

GUY DE COINTET

DREAM-CATCHING WITH GUY

17.09.2015 - 10.01.2016

M-Museum, Leuven

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Dream-catching with Guy

If Guy de Cointet (1934–1983) has gained a wide recognition in the past years, increasingly reaching a major position in the history of contemporary art—the yet-to-be-prepared book on how and why the contemporary art world had a proclivity for rediscovering overlooked artists in the 2000s and the 2010s will certainly include a case study chapter dedicated to the so-called “Marcel Duchamp of Los Angeles”[1]—his work still contains an idiosyncratic mystery, as his recent exhibition at M-Museum Leuven underlined. It’s one of his main qualities. For the amateur (such as the writer of these lines) who knows Cointet’s practice, as well as for the newcomer who discovered his manifold universe for the very first time, this first retrospective in Belgium managed to make clear what is at stake in his work without denying its charm; to also have its magical meaning recognised. The exhibition showcases his different and interrelated bodies of works in order to make understood why Cointet has become an incredible “toolbox” for contemporary art made today and how he influenced generations of artists, being as he was for a long time the artists’ artist *par excellence*.

Culminating with the stage sets Cointet designed for two of his plays (*Ethiopia*, 1976; and the iconic *Tell Me*, 1979–1980)[2], the exhibition spans the entire career of the French-born artist who lived in Oran (French Algeria at that time) as a teenager, in Paris as a young adult (where he notably worked as a graphic designer), then in New York between 1965 and 1968 (where he met Larry Bell and became his assistant) before finally settling in Los Angeles. No doubt, the City of Angels was the perfect framework for our twentieth-century Rimbaud[3], being simultaneously a rich source of inspiration and a terra incognita where one’s life and relationship to the world could be completely reinvented in the 1970s. Working in painting, drawing, bookmaking, “ephemera-making,” film, performance and theater writing, Guy de Cointet is definitely a master of languages, having created a subtle synthesis between presentation and representation, dead things and living characters,

performance and visual arts.

(New) Hollywood Babel

All the possible languages are tackled in Guy de Cointet's works: the visual and decorative, abstract and figurative, numerical and symbolic, kinetic and chromatic, without forgetting body language and magical thinking. All could be used and considered alone, such as in the numerous drawings from the different series on exhibition (the "digits" series, the "codified" drawings, the "narrative" drawings, the "calligraphic" series and so on[4]) as well as in the rare *Untitled* painting from 1965 realized when Cointet was discovering both New York and Pop Art. But they could also be linked and deeply intertwined together like in his plays in which not only everybody, but everything talks. In those performance pieces—which could act as singular applications of John Austin's linguistic theories—objects such as books, domestic commodities, clothes, and fine arts are catalysts for stories, narratives and dialogues. But one crucial point is that his two-dimensional works as well as his actresses' speeches, even when they are non-decipherable and non-understandable, are always valid—and above all valuable—because of their visual playfulness and particular take on the relationship between forms, colors, and letters. Languages could evolve, letters could be modified: deconstruction leads to the use of broken languages, "rhythmification" leads to verbal and poetry plays. As such, they are mirroring the living polyphony Guy de Cointet was experiencing, partly because of his diverse background and partly because of his experience living as a foreigner in the melting-pot of Los Angeles. His vision of Los Angeles is that of somebody discovering an entirely new world where every barman and shopkeeper is an actor, a singer or a future star, where language serves equally well across different registers, from advertising and communication to small talk, literature, and soap operas. Los Angeles, the Babel of languages. Thus his plays could be considered as a subverted and fantastical chronicle of Cinema City, as if Cointet was the Kenneth Anger of his times, building his own version of *Hollywood Babylon*. In his landmark book written in 1959 (date of first edition; the uncensored edition was published in 1975), Anger chronicles the backside and hidden stories of the Hollywood dream, seen as the perfect offspring of the ever-changing American dream. In his plays, Cointet offers his own interpretation of the American (Californian) Way of Life, between social meetings, supermarkets, and job-hunting, inventing the lives of the Peggy Entwistle[5] of the 1970s. In *Hollywood Babylon*, everyone wants to be a star. In Cointet's plays, everyone is a star—his own star—proffering his/her own prophecies (as in *Espahor Ledet Ko Uluner!*), being the hero of his/her own incredible story.

