Guy de Cointet: The Theatricality of the Code

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> I would be more inclined to describe Cointet as a
> structuralist.
> Mike Kelley

1. The Invented Work of an Invented Artist

1   The artist is present. In this vein, the November 1973 invitation card to an art event at the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris proclaimed: "The brilliant artist Huzo Lumnst presents her new work: CIZEGHOH TUR ND JMB". Guests were advised to arrive punctually, as the artist Huzo Lumnst, according to another superlative recommendation by a certain Mme L. Atmont, was simply "marvelous!" [Fig. 1]

2   Upon entering the gallery, located on the southern banks of the Seine in central Paris, visitors came upon an exhibition featuring twelve framed silkscreen prints, all in the identical size of 76 x 56 centimetres, hung at different heights around the corner of two perpendicular walls. Each print consisted of red letters and numbers in different sizes, typefaces, and typographic layouts on a white background, signed "Huzo Lumnst" in the bottom right corner. At first glance, the series' strict focus on notational iconicity (*Schriftbildlichkeit*) seemed related to conceptual art practices of the 1960s. However, whereas in that context there was an underlying understanding of text as a (seemingly) transparent medium, capable of conveying the core concept of the artwork without the interference or static of materiality,[1] these prints confronted visitors to the 1973 exhibition with the opacity of signs: the letters and numbers form an arrangement of impenetrable blocks, columns, and lines. Although typography and punctuation make it possible to deduce an underlying dialogue structure or a translation between

numbers and letters, ultimately the ciphers retreat into a cryptic form of self-referentiality.

Figure 1

Guy de Cointet, *La très brillante artiste Huzo Lumnst présente son nouveau travail CIZEGHOH TUR NDJMB*, invitation card for the performance, 1973.
Courtesy Guy de Cointet Society and Air de Paris, Paris.
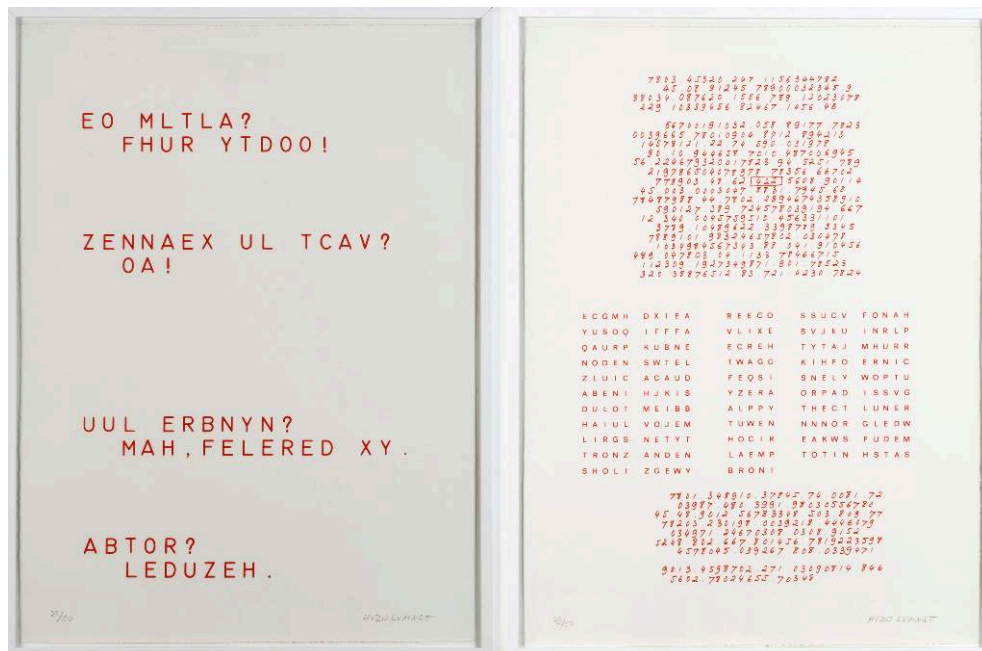
Figures 2-3

Guy de Cointet, *CIZEGHOH TUR NDJMB*, extracts from a set of 12 silkscreens plus title page, 1973.
© Photo Marc Domage, Courtesy Guy de Cointet Society and Air de Paris, Paris.

