully:

Goodbye, my Calvin . . . Goodbye, Charles Jourdan, Adios, little Saint Laurent . . . Adios, *Cosmopolitan*, *Playgirl* . . . Adieu, my Guccis . . . So long, Estée Lauder, Oil of Olay . . . Farewell, Vidal Sassoon . . .

Perhaps Aunt Harriet is disappointed to lose certain outfits Pamela took. Or perhaps she is somehow saying good-bye to her own youth. Regardless, in this final monologue, the last words written by Cointet, it is clear that products take on the qualities of people—even seeming like actors offstage, as this spoken list resembles so much name-dropping—while actors, in their interactions, can seem more like objects, speaking in a language set somehow at a distance from their own emotions.

You might be forgiven if you thought that Cointet was himself just such a figure out of the pages of fiction, for his personal story can, on occasion, seem too

incredible to be true. Drifting through his life were figures ranging from Andy Warhol's muse Viva, with whom Cointet shared a studio loft in mid-'60s Manhattan, to Marshall McLuhan, who was once spotted at a Venice, California, bookstore purchasing a copy of Cointet's completely encoded newspaper, *ACRCIT* (see Perkins, page 412). Known informally by some in the Los Angeles artistic community during the '70s as the Duchamp of LA, Cointet today is the stuff of hearsay, or even legend—a figure spotted in the background of photographs of early Paul McCarthy performances like *Class Fool*, 1976, or said to have stood at the head of classrooms at CalArts, where John Baldessari would sometimes invite him to guest teach (“an alternative to the Finish Fetish artists,” Baldessari says). Someone, in other words, with a powerful hold on the imagination and yet who now seems all but lost to time, a figure nearly as inscrutable as the wealth of encoded drawings and books he produced; and as uncanny as his plays incorporating snippets of television soap operas, Baudelaire, Mexican radio, and conversations overheard on the streets as dialogue. In his own time, Cointet was recognized for his ability to execute “mirrored handwritings”—an artist who was ambidextrous, he possessed the ability to write a correct line with his right hand and its reverse with his left, like Leonardo da Vinci—and, similarly, he produced an oeuvre to mirror contemporary society so that we would recognize its conventions better. As theater critic František Deák once wrote of Cointet's structuralist approach in plays such as *Tell Me*, 1979—in which fashionably attired actresses variously describe a white cardboard square featuring the black capital letters A, D, M, and T (though their actions imply that they are simply waiting for one woman's boyfriend to join them for dinner, which he never does)—the artist juxtaposed “lifelike casual conversation with contrived literary language . . . [pointing] out that both are particular styles and that, with a certain distance, the casual conversation will appear contrived as well.” Only, now it is the artist himself whose reflection is difficult for audiences to see.

Born in Paris in 1934, Cointet would live in many countries over the course of his life—Germany, Morocco, Algeria, to name a few. The son of a French general, he was forced in his youth to move every two years. Of these locations, it could be said that Algeria was the most formative, with its port city Oran the place where he became childhood friends with designer Yves Saint Laurent and—more significantly for Cointet's eventual move to the United States in 1965—fashion photographer Jérôme Ducrot. Together the trio flipped through the pages of the magazine *Jardin des modes*, which inspired them to pursue fashion, design, and art (a tripartite interest apparent not only in *The Bridegroom* but in Cointet's glamorous casting and costuming for theater pieces throughout his life). Saint Laurent would eventually leave for Paris, having won a competition sponsored by Dior. Cointet, failing in the same contest, would take a more circuitous route, landing first at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Art de Nancy (1954–57), in eastern France, before spending two years in the army as part of a required military service during the Algerian War. Finally, in the late '50s he moved to Paris, where he started working with the commercial agency Havas, designing advertisements for products such as Le Chat laundry detergent, Hollywood chewing gum, and Amora mustard.

It was likely with this work in advertising that Cointet began to strike a balance in his art between language as pattern or decoration and language as something instrumentalized or, more plainly said, text with a “goal.” For a time, he made drawings and paintings using newspaper and magazine articles as elements of collage. But his real innovations—when he first used letters as abstract motifs—began only when he moved to New York as an assistant to Ducrot. The latter was already sharing a studio with Viva, who today recalls seeing Cointet there on a daily basis, starting to make his own work, which consisted of movable ladders made from colorfully painted dowels. (The objects, which likely owe something to George Brecht's *Ladder*, 1962—for which the viewer was asked to paint the top and bottom steps white and black, respectively, and fill in a spectrum of hues on

the rungs in between—seemed a kind of obscure signage.) Viva soon introduced him to Larry Bell, who subsequently took on the young Frenchman as his assistant (a few of his famous glass boxes were assembled by Cointet, in fact), which required a move to Los Angeles soon thereafter, in 1968. In this locale, far from his European origins—and as part of an artistic community that included the likes of William Leavitt, McCarthy, Allen Ruppersberg, and James Welling—Cointet fully immersed himself in his linguistic investigations, which took the form of books, works on paper, and works in space.

Cointet's engagements with language were from the start much indebted to literature and, in particular, to the prose style of Raymond Roussel, whose novels such as *Impressions of Africa* (1910) featured narratives taking place in exotic lands, all rendered in crystalline texts composed according to obscure rules (see Leavitt, page 420). Underscoring the artist's literary sensibility, his drawings of the early '70s feature colorful geometric forms upon which Cointet would handwrite his titles, often lines taken from Edgar Allan Poe or Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, the latter's "Garden of Forking Paths" might be the most important of these references, appearing in a 1971 drawing with the clarity of a manifesto—speaking to the way in which Cointet's practice is one of infinite digression, where meaning is kept perpetually open. (Intriguingly, in his later drawings Cointet would use penciled grids to break letters down into constituent lines, spelling out titular phrases such as SHE IS IN WONDERFUL SHAPE! or BACK IN JAMAICA. Before completing these drawings, Cointet would erase the grids, so that this "writing" would appear simply as abstract decorative patterning. As in Poe's "Purloined Letter," what you are looking for is hidden in plain sight; the game here is not to find the solution, which is obvious from the title, but to guess the code and its elementary units.)



Guy de Cointet, *Even His Wife's Face Seemed Changed*, 1978, ink and pencil on Arches paper, 20 x 25 1/2".

MARY ANN DUGANNE GLICKSMAN

I FIRST MET GUY IN 1975, in Venice, California, through Gus Foster. One evening we were going to a party with friends, stuffed into the backseat of a car. As we were driving around the Venice Circle, Guy asked if I would be interested in acting in a performance. That scene remains a vivid picture for me: "Of course I was interested! Extremely interested," to borrow a couple of lines from his 1974 play *Two Drawings*. That invitation set me on a lifelong trajectory that has led to my present life in France.

The first performance we worked on together was *At Sunrise . . . a Cry Was Heard*, 1976, which explains the history of the "halved painting." As with Guy's other works, there is no central plot, but in this case a series of small exotic stories tantalize listeners into thinking that the mystery of the painting might in the end be explained. For me, it was the most difficult piece of any I performed for Guy: It is a long monologue, filled with non sequiturs, dates, lists of numbers, and geographic sites, and it features many characters.

In rehearsal, Guy did not explain his work. He let me experience it. He simply gave me a script and asked me to read it and memorize it. (I'm not sure, but I think our work together was the first of his memorized—as opposed to read—performances.) I would perform a section with no direction, and he would smile, or not. There never were negative comments. If he didn't smile, I would do it again until he was pleased. It was a wonderful relationship, because I was creating my interpretation and adding to his vision. But it was nevertheless important to me, then as now, to say each word as he wrote it, whether or not it seemed correct or made sense. He wove together so many diverse languages and cultures as well as literary and artistic concepts that, for me, each word became a little crystal that needed to touch the surrounding ones exactly as he had placed it, in order to glitter in the way he intended.

Shortly after my first performance of *At Sunrise . . .*, Guy began rehearsals on his first multiact, multi-actor theater piece, *Ethiopia*, 1976. Here we had many props and three actors. Guy did give some stage directions, but he let us discover each prop and also play off one another, developing our relationships and movements using his words. Again there was no central plot but rather merely a series of familial interactions, yet a symbiotic relationship developed between the objects on the stage and the actors as they told their family stories, about travel or former residences.