Cointet's plays give birth to a world of excitement, exaggeration, confusion, dead-ends, and fairy tales which manage to convey at the same time joy, disillusionment, fascination, and incredulity[6]. Of course, actors and above all actresses are fundamental to these performing works. Embodying a kind of literary or feminine perfection, they are all very well dressed and recur from one play to another, as characters in a TV series. They are now an incredible source of historical information to aid in the restaging of Cointet's plays.

The (Playful) Poetics of Reverie

Upon arrival in Los Angeles, one of Guy de Cointet's first works was *ACRCIT*, a free newspaper composed of 28 pages seen as his "Rosetta Stone." This self-publication combines several of the

graphic systems that one could find in his drawings and books, such as crossword puzzles, mirror writing, number series, Morse code, braille and decorative motifs. This first artist's book was followed by a series of five more, all shown in the exhibition and conceived upon a conceptual device linking language, storytelling, letters, and codes. Some became texts for performances in which books, newspapers, and props are "enigmas to resolve." As Cointet wrote about *Tell Me*, a play about three women waiting for something that will never arrive (and which is certainly not Godot): "During the narrative of the play, different props, generally abstract, objects made in various forms and colors, books, paintings . . . find their identity and perform their part in the dialogue and the activities of the actors." Let me add: in the most natural fashion, as if the magical power of these objects was a given, something natural, that awoke the sensitivity of the viewer confronted by a confusion of meanings.

One of the main qualities of the M-Museum Leuven retrospective was thus to show together the works and their genesis in the 28 notebooks. As for the characters in his plays for whom books are ways to attain a certain state of dreamlike-ness (another word for awareness), to dive into Cointet's archive is not only a means to understand his work better but also allows us to dream further. In *I Like Your Shirt*, the female character feels asleep—a fruitful power nap—as soon as she puts her head inside the book; while looking at Cointet's notebooks we open the doors of his realm(s). In considering his set sketches and performances, "partitions," quotes, letterings, alphabets of forms accompanied by their equivalence appear to be useful to decipher the drawings . . . even if one of the notebook mentions, "Hope has long been abandoned of deciphering hieroglyphs." [7]

To conclude, let's quote some of Cointet's drawings titles: *Night Night ...* (1976), *Back in Jamaica*, *In Tacuar everyone knew him as an Englishman from Oaxaca* (1971), *Enjoy the Commercials* (1971), *I can't sleep anymore* (1983): Cointet was perhaps first of all a poet, a visual poet strongly connected to his day and age, a visionary whose strength lies in his ability to perfectly match the obvious and the impenetrable, the mundane and the otherworldly. With Guy de Cointet, "an era of free imagination had just begun." [8]

[1] His posthumous play entitled *The Bridegroom* (1982–1983) could be seen as an obvious tribute to Marcel Duchamp.

[2] Guy de Cointet created 23 plays between 1973 and 1981. For a complete overview of Guy de Cointet oeuvre, see Marie de Brugerolle, *Guy de Cointet*, JRP|Ringier, Zürich 2011.

[3] One of Cointet's last play is entitled *Comme il est blond! Ou De toutes les couleurs*, in which synesthesia is one of the main devices to develop the plot. It was created in 1982 by Fabrice Luchini, Sabine Haudepin, Véronique Silver, and Violeta Sanchez, and produced by Yves Lefebvre, at the Théâtre du Rond-Point, Paris. It was performed during the *Playground Kunstenfestival* at M Leuven in November 2015.

[4] My own designations. For a complete overview of Guy de Cointet's drawings series, see Frédéric Paul, *Guy de Cointet*, Flammarion, Paris 2014.

[5] Peggy Entwistle (1908–1932) is one of the main "anti-heroines" of Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*. An unsuccessful actress, she is better known for having committed suicide from the Hollywood sign.

[6] Interestingly enough, Cointet's plays and practice is contemporary with what is called "The New Hollywood" (1960s–1980s) and of movies like *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974) by Sam Peckinpah.

[7] A “genealogy” could be drawn Guy de Cointet and Wallace Berman (1926–1976), another California-based artist who was also a graphic designer and bookmaker, equally interested in languages and the device of enigma.

[8] Excerpt from *I Like Your Shirt*, 1980.