3   As announced with great anticipation on the invitation, the artist Huzo Lumnst presented her new works in a highly expressive manner that stood in stark contrast to the abstract, hermetic formalism of the prints. A series of black-and-white photographs show an elegantly attired woman with wavy blonde hair in a long black dress, moving from one picture to the next in a gallery crowded with visitors [Fig. 4-7]. The theatrical repertory of dramatic gestures and facial expressions gives the impression that she is both physically and emotionally affected, stimulated, and engrossed by her artistic work: she throws her head back and caressingly presses one side of her entire body with extended arms against a picture, as if erotically drawn to it. She kneels down or turns away in desperation. She throws her hands in front of her face. She moves both hands over the surface of a print, as if it were written in Braille and she could tactilely grasp its meaning. She even does a headstand in front of one of the images. And time and again, she points at a picture or turns toward the audience as if to explain something. In 1973, the artist Guy de Cointet wrote a sentence in his notebook that offers insights into the conceptual phase of this performance: "The actor gives an interpretation of the work of HUZO LUMNST" (Cointet 1973b, unpag.).[2]

Figures 4-7

Guy de Cointet, *La très brillante artiste Huzo Lumnst présente son nouveau travail CIZEGHOH TUR NDJMB*, 1973. Views of the performance with Chantal Darget, Galerie Sonnabend, Paris, 1973.
© Photo Jérôme Ducrot, Courtesy Guy de Cointet Society and Air de Paris, Paris.

4   Born in Paris in 1934, the artist Guy de Cointet developed 23 performances during the period between 1972 and his premature death in 1983 in Los Angeles.[3] After studying at the National Art School in Nancy and working in the field of graphic design in Paris for such journals as *Vogue* and *Jardin des Modes*, he headed to New York City in 1965. Moving in the circles of Warhol's Factory, he made the acquaintance of Larry Bell, then a 26-year-old artist, whom he followed to Los Angeles in 1966 as Bell's assistant.[4] From this point onward, Los Angeles became the fulcrum of Guy de Cointet's life and artistic work, which took on a consistent focus beginning in 1971, when he forged his artistic

identity as that of a cryptographer and created his first encoded works: drawings, artist's books, and the newspaper *ACRCIT*. As a comprehensive compendium of many different coding systems, the newspaper plays a central role in his work and is frequently referred to as the Rosetta Stone of his œuvre.[5] However, Cointet did not publicly appear as an artist until two years later, staging his first performances in 1973 —initially under the guise of fictitious artistic figures, true to his interest in codification. "Inventing an artist, inventing several artists in close relationships with one another. The invented work of an invented artist", he records in his notebook about this early phase of his creative work (Cointet 1973b, unpag.).[6] It encompasses three performance pieces from 1973 and 1974, of which the *Huzo Lumnst* production described here, for which he engaged the French actress Chantal Darget, was the second.[7] The performance is typical in that it reveals two key structural features that exemplify his stagings: on the one hand, his engagement with codification, which serves as the starting point of the performance, whether in the form of a cryptic artist's book, a series of graphic works, a painting, or in later years, an abstract ensemble of objects; and on the other hand, theatricality as the *modus operandi* of his performances, a staged scene devoted to the explanation or decoding of the work. It is this relationship between an enigma and its solution, between an opaque work and its apparent interpretation, which was the repeated focus of Cointet's experimental performances.

5   On the following pages, I will analyze the staged "Act of Signification" as a key theme of Cointet's works by examining a selection of his performances.[8] In each case, the focus of my inquiry will be the relationship between the hermetic objects and the explanations mimed by the actors: What kind of connection exists between the opaque signs and their meaning? Is it legitimate to speak of a deciphering process? And what role does the theatrical event play in the staged production of meaning? I will then assess the works in their historical context as related to experimental theatre and performance art. Taking a look at contemporary reviews, attention will be given to the categorization of Cointet's works as structuralist theatre, querying what it means to view "Structuralism as the Horizon" of his œuvre. I will discuss this resonating backdrop in reference to the significance of language and to the relationships between subject and object in his work. In conclusion, theatricality will be contextualized as a core characteristic of his work in relation to the visual and performance arts. I will finally argue that his interest in theatre and code merge in the staging of a "Theatricality of Code". The essay will not be primarily concerned with looking at his performances from a decidedly semiotic or structuralist perspective. Rather, I will explore the ways in which Cointet, through his artistic output in the 1970s, implicitly negotiated and challenged such approaches in the medium of performance.