After *Ethiopia*, I think Guy knew that he was destined to create complex theater pieces. We continued to perform readings from his books and "one object" pieces, which were combined into longer "theater pieces" such as *Cigar*, 1977, and *Oh, a Bear!*, 1978. These and other compositions like *Going to the Market*, 1975, *Two Drawings*, and *My Father's Diary*, 1975, were still cryptic, visual works. But unlike *At Sunrise . . .*, they also had high emotion and excitement, featuring lost love, dangerous jungles, war, and death. They are fascinating to perform, and each time I am swallowed up by them.

And yet Guy himself was quiet, letting his work and his actors speak for him. Indeed, although he was reserved and a bit inscrutable, his work needed someone else in order to be fully realized—from his books with Larry Bell and Gus Foster to his plays directed by, for example, Yves Lefebvre at the Théâtre du Rond-Point in Paris—and people wanted to collaborate with him. In this regard, Guy was atypical in his vision and in his being: On the surface nothing seemed to make sense, but his work's perfect order and beauty made you look for something else, made you accept unanswered questions and improbable situations and enjoy enigmatic language.

When he was ill, just before his death, he was beginning to conceive a new play for the Avignon Festival. The last words I heard him say were "*Tant pis*, I was so close." □

MARY ANN DUGANNE GLICKSMAN IS AN ADVOCATE FOR DISABILITY RIGHTS WHO HAS INTERWOVEN ART AND ACTIVISM THROUGHOUT HER LIFELONG INVOLVEMENT WITH ART AND NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS.

Guy de Cointet, *Two Drawings*, 1974. Performance view, Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, OR, 1977. Mary Ann Duganne.



JEFF PERKINS

I HAD A STUDIO on Main Street in Santa Monica in Ocean Park, where there was a little artist community at the time. One day I heard a knock at my door, and there was Guy standing there, and his eye was huge. Somebody had walked up to him on the street, a total stranger, and punched him. Just smashed him in the face. He was really upset. I think he had a beautiful little storefront in the Venice Circle then, but he wanted to move into my place immediately. So I said yeah. He moved in that day and stayed for about four months. He was smoking Gauloises; he always ate very French, very simple. To me he *was* culture.

By that time we had already collaborated on a piece, his very first publication in 1971, a newspaper called *ACRCIT*, which featured an overview of ciphers. Pages were laid out in braille and Morse code; one page had a magic square and another a Muslim curve; there were a couple of puzzles and some backward writing, which he could do with incredible facility. When he asked me to contribute something, I went to Sam Flax in Westwood and found an aerial view of palm trees in Los Angeles, which he made into a spread. This image, to me, represented the city: flatness and palm trees, which were imported, just like Guy, into California. Now, I think Guy made this newspaper because he was ready to make a statement, to say, "I am here. I exist." But, of course, he couldn't help his sense of irony, which dictated that he publish the thing anonymously. I mean, he didn't even sell the newspaper. He just went out and surreptitiously put it in the racks of different bookstores.

I once heard that Guy grew up in a castle and came from a French military family—that his father was a general, and his father's father a general, going all the way back to Napoleon. But Guy always hid behind different characters. Not long after making the newspaper, he wanted to do performance, so he asked me if we could go to the Screen Actors Guild together to find someone to play the part of his main character, Qei No Mysxdod—which is Guy de Cointet in code. He was looking for a girl to play this person, and we looked through books and books of child actresses, but for some reason he wasn't pleased with anybody. About two weeks later, he called me to say he had found the right actor: Billy Barty, this famous little person. Guy was elated. Billy didn't know what was going on and didn't care. The performance took place at Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles, courtesy of Jean Milant, and Billy stood by a blackboard and a table with all Guy's books on it. Billy just introduced himself: "Yes, I'm Qei No Mysxdod. I'm passing through town, on my way to Benakhor, but I want to present my most recent books. Does anybody have any questions?" And so he took questions. It was scintillating.

As Guy made more performances, he became more confident, which meant more playful. I saw *Tell Me* in September 1979, at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, which was really funny: Three women were talking to the objects around them, speaking in a soap-opera style. They used trivial parlor language, like characters on *Sex and the City*—"Olive, everybody knows Emily is crazy about Peter and vice versa" and "Mary, are you interested in Arthur?"—but their sentences were often incomplete. What was funny to me was that, while they sounded like cheap paperbacks, it was really a sophisticated play on art. It was art, yet it was art making fun of itself. Guy's writing was always a bit of a ruse in this way, too. I deciphered some of his first book, *A Captain from Portugal*, 1972, which read in part, "I have no heroes, I have no dreams . . . I've discovered eight varieties of antelope." When I told Guy I couldn't decode it all, he just said, "Don't worry, it doesn't matter." That was his game: He was into the mystery of language, of puzzles, of objects taking on lives of their own. Guy would place all his strange sources in play, in various forms—whether publishing, theater, himself—and then let the audience figure it out. □

JEFF PERKINS IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK.

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Above: Guy de Cointet, *The Very First Time You Experience This Beauty Fluid*, ca. 1983. Ink on Arches paper, 20 x 25 1/4". Below: Guy de Cointet, *Espahor ledet ko uluner!*, 1973. Performance view, Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1973. Billy Barty.

Such was the open-ended effect of his printed matter as well, which comprised a kind of *typoésie*—to use a term coined by Jérôme Peignot to describe language that rests on the border of the visible and the legible (and which is more evocative in its valences than, say, concrete poetry). In 1971 Cointet also produced a limited-edition newspaper, *ACRCIT*, whose "articles" appeared in braille, Morse code, and other forms of encryption, and which he distributed through local news outlets, as if to make consumers who came upon the work question the legitimacy of the "information" being offered them (see Perkins, at left). Shortly thereafter he began making books with increasingly esoteric titles like *A Captain from Portugal*, 1972, *Espahor ledet ko uluner!*, 1973, and *TSNX C24VA7ME*, 1974, as well as a collaboration with Bell, *Animated Discourse*, in 1975 (see Bell, page 413). This new artistic direction, however, no doubt partly involved a look by Cointet back at his own youth, when he was obsessed with invented languages, mathematical games and riddles, the Inca codex, and military ciphers. The last might well have arisen given his family heritage; according to his friend Jeff Perkins, stories circulated in '70s Los Angeles that Cointet had grown up in a castle that flew heraldic flags. (And, in fact, his family's house, which still exists in Burgundy, was designed after the *Polygone*—a military structure invented by Mauban during the reign of Louis XIV—and has a strange labyrinthine quality. Seen from above, the house even assumes the shape of a crystal.) But one cannot discount his more





Top: Guy de Cointet, *The Paintings of Sophie Rummel*, 1974. Performance view, Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1974. Viva.
Bottom: Spread from Guy de Cointet and Larry Bell's *Animated Discourse* (Sure Co., 1975). Photo: Billy Jim.

general cultural interest in wartime radio broadcasts, where, again, messages could be hidden, as it were, in the open. One thinks twice about Cointet's use of language when considering prosaic government-agency communiqués during World War II such as "the carrots are cooked."

Yet Cointet's mature interests were still more philosophical or, perhaps more accurately, mystical, creating in his audiences the sense that something is hidden and must be revealed—as if there might be some revelation of the irrational in the quotidian. To offer just one example of his approach here, the lettering in *A Captain from Portugal* seems merely a kind of cuneiform script; at the end of the small volume, a pyramid-shaped text presents a code with which one might decipher the tome. As it turns out, however, the words in Cointet's text are not separated by spaces, but rather with still further punctuation that requires deciphering; entire passages are also in Portuguese, so that even a decoded text remains somehow hermetic. The true stakes of his work, then, are not in a text's final meaning, but in the recognition that *everything* is ciphered—suggesting that it is more important for us to find relationships among things than to seek any kind of truth.