6   Cointet's performances are well documented in photographs and video recordings, as well as scripts, notes, designs, and exhibition ephemera. This essay is based on research conducted in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky at Centre Pompidou in Paris, which holds the archival materials from Cointet's estate, as well as major publications, websites, and exhibitions from the past years, all of which provide insights into his artistic œuvre.[9]

2. The Act of Signification

7   "Ah! See! Look over there! Don't you see? See what?" are the first words addressed to the audience by the "artist" Huzo Lumnst. She turns toward one of the first prints with an outstretched arm: "Yes, a night rainbow!" She appears to espy a rare spectacle of nature beyond the abstract characters: a double arch shining in the glow of the moon—which, according to the performer, only few human beings have ever witnessed. The print she is referring to, by contrast, shows four pairs of questions and answers comprising an unintelligible series of letters that cannot be correlated with her description—neither structurally nor graphically.[10] [Fig. 2]

8   The performance progresses through the twelve screen prints, to which the performer devotes a succession of short, individual episodes. Most of the twelve "pictorial interpretations" are characterized by the contrast between the reductive impenetrability of notational iconicity and the melodramatic declamation of narrative fragments—which drift into imaginary images that are no less enigmatic. The latter refer to extraordinary natural phenomena, to diary entries written in blood rather than ink, to emirs and bagpipe-playing Scots, to peculiar words and magically glowing paintings, to musical notations, traps, philosophical games, and exotic forests. The gap between the level of written signs and the act of decoding them is bridged in only one episode, when the performer herself "acrobatically" addresses the subject: she does a headstand and explains that this is how the sequence of letters must be viewed—or as a diagonal line, like "a spurt of blood, which goes from the mouth to the ground. So for the viewer to get it, R, V, E, T, F, Y must lean like the Tower of Pisa" (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 37). Upon close examination, it is possible to identify the named letters within the columns in the picture. [Fig. 3] Yet it is impossible to further decipher their meaning, despite the concrete "cues" that have been given. In this case a minimal connection is established between the printed work and the performative act, which is otherwise created purely by theatrical means: deictic gestures such as pointing, referencing, and explaining, along with an expressive display of emotional affectation.

9   According to an entry in his notebook, Cointet had the feeling that the artist Huzo Lumnst "generally explains things better verbally than in any other way" (Cointet 1973b, unpag.).[11] There is a perceptible degree of irony in this comment, as the explanations offered in her performance are neither entirely consistent nor truly original. From the very first moment, stereotypical expectations of an authentic approach to the work, which would generally be suggested by the artist's presence, are subverted. Rather, Cointet has the artist reiterate things that have been previously articulated by others. A number of text passages are proven quotations from a wide range of sources, including an interview with the author Jorge Luis Borges (Milleret 1967), the infamous novel *Venus im Pelz* (1870) by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the book on natural history by French scholar Jean Rambosson entitled *Histoires des météores et des grands phénomènes de la nature* (1883), the science-fiction novel *The Weapon Shop of Isher* (1951) by Alfred Elton von Vogt, or Jules Verne's *Les Indes Noires* (1877) (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 40). Despite the heterogeneous nature of these sources, there is a recurrence of certain motifs. The disparate episodes make reference to supernatural or encoded textual and pictorial media, they evoke images of distant, exotic landscapes or extrasensory natural spectacles and convey moods like

melancholy, passion, and desire. Later performance pieces by Cointet are also infused with quotations and motifs of this kind, except that instead of standing as fragmentary elements, they are tied into a narrative—albeit often seemingly absurd.

10   The staging of this performance gives the impression that the actress is interpreting the print series for the audience. But contrary to the anticipated promise of the event, the presumed underlying code is not broken: the written characters remain opaque. What is broken is the expectation that the interpretation will decipher the cryptic assemblage of signs—that the latter will be fully resolved through the actualization, the medium of performance. For fragments of meaning are not derived from the encoded prints, but are unwound within an inherent form of intertextuality. Combination is the key aesthetic principle here on both levels, but independent from each another and under separate aesthetic premises: while existing units of meaning are linked to the named motifs on the level of verbal speech, the material elements of writing—letters, numbers, and punctuation—are repeatedly rearranged in new graphic compositions on the level of the prints. Based on extant design sketches, we are able to conclude that these arrangements cannot be traced back to some underlying codification, but that the sole guiding principle was to achieve cryptograms with a visually balanced appearance (Cointet 1973b, unpag.). Due to the structural decoupling of the textual and interpretational levels, a gap arises that can only be bridged by means of performance. This gap, as well as the act of overcoming it, is a source of comic incongruity that typifies Cointet's performances.

Figures 8-9
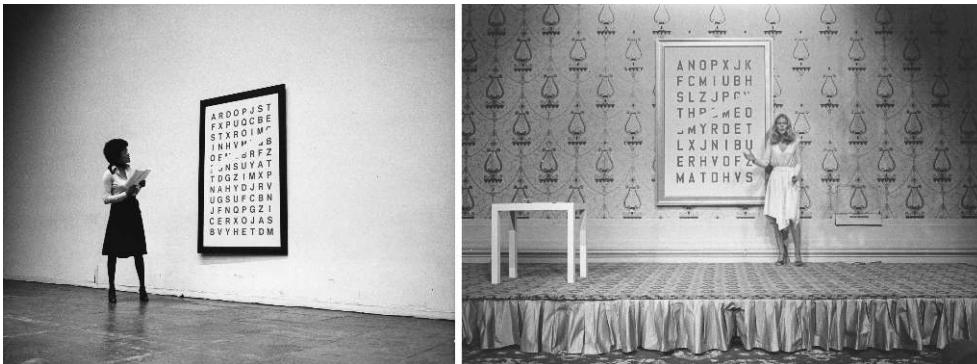
Guy de Cointet, *At Sunrise a Cry Was Heard or The Halved Painting*, 1974. Views of the performances with Deborah Coates, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1976, and with Mary Ann Duganne-Glicksman, Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles, 1976.
© Photo Manuel Fuentes, Courtesy Guy de Cointet Society and Air de Paris, Paris.

11   In the performance *At Sunrise a Cry Was Heard or The Halved Painting* (1974), the gap arising from the fact that the picture's hermetic characters ultimately evade decryption is not glossed over, as was the case in the *Huzo Lumnst* presentation, but rather is identified as the subject of the work. This performance was staged several times during Cointet's lifetime, also as part of the first institutional performance event at New York's Whitney Museum in 1976. [Fig. 8-9] Like all of his pieces, it is based on a definitive written script.[12] The presentation of the striking painting with large red letters arranged in a grid is staged like a "parody of the docent lecturer" (D.J. n.d., unpag.). A visual gash cuts across the painting, which the actress refers to as an "extremely intricate cryptograph" with "obscure signs" (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault

2017, pp. 63 and 65). Gesturing towards the work as if to illustrate her words, the performer—whose role is not more precisely defined—describes the painting's strong emotional impact, as well as its provenance and historical context: on view is an antique painting that was torn into two pieces during a major earthquake in the year 27 AD. During the period before its restoration some 200 years later, according to credible sources, the severed painting had occasionally emitted a strange sound, like a strident cry, always at sunrise. The core of this account was appropriated by Cointet from the story of the ancient Egyptian Colossi of Memnon, even repeating many of the same dates (*Ibid.*, p. 68). At the same time, Cointet enhanced the narrative with numerous embellishments. Despite the rich content, two essential pieces of information are ultimately withheld from the audience—as one critic pointed out: "The painting's history is long, exotic, checkered and fascinating in the extreme but it lacks two important details: the meaning of the code it contains and of the sound it once emitted" (D.J., n.d., unpag.). The enigma, or the gap, is the central motif around which the story revolves. However, here it can also be assumed that the composition itself is not based on any specific code—for documentary photographs show that at least three separate versions of the painting with different letter combinations were used for the various stagings of this work. The painting apparently served as a representation of a cryptogram, but not of a specific one.

12   While the absence of an attributable meaning is central to the former work, *Two Drawings* (1974) revolves around *doppelgänger* and the issues of differentiation and polysemy [Fig. 10-11]. A young woman has successively come into the possession of two drawings.[13] She is surprised to discover that the second work is completely identical to the first in appearance, although it was allegedly created by a different artist and emerged from a different context:

> I saw the drawing. It was identical [...]. Same size. Same irregular edges. Same grayish paper. Same deep rich color. Same signs, placed in intricate composition. [...]
> Yes, everything was the same, and somehow it was undoubtedly different. Very different indeed. (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 77)

13   The difference cannot be found on the level of the written ciphers in the two identical cryptograms, which comprise rectangular blocks of numbers [Fig. 10-11]. Rather, it appears in the completely different stories evoked by them. Beginning with the first line in each picture, which contains the exact same sequence of digits, the performer beholds a laconic departure scene in one picture, with a man on a steamship slowly travelling away from a woman who remains on land; in the other picture, we are immersed into the humid atmosphere of an evening in the lobby of Singapore's legendary Raffles Hotel, whose best days lie in the past: "Gone are Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward!"[14] In the "comparison" of these images, which the protagonist emphasizes by gesturing dramatically at the works, the relationship between the spoken words and the displayed signs is created in different ways: Either it is fully arbitrary, as in the two initial scenes that recall the *Huzo Lumnst* performance, where there is no connection between ciphers and narrative. Or a simple equivalence is established by mentioning a number in the plot and then pointing out the corresponding digit in the picture. A third possibility is found in the iconic reading of the ciphers as visual signs: zeros are interpreted as moons; a rising row of numbers becomes a "slope upwards"; and even the exterior shape of the painting is integrated,

for example, as an illustration of a "monstrous chasm" that suddenly appears in the adventurous story.