It was only a matter of time before Cointet would move into real space, as he sought to stage his books, adding another dimension to such relationships. His first effort was *Espahor ledet ko uluner!*, a presentation in May 1973 at the Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles, for which he recruited the midget actor Billy Barty to improvise a talk based on the artist's book of the same title and steeped in pseudoscientific discourse. (Although Barty had appeared in numerous movies, at that time he was most familiar to audiences as a regular on the televised *Colgate Comedy Hour*, where he would impersonate Liberace while a chandelier spouted shaving cream. See Perkins, page 412.) But more of an indicator for the evolution of Cointet's practice was *The Paintings of Sophie Rummel*, 1974, in which Viva stood before twelve of the artist's new paintings composed of red letters and numbers on white canvas (consisting of license plate and phone numbers found randomly, together they seem like nonsensical signage, or else eye charts). Ultimately, for audience members these became paintings and texts at the same time that they were *representations* of paintings and texts—in short, props. Viva read aloud from sheets containing the exact same text, introducing different potential meanings by using a variety of intonations and rhythms of speech as she revisited the passages over and over. Is it praise? Adoration? Puzzlement? Depending on the intonation, "1256" could be a tragic number.

Here we get a hint of how Cointet's practice of the visual poetry of letters would move toward one of objects. In subsequent productions he literalized language onstage by rendering books as enormous volumes, for example, making them into narrative accessories that stood alongside other geometric stage props that would seem like things, signs, and characters simultaneously, as actresses or actors spoke to them—and, more to the point, as these objects appeared to

LARRY BELL

I MET GUY sometime around 1965 or 1966 through a woman named Susan Hoffman—aka Viva, who was one of Andy's actresses. I was dating her sister, and one day she introduced Guy to me; he had just arrived in New York and needed a job. He spoke practically no English, but I liked him so gave it a shot. He worked in my studio for some seven years. Socially during that period, however, he said about seven words to me. He was a very mysterious person. But I learned a little bit over time. I saw his drawings, ciphers, and stick sculptures. I noticed that he would sometimes shoot videos from the window of his apartment (formerly mine) of a toothless old lady across the street, who would hang the bloomers she was laundering on a clothesline along with aluminum foil.

Not long after Guy stopped working in my studio, I began taking blurry pictures of friends of mine as they moved around that space. When I came across a pamphlet by a Belgian writer named Raoul Vaneigem, who was in the Situationist International, the thought occurred to me to get back in touch with Guy. On the back of the pamphlet was a notice saying that anyone could use this text in any way they wanted. So I did exactly that, shifting around a few of the sentences in the text—which was originally called "Thoughts on Living for the Young"—and giving it to Guy. I asked him to convert my pictures into text, making a kind of translation out of them, which ended up as a book called *Animated Discourse*, 1975. A final passage read:

History is not setting us a goal without giving us the equipment to reach it. When the illusion of real change has been shown, a mere change of illusion becomes intolerable. People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life and without realizing what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth.

We made a key for those interested enough in deciphering it. But, that said, I am not sure Guy's own work had anything to do with communication. In fact, I think it was just the opposite. His act was about total silliness, the most difficult thing to communicate. And so, while his influence on many people was quite profound, I do not think he has ever received any acclaim except from artists. □

LARRY BELL IS AN ARTIST.

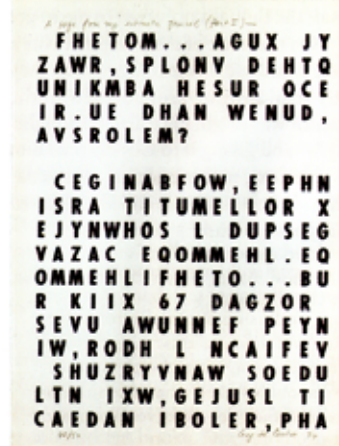


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MATTHEW BRANNON

GROWING UP in places like Alaska in the 1970s and Montana in the '80s, I was used to seeing advertisements before I saw the real thing. Eventually, I realized that everything was right there—in the posters, the previews, the signs, the reviews. You could become obsessed with, say, a film from the posters alone; you didn't have to see the movie to understand. Later, in graduate school, after making a few terrible paintings, I curated student shows and ran the visiting artist program, finally becoming more interested in the promotional residue than in the events themselves. Today posters form the core of my work: They loosely mimic advertising through the balance of text and image; their flat-footed appearance and immediacy are countered by their poetic component; they are full of content but fail to deliver. These are lessons I learned from Guy de Cointet.

I'm sure I first heard of Cointet in Paul McCarthy's New Genres class at UCLA, but I didn't really take note until another student, Jon Pestoni, a living archive of the esoteric and obscure, showed me Cointet's work on paper ("on paper" being very significant in terms of the above). Like Conceptual art with a capital C, the work was something you could imagine yourself producing. But more important, I thought, you literally felt yourself reading; you were very aware of the fact that you were looking at ink on the page. The work was visually hard to define, yet somehow very familiar; it looked pretentious but also casual; it was intimidating but full of humor; and it never seemed a discrete end unto itself. In other words, everything looked like a prop. I loved it before I understood it.



Guy de Cointet, *A Page from My Intimate Journal (Part 1)*, 1974, ink on paper, 30 x 22½". Photo: Billy Jim.

And yet, in fact, before you read anything, you've already understood so much. The choice of type, of color, the layout, how it was printed, the paper—all this tells you an almost infinite amount before you read something. Designers understand this. And it is something Cointet understood. He forces us to focus on the components of language we typically ignore. He pokes fun at the clarity one usually demands from a text and instead draws our attention to textual limits—something he also managed to do in his performances, using language in an open-ended way, employing it in a literary fashion, or using street, camp, or popular tongues. In all these endeavors, you suspect the joke's on you. But you also feel flattered to be involved in the construction of meaning.

Consider a print Cointet made in 1974, called *A Page from My Intimate Journal (Part 1)*. The title is handwritten at the top of the work and is as important as the printed letters below: It suggests that the artist is disrupting the idea of, and demand for, autobiography (another lesson I learned from Cointet). I doubt the work is truly a page from his diary. But even if it were, and even if we could translate the text, how would his private life inform ours? Just what is it we need art for—to find a person in a paper trail? In this regard, I think that Cointet's fabled interest in the soap-opera genre is telling. Indeed, I like to think that the title of this work is pure camp: *Sure, it might look like an eye doctor's exam, but it's actually something deep and private, something I'm sharing.*

Of course, an artist is free to speak in voices other than his own. And the time between an author's writing and an audience's reading is potentially infinite. Yet writing is nevertheless a self-conscious act; one anticipates that people will bring to your work not only intellect but also biases about what art is and has been. It makes perfect sense to me that Cointet would, then, make work disallowing a passive reception; work for those who love language and everything messy about it; work that some will easily dismiss, believing it will never add up to anything. In this regard, I know that to write about Cointet today is to participate in a form of mythmaking. Yet perhaps his general obscurity in the history books to date may still be attributed to his art, which is resistant to just what we desire to discover in him. And so Cointet's work will never fit. □

MATTHEW BRANNON IS AN ARTIST LIVING IN NEW YORK. HIS EXHIBITION "WHERE WE WERE" IS ON VIEW AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AT ALTRIA IN NEW YORK THROUGH AUGUST 26.

trigger dialogues between the actors moving among them (who occasionally even "introduced" the objects to the audience). In the monologue work *At Sunrise . . . a Cry Was Heard*, 1976, a painting was again both signifier and signified, tool and symbol: The actress Mary Ann Duganne refers to the work throughout the play, seeming to take her words from the canvas, looking to the image and then to the audience as she tells the story of an artwork whose origins could be found in hieroglyphics. (In other words, the characters painted on the canvas remained "dead letters" unless they were "acted out" with intonation and body language that created meaning for the audience. "A painting is always a text," Cointet once said.) In *Going to the Market*, 1975, such painting-texts were framed by jagged forms of various colors. Blue evoked a river, green evoked the grass; when the actress pointed to green, she was speaking of a prairie. The decorative elements were themselves always already a text, in other words, again falling between visibility and legibility. As artist Mike Kelley recently said of his first experience seeing such set designs:

It struck me that [Cointet's] props, at least the abstract geometrical ones, were analogous to phonemes in language—they were visual phonemes, primal forms. He used language abstractly. In his drawings, too, he utilized letter forms in an abstract, graphic manner—but at times they were arranged into recognizable words and phrases. It was the same in his performances; there was the same play with abstract/representational tension.

Or, as Cointet himself wrote in one of his later works, *Iglu*, 1977, quoting Baudelaire's "Correspondances" (1857) without citation, "Nature is a temple of living pillars where often words emerge, confused and dim."*

Yet still important here is the role of intonation—and of sound more generally—in Cointet's play with language and code. In an interview just before his death in 1983, he discussed this aspect of his work in a manner suggesting that individual words could be as variable as his structuralist streams of readymade language taken from television melodramas and modern literature alike. "I make dialogue part of the action," he said, continuing:

and it's hard to say when a conversation starts and when it is finished. You realize it's finished only when you get onto another one. People speak differently even in the same language: people in the street, all the different classes of society, tell different jokes and

* The sonnet, as quoted by Cointet, and spoken by the character Rosa, continues: ". . . and man goes through this forest, with familiar / eyes of symbols always watching him . . . perfumes, sounds and colors correspond." The symbolist poet's work is full of such references to synesthesia, where sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste are linked and interchangeable, and Cointet explored this deeply in his work.

talk differently; they have their own vocabularies and special ways of explaining things. These styles are very simple, as well as structured.

Such attention to the effect of sound was informed by his four close collaborations with Robert Wilhite, whom he met in 1972, and which included important plays such as *Ethiopia*, 1976, and *Iglu*. (The pair worked together for only two years.) For the latter piece, Wilhite—who often fabricated the objects onstage for Cointet's productions—made wooden furniture, authored music, and composed a sound track featuring prerecorded phrases from a Spanish-language course. (There is also a "silent harp," an instrument that—in a kind of nod to John Cage—produces stretches of silence.) In the recording, words that sound similar yet have vastly different meanings—recalling Roussel's preoccupation with homophony—are intermittently spoken as part of a conversation among four characters whose language ranges from advertising taglines to poetry, with one mood change marked by the arrival of a telegram with terrible news. Today, Wilhite says that, while words in a work such as this could take on the quality of objects, he "saw the opportunity for injecting sound within a narrative format and thereby enlarging the 'sculptural' aspect of my sound-making." Sometimes, he adds, the objects he made for their collaborations produced sounds "not intended to be 'music.' Instead, the sounds were similar to verbal descriptions in that they gave the objects identities."

Yet in describing sound's effect within his staged collaborations with Cointet, Wilhite also cites the influence of Russian Cubo-Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922): "For Khlebnikov, a shift in sound that produced a shift in meaning was a shift in the structure in the universe." For his part, Cointet took a more sober view of sound's role in his work: "It's not music, it's more codes," he said. Nevertheless, as far as the duo's final collaboration is concerned, one must say

that a major shift in structure—and one pregnant with implications for Cointet's art as we see it today—did take place. For *Ramona*, 1977, there were minimal props; he and Wilhite instead took as their set the main entrance to an abandoned building at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, a structure with a grand French Renaissance facade and staircase. Accompanying the production was a trio of musicians who wore hats with black netting covering their faces, as well as black leather gloves; with rhythms determined by chance, they played gongs, each one of a different metal (stainless steel, bronze, and copper) and a different shape (circle, triangle, and square). The story was that of a "sensitive young woman," Ramona, who has just moved into a house overlooking the Pacific Ocean, which is "not so passive on this particular evening." But most remarkable here was how the facade becomes a kind of seamless scenery; even a window above the balcony, where most of the action takes place, frames the actresses so that they seem like figures in a painting. In the plays that followed *Ramona*, Cointet, looking for new "correspondences," for the most part moved away from objects, instead composing works in which each scene appeared under lighting of a different color, for example. Whereas Cointet had once held a mirror to society's codes and conventions, toward the end of his life he seemed prepared to move into society itself, imagining a theater in the street (as well as, more playfully, in a swimming pool). "How strange that the narrow perspective lines always seem to meet, although parallel," says the character John Bentley in *Ramona*. And so it might have been with Guy de Cointet and the codes he discerned all around him, creating an art—as well as an artist—that we seek to decipher today. □

MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE ORGANIZED THE FIRST EUROPEAN SURVEY OF GUY DE COINET'S WORK AT THE MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE ET CONTEMPORAIN, GENEVA, IN 2004. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

Translated from French by Jeanine Herman, with additional translation by Yves Schen and Tim Griffin.

Guy de Cointet and Robert Wilhite, *Ramona*, 1977. Performance view, Gates Hall, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA, 1977. Mary Ann Duganne and Harry Frazier.





Guy de Cointet, *Tel Me*, 1979. Performance views, Los Angeles County Museums of Art, 1979. Top right: Helen Mender, Jane Zingale, and Derise Domingue.

Mood Elevators and Changing Shapes

JAY SANDERS

IT'S A PERFORMANCE taken up a thousand times a day: The gallerist, museum tour guide, or art collector stands in front of an enigmatic painting, takes a deep breath, gestures toward it—an object in need of an explanation—and opens her mouth. . . .

For art audiences, the primary point of contact with an artwork is often the social space right in front of it (modern art as verbal production). In Guy de Cointet's work, however, this space becomes the art itself. He creates a staging area to enact a theater of "understanding," "appreciation," and "decoding"—fundamentally reorienting the nature of his paintings, making them into a kind of prop. Cointet's contemporary and friend William Leavitt, who also produced "prop paintings"—works made specifically to function as theatrical objects—describes this approach as "a way to avoid modernism," a means of conceptually circumventing the trajectory of "painting" and the critical measures applied to the medium. By being presented onstage, a painting can at the same time step off the stage of painting history.

Situated in this way, Cointet's paintings are fashioned specifically to participate in their own custom-made fiction. A beautiful actress in a stylish dress, say,

stands before the audience, the painting or paintings already on view behind her. Her monologue, in its marvelous storytelling, takes the paintings on riotous journeys through space and time—a narrative like a carnival ride or an adventure movie, only starring a painting. (It is art as performed fantasy, as entertainment.) Of course, the "painter," too, must be a fabrication. As if a precursor to today's artistic efforts toward creating "paintings without painters" and other forms of fictive production, Cointet produces *The Paintings of Sophie Rummel*, 1974, a suite of screenprints by Huzo Lumnst, and dramatic presentations of books by Dr. Hun or Qei No Myssxdod.

Even when Cointet's performances aren't happening, then, they are still there, embedded in the very structure of these objects of our attention. The performance is always "about to start," and we're there in extended anticipation, waiting to hear the script that will, for example, unlock the flat, impenetrable codes of numbers and letters comprising the canvases. The paintings, in other words, are structured as visual aids to their own revelation. The poet Tan Lin, in his recent book *7 Controlled Vocabularies* (2006), posits an analogous contemporary condition, where art objects fully commingle within the highly evolved field of domestic "lifestyle," an aesthetic space where culture is reduced to code: "Paintings like words can be read as an equation for any number of diagrammatic surfaces: inexactitude, thought, the false arc of the historical. All paintings should be flow charts of paintings and inhabit a decorated space." Cointet's paintings operate like science fictions—paintings as ambient code, triggering dreams.

The artist's fully developed plays, which came slightly later, convey a similar ontological ambience. Adopting the mode of television melodramas, his actresses move through the set, talking with one another about love affairs and home life, sharing anecdotes and gossip. But in a manner resembling that of test laboratories where certain environmental conditions are held constant, the sets and props these

characters find themselves surrounded by lack the ornamental and defining attributes of "design" that allow forms to become specific objects. Instead, everything in Cointet's performance work is kept as a volume—a basic shape with a basic color. A red cone, perhaps. Or orange cubes. Rectangles in black, green, and blue. A pink diamond. The plays demonstrate that everything one touches becomes media, a surface point for committing a momentary hallucination of definition. Objects are open codes for domestic lifestyle. An example from *Tell Me*, 1979: "Where's my comb? Oh, there it is." (The actress knocks over a large

Cointet's plays demonstrate that everything one touches becomes media, a surface point for committing a momentary hallucination of definition. Objects are open codes for lifestyle.

stack of orange cubes.) "Oh! My precious book!!" (She begins picking up and restacking the blocks.) "Half a sentence is broken! . . . I'll fix it later. . . . But there, I'm afraid one word is beyond repair. . . . What a shame, it's an important word." Like flashlights shining in the dark, the actresses verbally identify and engage each colorful form, whose tenacious blankness only erases any residual meaning at the moment that the women move on to something else. As content fails to adhere or accumulate, we can never feel comfortably oriented to what we see.*

In a rare statement on his own work, published posthumously in 1984, Cointet explained, "In my performance pieces there is a progression in the dialogue, but there is nothing so striking as plot." He produces, he continues, something more like walking tours through the decor of the set:

What I like is the texture of the characters interacting with the objects and shapes and feeling completely at ease with them. . . . The audience sees arrangements and piles of painted geometric forms. During the course of my plays these forms are talked about and their identities revealed. After the audience discovers what everything is, sometimes they're even more confused.