Figures 10-11
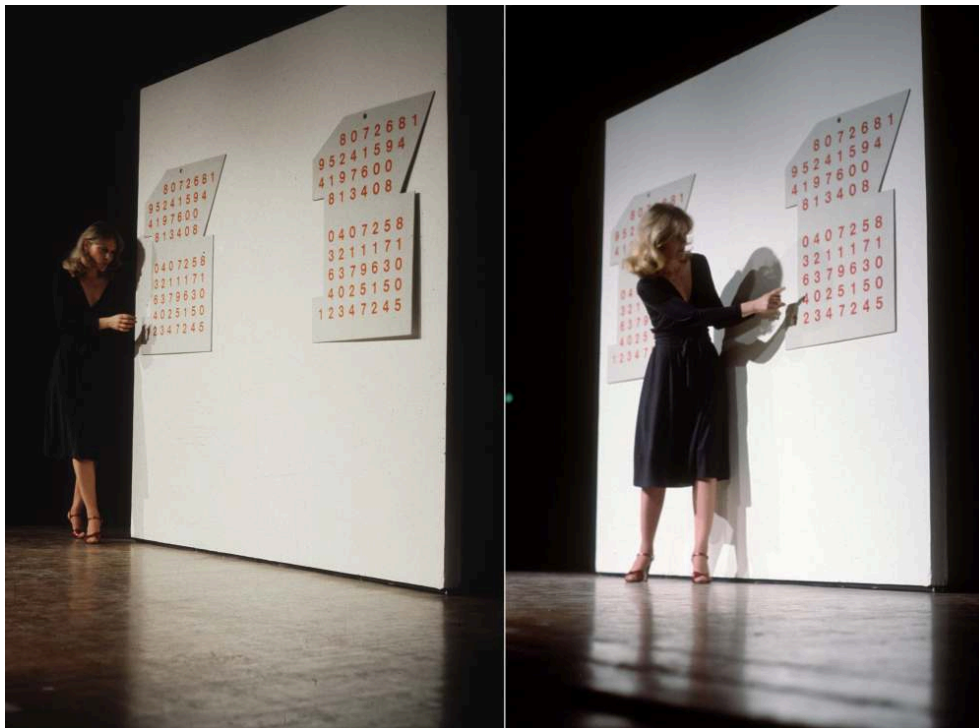
Guy de Cointet, *Two Drawings*, 1974. Views of the performance with Mary-Ann Duganne Glicksman, The Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, 1977.

14   Nevertheless, we cannot speak of decoding in a strict sense here. For one thing, a universally applicable code cannot be deduced from the assignment of meanings to the respective ciphers. "There is no Rosetta Stone" (Miller 1976, unpag.).[15] Furthermore, the cryptogram is not fully converted into a semantic context—a hermetic "surplus" remains (*Ibid.*). On the one hand, this remaining opacity heightens the impenetrability of the two drawings. On the other, it makes reference to the potential of the semantic spectrum that simultaneously forms the subject of the performance. The fact that two identical works give rise to completely different interpretations can be cited as a confirmation of the definition of the stage put forward by semioticians of the Prague School, who described it as a delineated space, within which an arbitrary meaning for any physical sign can be theatrically generated (cf. Sofer 2003, pp. 6-11). And ultimately, it can be regarded as a parody of the polysemy of artworks, which seems to be randomly created in the moment of the public performance.

15   From 1976 onwards, the dynamics in Cointet's pieces take on increasing complexity: they are no longer guided by the binary relationship between a cryptic object and the monologue of a mediating person. A proliferating number of objects and characters multiply the web of relationships. The starting point for the performances is a heterogeneous ensemble of objects, which Cointet treats in its entirety as an encrypted stage that is to be fully deciphered in a theatrical act of designation. Cointet explains the denotational process, which now functions more clearly as a metastructure that