This choreography bears a resemblance to the work of another Frenchman, filmmaker Jacques Tati and, in particular, to his first color film, *Mon Oncle* (1958), and its complex kinetic movements among people and household objects. While the film is specifically a parody of domestic modernization, the bold primary colors of the furnishings (a yellow chair, blue patio umbrella, green sofa) set in a fictitious ultramodern house—as well as the stark gray/white interior's contrast with the bright green front lawn—nevertheless encourage the same kind of heightened visual comedy between people and things that Cointet achieves on the stage. Chairs and tables at a garden party are shuffled in a highly choreographed but "clumsy" manner; futuristic interactive household gadgets populating the home's interior operate in radically unexpected ways—extended domestic scenes are lost in the cacophonous pleasure and visual slapstick of people moving objects through a landscape. And life at home is an ongoing series of inept negotiations (physical and emotional), resulting in a kind of busy-looking "sameness."

Indeed, both directors avoid developing the interior life of their "characters," preferring basic caricatures instead—and in Cointet's case, the emotional ups and downs and domestic humdrum of soap operas. His actresses appropriately "overact," adopting a style that is somewhat saccharine in the context of performance art. (In this regard, one might also note that Tati's stylistics were quite out of step with the New Wave.) Just as the plays trace contextual outlines around shapes scattered about the stage, so, too, the theatrical deliveries outline a wide array of performed emotions. In Cointet's earliest performances—

*Again, Tan Lin: "Information should never be allowed to accumulate for too long [like desires] and become static form. Information should constitute the thinnest possible coating on paintings, sculptures, deserted public plazas, and airports. In such a way, forms that disappear become extensions of everything else."

dramatic "readings" of his nonsensical books—the actress or actresses would run through a rainbow of staged emotions, from assertiveness to sexual desire, from rage to sorrow or frustration. Like someone turning the dial on a radio, drifting through stations, Cointet cross-fades freely among the emotions that might be expressed over the course of a play. In his last completed piece, *Five Sisters*, 1982, this modulation became Cointet's focus: No props whatsoever were used and the audience's attention was drawn instead to changes in the moods of the "sisters" that corresponded with the changing colors of the stage lighting (designed by artist Eric Orr). As Cointet explained, "For example, to relax, you need blue light. A character says, 'It's so blue,' and she slowly starts becoming completely blue. Another character is very sensitive to the sun; in fact, she can't stand it. Once in a while a bright yellow square appears; when she sees it she starts to get sick, and then becomes completely upset, out of her mind." Decor modulating mood, emotions as changing lights. Lin writes:

What are emotions we are about to have in a future already present? The era of emotions is over. One prefers a mood or mood predictor (mood rings, glo-balls, bio-feedback devices, etc.), which in turn become logos for products, which in turn become product-emotions, which in turn become consumers (by-products). In this way the consumer is always ahead of the feelings she is having, just as with Muzak whose décor can minimize any room or elevator in the minute before one walks into it.

Why not have a more sophisticated relationship with objects? What are the artistic possibilities of activating nonadministered forms of information and nonprescribed uses of things? How can we reoccupy the betweenness of our interactions?

While Cointet's work during the '70s and early '80s is unique, it nevertheless may be set within the context of a few artists working simultaneously on both coasts of the United States. His focus on performed-object manipulations, on semantic complexity—and on working within "genres," with an open-ended phenomenological approach to meaning—brings to mind Michael Smith's solo stage works like *Let's See What's in the Refrigerator*, *Comedy Routine*, and *Busman's Holiday Retreat Revue*. One also remembers the intensely economical tabletop "Spectacles" of Stuart Sherman and John Zorn's Theatre of Musical Optics. (Significantly, all these artists found inspiration in the Ontological-Hysterical Theater of Richard Foreman.) The same might be said regarding Leavitt's stage pieces and Mike Kelley's early lectures, which appeared in Los Angeles at the same time that Cointet was producing work. And so Cointet's example makes it clear that complex undercurrents remain in art history, still lacking sufficient feedback, requiring another deep breath. □

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Set for Guy de Cointet's *De toutes les couleurs*, Théâtre du Rond-Point, Paris, 1982.



That's Guy de Cointet

CONNIE BUTLER

ONE OF THE SONGS I had in constant rotation for years in my car in Los Angeles was David Stephenson and Richard Bell's "I Want to Hang Out with Ed Ruscha": "I want to pack up and fly to LA / I want to hang out with Ed Ruscha / He makes the words and light interplay / He puts cool into LA / That's Ed Ruscha." It was on a compilation CD commemorating the late Giovanni Intra, the mercurial New Zealander who was a founder and the pied piper of China Art Objects gallery in Los Angeles for four short years. Like the French-born artist and LA immigrant Guy de Cointet, whose work is the topic at hand, Intra's light burned fast and bright. The impact he had on his host city and its resident artists was profound and indelible. He must have loved that catchy Ruscha tribute (I assume that's why it's on the disc) for the way its languid phrasing and cool temperature crystallize the exotic, archly existential, and deeply humorous posture of a certain kind of Conceptual art that has emanated from LA for more than thirty years now. Coming from one of the most beautiful and extreme landscapes in the Pacific, Intra somehow understood the weird confluence of light and text that infused Ruscha's best text paintings of the 1980s and the coolness that characterizes his body of work as a whole.

But then the nausea took over again. And trembling and shaking, for some reason, she lost her balance and fell into the river. Fortunately, two persons, two gentlemen, with a slight accent from Luxembourg, caught her just in time!

—Guy de Cointet, from *Oh, a Bear!*, 1978

According to those who knew him—and no one seems to have known him very well—Cointet's time in Los Angeles was deeply imprinted by his experience of the popular culture there and the surreal beauty of the California exotic. He lived in a loft in Little Tokyo long before it was colonized by artists, and there he listened voraciously to Chinese, Filipino, and Mexican radio stations, which provided the sound track to his steady diet of television soap operas in as many languages as pre-cable Los Angeles had to offer. Cointet had moved to LA in 1968, and he remained there until his death in 1983, of AIDS. As suddenly as he had arrived on the scene, he disappeared into the hospital, having deteriorated quickly from what his doctors mistook to be hepatitis.

Fully at home as a cultural transplant in a city often caricatured, to this day, as a cultural wasteland, Cointet made theatrical performances that defy categorization and yet are absolutely central to a largely unmined history of Conceptual performance art as it unfolded on the West Coast. Like that of his contemporary Ruscha, Cointet's involvement with language was of a largely pedestrian kind. More often overheard than read, his sources were of the down-market variety—the smarmy cadences of '70s television advertising, the trashy condescension of fashion magazines, the loopy hysteria of soap-opera confessionals, and the random brilliance of eavesdropped conversations—and together they contributed subplots about food, beauty, dieting, and love.

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Guy de Cointet, *The Halved Painting*, 1974. Performance view, University of California, Irvine, 1974. Deborah Coates.