replaces a conventional dramaturgy, in this way: "All the objects are used in the action [...]. The performers talk about all the objects, one after another, until the enigmas are resolved" (Hicks 1985, unpag.). The piece ends as soon as each individual object has been named, assigned a function, and placed in a spatial and temporal context. Pictures or oversized books inscribed with ciphers are still included in the performances. Cointet's 1971 newspaper *ACRCIT* appears as a prop in two works, *Iglu* (1977) and *Tell Me* (1979). In addition, abstract volumetric objects and shapes in monochromatic colours constitute a large part of the set. The dominance of visual signs increases in relation to linguistic codes, and a number of actual objects are intermixed with the basic abstract forms: "Mixing real props with invented ones", Cointet records in his notebook on the performance of *Tell Me* in 1979 (Cointet 1979, unpag.). This work marks a climactic point in his œuvre as regards the complexity and dynamism of the staged acts of signification: "Creating a hiatus between objects and their meaning had always been Cointet's program, and this semantic upheaval flourishes in *Tell Me* with the greatest diversity of motifs" (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 248). This is one of his most frequently staged performances—venues during his lifetime included the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles (1979), the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1980), and the Théâtre Maria Stuart in Paris (1981). Today artefacts and recordings of the work are held by the Centre Pompidou, and numerous re-enactments have taken place in various countries since 2006.[16]

Figures 12-13
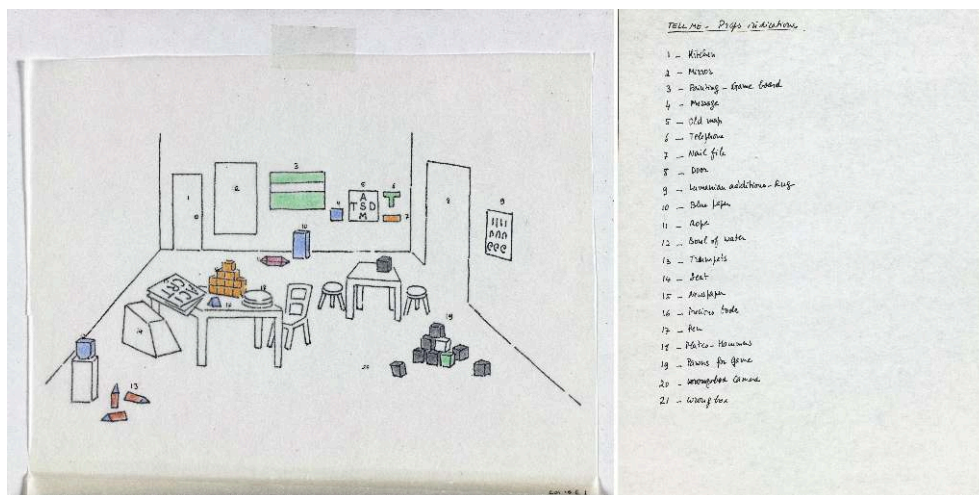
Guy de Cointet, *Tell Me*, 1979. Sketch of the set and checklist of the props, 1979.
© Centre Pompidou – MNAM-CCI – Bibliothèque Kandinsky. Courtesy Guy de Cointet Society and Air de Paris, Paris.

16 The superficial plot line of *Tell Me* can be summarized in two sentences: three female friends—Michael (used as a woman's name in the piece), Olive, and Mary—are spending an evening together at home. The set turns out to be the interior of this scene. They are expecting Olive's boyfriend to arrive for dinner, although he never shows up. While the function of the sole actress in previous performances was to impart information to the audience about an inscrutable visual work, this piece primarily revolves around internal, abruptly changing modes of communication: "*Tell Me* as the title suggests is first about language and how people communicate between themselves through different means or variations of language" (Cointet 1979, unpag.). We watch the

protagonists as they talk to each other in short, quick fragments, listen to one another, write, or read; or we observe how they communicate with—or misunderstand—each other using body gestures, hand motions, nonsensical sounds, and noises. The textual genres switch abruptly between small talk, literary quotations, trite phrases from television and radio, emotional outbursts, and mystical discoveries. During the course of this fast-paced drama, each object is successively singled out within the abstract installation and denoted by language and usage as a specific, sometimes absurd item: for example, a rectangular blue block becomes stationery for a love letter; a green letter "T" hanging on the wall turns into a telephone. A book, elongated to an exaggerated width to accommodate the title *Chrononhotonthologos*, is admired by the protagonists as "the most tragical tragedy, that ever was tragedized by any company of tragedians" (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 243)—actually a reference to an extant satirical play of the same name, written by the author Henry Carey in 1734.[17] A group of small, oblong shapes are first identified as tranquilizers, then as trumpets, as if the homophony of the initial consonants is the determining factor for confusing the two words. And when Mary knocks over a pyramid of small orange cubes, they are disclosed as her "precious book", which has fallen apart into its constituent linguistic units: "Half a sentence is broken! I'll fix it later … But there, I'm afraid one word is beyond repair. What a shame! An important word" (*Ibid.*, p. 232).