The land lays silent, still, under the brilliant sun already starting to set down . . . Only frail butterflies, fearless children of the sun, capricious tyrants of the flowers, are fluttering about audaciously. Their minute shadows hover in the swarms over the dropping blossoms, run lightly on the withering grass, or glide on the dry and cracked earth . . . Oh! It's starting to rain! —from *Ethiopia*, 1976

When he moved to Los Angeles from New York, where he had experienced Warhol's Factory firsthand and had begun to develop his performance theater, Cointet joined artists such as Bas Jan Ader, Michael Asher, David Askevold, John Baldessari, Ger van Elk, Douglas Huebler, David Lamelas, William Leavitt, Allen Ruppersberg, Ruscha, William Wegman, and others who were, at the time, inventing the Conceptualist trope of location. While Robert Smithson was in New Jersey making his non-sites and calling his home state the California of the East in tribute to the left coast, where he had made some of his most ambitious site-related works, artists in Southern California were using the extreme hybridity of the landscape and the locally diverse culture around them to fashion a regional, location-related conceptual language. I think here of Cointet's ravishing and mysterious *Halved Painting*, 1974, a landscape of letters with a gash through the middle, a gap that functions as a silence, a challenge to the aural image called up by the title of the latter of two plays in which the painting starred as its leading prop—*At Sunrise . . . a Cry Was Heard*, 1976. An actress, dressed with Carol Merrill aplomb, narrates an epic journey punctuated by the letters in the painting to which she gestures at critical points in the story line. While a specific location is never revealed, the journey recalls one of Cointet's (and Ruppersberg's) favorite fictions, Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* (1910). This mix of a silence that is expressed visually and an aural experience that is described with language or letters but is unintelligible to the audience—this experience of confounded reading, of audiovisual aphasia, is similar to the experience of reading Ruscha's paintings. Or more to the point of the gap, Ruscha's paintings of the late '80s that contain actual chunks of negative space, unpainted moments where words should appear. They appear to function linguistically but don't, or can't. In Ruscha's *Nothing Landscape*, 1987, for instance, the gap is framed by two trees that act like parentheses around the silence in the middle—a luscious caricature of a

landscape that is structured by language and generates only silence.

We used to live there, on a plantation between the Rio Colorado and the Rio Negro, just East of Bahía Blanca.
—from *Ob, a Bear!*

Like his LA compatriots Ruscha and Ruppertsberg, Cointet made books and breathtaking drawings using coded language apparently developed from many sources (his mother was a linguist; as a child during the war, he became intimately familiar with military codes; etc.). The drawings and books can be deciphered and were often narrated in lecturelike monologues in his performances. “Mock professorial” was a frequently employed mode for Cointet’s characters. His first play, *Españor ledet ko uluner!*, 1973, was a monologue in which the actor Billy Barty read from the artist’s eponymous book in a kind of overenunciated gibberish, creating narrative interest purely through gesture and intonation. The books and drawings functioned as guides or keys to the embedded and implied narratives that the artist worked out, but also as daily objects, props, or scripts to everyday existence. Cointet’s drawings and books all cycled around the dramatic tableaux and plays he would write and stage for various art houses in Los Angeles (and, later, around the



Guy de Cointet, ca. 1980. Photo: Manuel Fuentes.

MIKE KELLEY

THOUGH GUY DE COINETET was still alive when I moved to Los Angeles in 1976, I never met him, nor did I see any of his theatrical productions until after his death. These works were not performed often, so it’s not so surprising that I missed them even though I was living in the same city. Yet I was a fan of his work based on the little I did come across, like the script for his play *Tell Me*, 1979, which appeared in an arts journal accompanied by photographs of its recent production. Much of my own performance work at the time was made in response to such written accounts of live events, rather than to personal experience. The same could be said of my appreciation for the early work of Robert Wilson and the plays of Richard Foreman, both of which were unavailable to me (and which, I would argue, share some characteristics with the work of Cointet).

I did see some of Cointet’s drawings in person, however. These consisted of combinations of letter and number forms, sometimes with an accompanying phrase that cast the arrangement in a theatrical light. Here’s an example from his 1975 book *A Few Drawings*: “I stand dumbfounded and stare at her in amazement.” It was this theatrical, and somewhat romantic, quality that gave his work its uniqueness and differentiated it from the history of concrete poetry and the Constructivist play—with its abstract use of letter forms—that I was familiar with.

His stage sets had a similar quality. Abstract shapes and forms, furniture, and charts were arranged into tableaux that intimated domestic interiors. These were extremely beautiful and could easily have functioned as stand-alone sculptures. But they were not sculptures; they were arrangements of objects designed to be performed within.

After Cointet’s death, his friends mounted a number of his plays at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, with many of the original cast members. I saw the entire series and was incredibly impressed. They were unlike anything I had seen before. The dialogue was generally abstract, yet the staging was quite dramatic—sometimes melodramatic. This combination of abstract form and language, paired with the performative tropes of melodrama, was very powerful and original. Actor and object had equal weight: The symbolic ambiguity of the set pieces inflected the performances, and the emotional intensity of the performers charged the set pieces. This was, truly, a kind of sculptor’s theater.

What was particularly unusual, especially for the era, was the focus on beauty and elegance. With the exception of *Españor ledet ko uluner!*, 1973—an abstract “lecture” performed by famed little-person actor Billy Barty, which was overtly comedic—Cointet’s plays for the most part featured beautiful women of extreme poise. Though this evocation of the aesthetics of the fashion world is standard fare in today’s art world, it was extremely uncommon in the late ’70s. And it was particularly strange in the context of the day’s performance-art scene, which in Los Angeles was dominated by politically oriented feminist works and body art. Unlike New York, Los Angeles—probably because of the omnipresence of the film industry—had almost no history of avant-garde theater. In fact, its performance art (or action art, or body art, or whatever else you want to call it) has often been defined in direct opposition to theatrical traditions. Allan Kaprow’s call for the merger of art and life was a very strong local politic. Cointet was definitely the odd man out in this artistic milieu.

I have heard Cointet defined as a Surrealist. I suppose this stems from the surface absurdity of his work, and from the incommensurable play between clarity of form and ambiguity of meaning that is at the core of it. But I don’t think this label is accurate. “Psychology” doesn’t have much of a place in his work, except for the outward manifestations of it. I would be more inclined to describe Cointet as a structuralist. His works are incredibly refined formally, and he had a great understanding of the visual tropes of acting style. The “theatricality” of his work caused many viewers to get lost in issues of narrativity, which I believe were a smoke screen. Cointet was an abstract artist who could equally appreciate the formal beauty of pure geometric form and the histrionic gestures of melodrama. □

MIKE KELLEY IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES IN LOS ANGELES.

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WILLIAM LEAVITT

ONE DAY GUY INVITED ME to visit his studio at Washington and Normandie—which turned out to be a sizable loft, spare of furnishings except for a table, a bed, and a wire carousel rack for paperbacks that contained, among others, books by Raymond Roussel and Alain Robbe-Grillet. I had first heard of Guy when someone who had seen my play *The Silk*, 1975, told me that he and I were doing something similar; we were subsequently introduced by Denise Domergue, one of his actresses, who was married to Bob Wilhite. But it was in Guy's loft that I realized we did, in fact, share influences that brought us both to investigate a particular kind of theatrical work.

Roussel's novel *Impressions of Africa* (1910) and his play *La Poussière de soleil* (1926) were uninflected chains of events, dispassionately described in a precise and neutral style. That Guy came from a family of cryptographers would explain the strong appeal he felt for the wordplay and language codes of these odd narratives. Where Guy and I connected, however, was that we saw the situations, actions, and manipulations of bizarre apparatuses, humans, and animals in books like *Impressions of Africa* not only to be delicious in the Surrealist sense but also liberating for Roussel's disinterest in creating suspense or achieving resolution. But, whereas the codes in my work were more generic and about the day's culture, Guy took a collection of objects and words and reduced them to his own code, then voiced them theatrically with actors and props. These pieces seemed like theater, but the theatrical meaning was missing.

In truth, my play, in its distanced description and voice-over narration, was probably closer to Robbe-Grillet than to Roussel. Yet I think that for both Guy and me, a play was a theatrical object or image: a series of events that occurred in time, one that unfolded without suspense or gratuitous emotion. We were also reacting against the pyrotechnics of avant-garde theater and the brutality of performance art. Our goal was not to break the bounds of theater but to stay within them in order to achieve the effect of the ordinary through actions and descriptions that were obvious. The words became the objects of desire. □

WILLIAM LEAVITT IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES IN LOS ANGELES.



Guy de Cointet, *Iglu*, 1977. Performance view, Theatre Vanguard, Los Angeles, 1977. From left: Monica Tenner, Mary Ann Duganne, Glen Prior, and Jane Zingale.

country and in Paris). Like Ruscha's photographic books, Cointet's books and drawings are exquisite and opaque, unyielding yet indulgent in their appreciation of the vernacular. One drawing, from around 1976, is a monochromatic, red constructivist landscape of peaks and valleys that apparently spell out the work's title, *I Smoke All the Time*, a phrase of hilarious and compulsive rejection of the natural, wholesome beauty that is the Southern California landscape, the backdrop of transgression of all kinds. Campy linguistics dressed up as cool, reductive abstraction.

Cointet's dramas—*Ethiopia*, 1976, *Iglu*, 1977, the incantory *Espahor ledet ko uluner!*—not only occupied or implicated dystopic locations of desire and otherness, they transported the audience through a narrative of dramatically inflected clichés, non sequiturs, and pulp-fiction fragments. Brightly colored props, oversize geometric forms implying various domestic fragments and resembling a Constructivist reading room, were manipulated by elaborately clothed women (and they were almost always women) performing a kind of hyperfemme drag concocted from the daytime soaps and the self-conscious voyeurism of Warhol's screen tests. The connection to Warhol is not unimportant, and Cointet would even cast Viva, a Warhol actress, in *The Paintings of Sophie Rummel*, 1974. The script to *Five Sisters*, 1982, arguably Cointet's most resolved and mature play, is a collage of clichéd exclamations about beauty, self-help, and all manner of feigned emotions. Cosmetic surgeons, exotic locales, and New Age tinctures are discussed and punctuate the simple stage directions. The final cadence of the play is a comment on the art world, which returns us to some kind of known reality but renders it as transparent and ridiculous as the facial moisturizer that has been discussed at length in the scene before: "Why are my paintings so disturbing to me, and to Rachel, to Maria, to Dolly? My dealer seems to like them. He says they're neat and pretty. Maybe he should take a second look at them." Funny, and a little too close to home.

She's presently all alone in the garden of her West Los Angeles home. Showing signs of emotional distress, she aimlessly wanders about hoping to find some comfort in the solitude of this summer night . . . Surrounded by the dark shadows of trees and bushes, the graceful woman is standing arms stretched out, and she seems to address the moon . . .
—from *Iglu*, 1977

Imagine a constellation that might include William Leavitt's *California Patio*, 1972, an installation consisting of a sliding glass door of the tract-house variety and a fake potted landscape of the sort one might find on the adjacent patio; Ruppertsberg's *Location Piece*, 1969, a performative installation comprising a pathetic arrangement of nature's leftovers in a theatrical construction in an office; *Instant Mural*, 1974, made by the Chicano collective ASCO (Spanish for *nausea*): an ephemeral tableau of an artist taped against the wall, suspended in action as if caught, framed on the sidewalk of East LA in a moment of fragility

and aesthetic transgression in the geography of the stucco neighborhood; and, finally, David Lamelas's film *The Desert People* (1974), in which a collection of characters, including a Native American, a housewife, and a jock, all cruise around the freeways of LA, packed into a sedan, narrating their memories of a Papago Indian reservation, their journey ending with the car careening over a cliff. All synthetic landscapes, all completely familiar and generative.

To get from Cointet to the present, add to this constellation the over-the-top, postpunk, mariachi, Warholian theatrics of the anarchic collaborative duo Martiniano Lopez-Crozet and Milena Muzquiz, who call themselves Los Super Elegantes. Promoted early by Silverlake drag queen Vaginal Davis and supported

Cointet made theatrical performances that defy categorization and yet are absolutely central to a largely unmined history of Conceptual performance art as it unfolded on the West Coast.

by artists Stephen Prina and Mike Kelley, who knew Muzquiz at Art Center, Los Super Elegantes brilliantly embody a kind of conceptual *mestizaje* that could only have been nurtured in Southern California. Also emanating from Los Angeles are the campy conceptual, pseudo-glam-rock stylings of My Barbarian, another performance group, founded in 2000, whose core is Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade, who claim that their "antic, rock-operative oeuvre synthesizes music, art, and theater through site-responsive spectacles, videos, and recordings." *Squirrel Radio Action*, a 2005 performance, video, and radio play commissioned by Pacific Drift for public radio station KPCC in Pasadena, centered around a posse of disease-ridden rodents that make street theater to call attention to their plight. My Barbarian aspire to be famous for nothing, à la Paris Hilton.

Guy de Cointet. *Ethiopia*, 1976. Performance view, Barnsdall Park Theatre, Los Angeles, 1976. Jesse Ferguson, Brian Jones, and Mary Ann Duganne.

Immersed in the pop-culture landscape of Los Angeles, these two groups have emerged in the past few years, producing some provocative and often absurdist performance-based work that is, in fact, deeply connected to the work of Cointet and the history I'm attempting to conjure (of conceptual performance steeped in what Muzquiz of LSE has described as "the shaky-shaky-boom-boom appeal of what we do, no matter how much concrete poetry and readymade Marxism we shovel in"). Muzquiz, who is from Tijuana, has also said, "I can see a border mentality in what I do. I'm not interested in defining things. . . . This natural disregard for origin has something to do with Tijuana in general." This miscegenation of form—the strategic intermingling of lowbrow Latin pop references (Lopez-Crozet, a native of Buenos Aires via the San Francisco Art Institute, cites Sando, the Argentine Elvis, as a formative influence), French theory, Anglo middlebrow aspirations of taste and decorum, and self-conscious riffing on the art world—seems the perfect remix for the moment. Los Super Elegantes' 2005 performance at Daniel Hug Gallery in LA's Chinatown was titled *The Technical Vocabulary of an Interior Decorator*. The night was warm, the production was a mix of the raunchy, the homegrown, and the slightly pathetic, but it was absolutely fabulous.

The magic of the orchestra was beyond approach. When the first note would start not a sound could be heard from the audience, no matter how large the theater. They would be totally spellbound, hypnotized by the potion of loveliness they saw dancing in front of them, and the combination of sounds more delirious than anything ever heard. There was a French critic who had compared the orchestra to the roar of the minotaur in ancient lore. It was common knowledge the critic was bitter with the group because he had gone deaf as a result of the applause from the final curtain. —Guy de Cointet, from *Ethiopia*, 1976 □

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Aug 3, 1976
Ritz Hotel ①

AT SUNRISE A CRY WAS HEARD

NO SURE

ONCE UPON A TIME

Not long ago, in May 1974, I was a guest at a party given by Alexander Bessarof, the wellknown Soviet writer, at his Moscow apartment, located in a fashionable area of that magnificent city. When I walked in the spacious drawing-room I was struck by the sight of a large, red, painting hanging on the wall. ^{the emotion I felt, looking at the simple but obscure signs} was immediat and quite intense.

LONGER - NOT SURE

It was a mild evening of that time of the year, just past winter, I come to love the best. This special Russian season of sun and haze, of blue and green... Guests were mingling about the rooms, in lively conversation. All windows were open. I was leaning on a broad window sill feeling the soft breeze, breathing the fresh exhalations rising from the luxuriant vegetation of the garden below, from the land around, from the majestic Russian forest I could see in a distance... Close to me, two young men in white trousers and yellow tunics, probably Greeks considering their dark eyes, pale complexion and jetblack hair, were singing with skill and sincerity the beautiful Gypsy hymn:

BIG
FAR
CLOSE

"Csak egy kis lany

van a vilagon

As is as ei draga

galabon

A jo Isten de nagyon

serethet

Hogy en... .."

→ immediately

A N O P X J K
F C M I U B H
S L Z J P C
T H P C M E O
M Y R D E T
L X J N I B U
E R H V O F Z
M A T D H V S

At Sunrise ... a Cry Was Heard

GUY DE COINTET

(2)

*Painting
in the
background*

A sweet melody full of passion, longing, adoration... But, I couldn't take my mind off the red painting which had impressed me so profoundly when I first saw it.