Figures 14-17

Guy de Cointet, *Tell Me*, 1979. Views of the performance with Jane Zingale, Helen Mendez, and Denise Domergue, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1979.
© Photo Manuel Fuentes, Courtesy Guy de Cointet Society and Air de Paris, Paris.

17   Despite this sequential process of denotation, there is no overriding narrative. Rather, many separate, successive actions are combined into a rapid play of differences, employing syntagmatic dislocations, paradigmatic substitutions, arbitrary attributions, or linguistic equivalencies. This is played out in spoken language—when, for example, the difference between "drinking" and "smoking" is sustained as an incongruous

substitution throughout a short dialogue by interchanging words like "cigar" and "Scotch" or "whiskey" and "Marlboro". It is achieved as an inversion of the senses when a figure smells the pages of a book to discern its contents. It poses as a disruption in the act of denotation at the moment when real props are consistently described as something else—for example, when a plate is referred to as a "fine looking hammer". While the abstract objects are neutral signs that submit to their theatrical designation, the discrepancy between real, everyday items and contradictory appellations on stage remain unresolved.[18] Or, in a manner typical of Cointet, the level of written language dissolves by theatrical means into a fictitious level of imagery and back again: a 300-year-old map shows nothing but five letters in a cruciform arrangement on a cardboard square, yet Michael recognizes an entire landscape in it. Her description turns out to be a literary quotation from an adventure novel by H. Rider Haggard, written in 1885. The five letters form an acronym for five keywords in the text excerpt.[19] Furthermore, both body and voice emerge as physical signifiers in this piece: for instance, when a dialogue is replaced by mere hand motions, a single word is represented by a quick movement, or the process of writing a text is conveyed as a noise.

18   While the production of meaning was staged in Cointet's monologue-based performances, this piece contrarily demonstrates the conditions of its constant collapse. Any momentary flicker of semantic context is extinguished by the manipulation of the structure itself. Whenever there is a nascent emergence of meaning, it is quickly forced into the background of the staged action, giving precedence to the appearance of its material contingencies: whether as text, object, sound, noise, gesture, or visual sign. "Anyone caught up in the materiality of the characters will not be able to understand them, just as the dull gaze of an [...] ignorant reader is unable to raise the curtain of letters" (Assmann 1988, p. 238). There is a nimble lightness in the way Cointet plays with the roots of language, and that is the essence of his art: lying under the surface of seemingly never-ending small talk, in the form of a comic performance, and as the aesthetically composed ensemble of a contemporary art installation.

3. The Demilitarization of Language, or: Structuralism as Horizon

19   Playing with language structures is the central dynamic that sets Cointet's work into motion. As early as 1973, he wrote in his notebook in reference to the *Huzo Lumnst* performance (Cointet 1973b, unpag.): "We should not allow language to imprison us."[20] On the one hand, language functions as the dominant symbolic order in his performances, and nothing exists beyond or apart from it. On the other hand, Cointet continually attempts to break this structure open: by playing with dislocations, differences and expansions; by shifting to paralinguistic communication in the staged act; or by pointing out the material conditions of language. In an interview with the gallery owner Barbara Braathen in 1980, his approach is aptly compared to a "demilitarization of language", to which Cointet adds the following explanation: "My work is not a system to replace another system. [...] But my work, it's more to add to the present system, to open the existing system up." (Braathen 1980, p. 10)

20   This engagement with the conditions of language in Cointet's work will be discussed in the following against the backdrop of structuralism. In contemporaneous critiques of

his works, there are already repeated references to his "exploration of [...] structure", and to his method of "working just below the surface" (Welling 1975, p. 16). It is noted that his artistic practice is rooted in an "aesthetic of structuralism" (Clothier 1976, p. 2). A more critical viewpoint finds fault with the "structural circularity" of his performances (Clothier 1979, unpag.). A lengthy review of Cointet's performance *Tell Me* was included in a special edition of the American periodical *The Drama Review*, published in 1979 under the title "The Structuralist Performance Issue" (Déak 1979, pp. 11-20). And in a 2004 feature article in the journal *Artforum*, which was devoted to Cointet's work, the artist Mike Kelley stated: "I have heard Cointet defined as a Surrealist. [...] But I don't think this label is accurate. [...] I would be more inclined to describe Cointet as a structuralist"[21] (Kelley 2007, p. 419).