*Painting
in the
background*

The proportions of the picture, the great variety of the signs and their esthetic qualities, the deep rich color, pleased me a lot. I stood in front of it, and remained there for a moment. Long enough to be slowly aware of other things. *could be involved?* But realizing I was not able to understand the text, nor to put some order in the vague and contradictory feelings the picture was giving me. *57th St. NYC*

I joined the guests again...

*July
1967*

I knew Alexander Bassarof for some time. I met him several years ago in America, while we were doing a radio show together, from Fordham University. It was an interesting show called: "Vox Poetica". We recited the poetry of Carl Sandburg, Edna St Vincent Millay, Robert Service, Sylvia Plath, along with the works of talented young poets from the Soviet Union.

*NO
SIDE*

Noticing Bassarof was by chance alone, and agog with my own curiosity I asked him where that painting came from. He chuckled into his beard and said: "A Japanese colleague gave it to me before the war, in spring 1939. The painting was found during excavations on the island of Hondo in Japan. It is dated long before our era..."

personal

"Long before our era?...". I said, "long before our era...? I remember... of course I remember. It is not from the island of Hondo in Japan that picture comes from... but from Egypt! It is... it is the famous "VOGAL PAINTING", the notorious piece for which a temple was built. # It's beauty, and aptitude to

MYSTERY

(3)

emit a sound once in a while, used to attract worshippers and sightseers from all over the country, and from all over the world.

Highly interested Bassarof asked me to tell him all I knew about the piece himself liked so much.

*Play
down*

"Actually," I said, "the sounds which are recorded as having been emitted by the painting were neither many nor especially melodious. Infrequently, but always at sunrise, those who stood near it, long ago, might hear a thin, strident sound, like the breaking of a harp string. That was all. An aimless cry heard at rare intervals during a relatively short period of two hundred years. A period preceded and followed by many centuries of silence. Yet it was a phenomenon of which hardly any similar case is on record; and it was not, it should seem, a deception. The painting, which had been silent for so long, and has again sunk into silence, did once acquire and exercise some strange inherent power of saluting the sun."

NOISE - LISTEN TO IT

The painting was made about 1500 BC. The name of the artist is totally forgotten, which is surprising since the picture immediately after its completion has been the object of great curiosity and devotion.

NOISE

The meaning of the message itself, also, has been lost and has never been broken in modern times. Perhaps, that is my personal opinion, has never been known in its time either, when the painting was brought to Pluh-Hah, a remote valley of lower Egypt.

Nevertheless, several imaginative persons and dedicated historians tried their talents at deciphering the beautiful



Opposite page, far left: Guy de Cointet, *Halved Painting*, 1976, oil on canvas, 80 1/4 x 56 1/2". This and opposite page: Manuscript of Guy de Cointet's *At Sunrise... a Cry Was Heard*, 1976 (annotated by Mary Anne Duganne). Right: Guy de Cointet, *At Sunrise... a Cry Was Heard*, 1976. Performance view, Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles. Mary Ann Duganne.

Painted signs... never to succeed!

For example, in mid-eighteenth century an eminent professor from an African Republic, noticed a slight difference between the "larger" signs in the center and the "smaller" signs on the edges. "Only the large types," he maintained, "are true symbols. The small ones seem merely to serve as explanatory or to interpret the others, some of them bear a marked resemblance to a alphabetic letters." But he never could figure out either the symbols or the writing. ~~In more recent times~~

after fact
system
In more recent times, around 1880 I think, a group of ardent Chinese searchers developed the idea there was a very close connection between the sounds emitted by the picture and the signs painted. "As a matter of fact," they stated, "the entire painting is a musical description of some national event or monument." Which is not to be readily rejected since everybody *knows the Egyptians possess a natural inclination to rhythm* and are fond of inventive musical compositions. But again, the Chinese failed to give a specific explanation.

Among the many different interpretations, futilities and pretentious assumptions or penetrating suppositions which still remained to be proved, I hold only one, which may well be indicating the right direction. *From fact soft - personal*

Out of her sheer poetic mind Laura Subec, from Western Europe, in the 12th century, came to the idea of the message being closely related, in an extremely intricate cryptogram form/ to an intense love affair which ended in tragedy and which, like a burning stone, jolted the emotions of the people inhabiting the peaceful Egyptian valleys long before the pyramids *peaceful*

CLOSE TO TRUTH

light

were built, and long before the painting was made. This reminds me of a Hollywood columnist and close friend of Jayne Mansfield who, worrying about her troubled sentiments, said to her: "Jayne, are you becoming like the immortal Isadora Duncan, the famous dancer who lived for love?" "I live in beauty and love," the actress answered, "anything less is not for me, for it would be unnatural." A few months before her violent death a leading psychiatrist from London who looked after her problems several times, revealed: "She places her faith completely in love..."

already by Jane...

Only one woman in a generation is born to be like her. She pays a high price, too high. Her whole motivation in life is to love and be loved. The men who love her, who know her, have to be aware of this all-important fact or they will kill her. She will suffocate emotionally."

①

②

③

As I said, the making of the painting took place 1500 BC. The piece attracted visitors many years to follow.

In 27 BC the painting was partly destroyed by an earthquake. The upper half fell down to the ground. We still can see the marks of the cracks. It stayed that way, in two pieces, for no known reason.

Then, the mutilated painting drew new interest when in 20 BC Paulus Lotern, the historian and specialist of the exciting Ubuko Dynasty in Central Arabia, visited the site and recorded the fact the painting emitted a sound at sunrise.

Again, in 19 BC, takes place the sound heard by Plutov, a young engineer.

90 AD, the sound heard by the princess Asraol of Siam. A colorful fresco, which still can be seen in good condition

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at the palace of Liu-Hog, the old capital of that country, depicts the pretty princess and her entourage, contemplating the painting at the very moment where a ray of the rising sun reaches the top of the piece. The whole scene is illuminated and the letters glow like embers.

130 AD, the sound heard by Antonio Varga, a geographer.

196 AD, last recorded occasion on which the sound was heard, that time by quite a crowd of people.

These dates on which the sound was heard, are only intended to provide a few points of references. During the period 20 BC and AD 196 it seems to have occurred quite frequently, if irregularly. Certainly not every morning, but probably several times a year at least. The authorities include also Hirostus, a wealthy local farmer; the architect Nao Luser, not by personal observation; Peter Solmic, a member of the government of an Asian State, who speaks of "halved painting", indicating the piece had not been restored; and Adronisar the poet. Adronisar is the author of many remarkable poems. One of them is the famous:

"Dull is the eye that will not weep to see

Thy walls defaced... .."

which, because of its audacious composition and imaginative use of new words, was to have a lasting influence on the poetry of the Orient as well as the Occident.

As for the nature of the sound, the engineer Flutov speaks of it as resembling the sound of a primitive flute. Varga, the geographer, states that it can only be compared to a highpitched note, like the sound produced by striking brass. One of the reports describes it as a thin whistling sound that rose and

(7)

fell and faded away. ^{the fresco} at the Siamese palace suggests the sound ^{may resemble} the notes of a piano or an organ. For, in a corner of the picture, is represented, surrounded by clouds, a musician sitting at an instrument looking very much like an early keyboard. It is interesting to notice, the sound has never been compared, in any reports from the witnesses, to a human voice or to the scream of an animal.

The reports contain some 39 references to the time of day at which the sound was heard: twice before sunrise, 18 times at sunrise, 8 times less than an hour after, 6 times an hour after, twice more than an hour after, 3 times more than two hours after. *etc*

The months most frequently mentioned are February and March. Several visitors heard the sound more than once.

It is not absolutely certain, but almost so, that the painting has been silent since about AD 200. There is one recorded instance of its having sounded in quite modern times, but this event is attested in so curiously round-about a fashion that its value as evidence is exceedingly slight.

We can assure, the sound was only heard at or near sunrise. It varied in note and intensity. It occurred at irregular intervals, during a period which apparently began when the upper half of the painting was demolished, and ended as soon as (but possibly before) the piece was restored.



This and opposite page: Manuscript of Guy de Cointet's *At Sunrise... a Cry Was Heard*, 1976 (annotated by Mary Ann Duganne). Right: Guy de Cointet, *At Sunrise... a Cry Was Heard*, 1976. Performance view, Billmore Hotel, Los Angeles, Mary Ann Duganne.