21   The critique in the special issue of *The Drama Review* will serve here as a basis for outlining the way that "structuralist performance" was described by some commentators in the late 1970s as a category of experimental theatre, and the degree to which Cointet's work was discussed in this context. This will be followed by a more general consideration of how structuralism frames and informs his performances, particularly the relationship between subjects and objects. Before embarking on this examination, however, it should be noted that Cointet himself—concurrent with his self-perception as a cryptographer—rarely commented directly on his work or its classification.[22] Contrary to many of his artistic peers with a conceptual bent, he never elaborated on his creative practice by publishing his own theoretical essays or statements. The fertile environment of discourse history and culture that nurtured his artistic practice can be more clearly traced in his notebooks and the numerous quotations that permeate his visual and theatrical works. In addition to drawing on sources from media and information theory, anthropology, or the history of cryptography, references to the writings of Roland Barthes (*S/Z*, *Système de la Mode*, *Éléments de sémiologie*) are particularly prevalent (Cointet 1973a, unpag.). Cointet's work was also clearly influenced by an engagement with experimental literature that challenges the notion of language as a system, especially the publications of Jorge Luis Borges, Lewis Carroll, or Raymond Roussel—prominent authors whose work informed structuralist thinking in the 1960s. As Gilles Deleuze stated in his 1973 essay "How Do We Recognize Structuralism", aiming to differentiate it from existentialism: " Structuralism owes nothing to Albert Camus, but much to Lewis Carroll" (Deleuze 1973 [2004], p. 175).[23] Furthermore, Roussel's famous "literary procedure", revealed in his posthumously published text under the title *How I Wrote Certain of My Books* (Roussel 1935), found an echo in the writings of such authors and philosophers as Alain Robbe-Grillet or Michel Foucault (cf. Robbe-Grillet 1963 and Foucault 1963). This so-called procedure—briefly summarized—stands for Roussel's method of taking two almost identical homophonic or homonymic sentences and then spanning the gap created by their minimal linguistic differences with a fantastical, exotic story that links them together. Or in other words, anchoring a story that is drifting into pure imagination to a tiny distinction in the material world of language. This approach evidently had a major impact on Cointet.[24] In 1976, he staged a reading of Roussel's texts in Paris entitled *Une Soirée avec Raymond Roussel*, and in 1980 he created a performance devoted to Roussel, although it was never enacted. Taking all of this into account, it is clear that Cointet had a basic familiarity with key authors and writings that shaped structuralist thinking; hence structuralism will be discussed below as a backdrop for his work, but

without interpreting his artistic practice as a direct illustration of a consistent theoretical construct.

22   The decision of Michael Kirby, editor of *The Drama Review*, to devote a special issue to "structuralist performance" in 1979, can be assessed as a belated response to the proliferation of terms like "structure", "structurist", or "structuralist" within the context of minimal art, op art, conceptual art, or structural cinema in the United States since the 1960s.[25] While the early use of such terms can be mainly attributed to the spirit of the times, without any direct connection to French structuralism, this changed over the course of the 1970s. A pioneering international symposium hosted by the Johns Hopkins University in 1966 under the title "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man", along with the publication of numerous translations and anthologies in the early 1970s, stimulated the reception of structuralism as "French Theory" in the context of "American Art".[26]

23   Although Kirby's attempt to elucidate "structuralist performance" in his introduction to the special issue of *The Drama Review* remains astonishingly vague, his essay on structuralist film (as distinguished from structural film) and a further article by Noël Carroll on Kirby's theatre works, entitled "Notes on the Esthetics of Structuralist Theatre", emphasize two key aspects:[27] first, the priority of making internal structures visible by means of correspondences, differences, and repetitions in relation to the work as a whole—while implicitly echoing parameters of Gestalt theory.[28] And second, the activation of the audience's perception through the experience of structure.[29] From today's perspective, the definition of a structuralist performance can be contextualized as one method among many of creating a "post-dramatic" theatre: that is, a theatrical event that is no longer primarily dependent on plot; that relinquishes the traditional supremacy of the dramatic text over the enactment; and that eludes a simple hermeneutic analysis.[30]

24   Appearing in this context, the review of the performance *Tell Me* by theatre scholar František Déak finds a foil in Barthes' understanding of structuralism as an activity. According to Barthes, the latter can encompass both scientific approaches as well as artistic practices "by writers, painters, musicians in whose eyes a certain *exercise* of structure [...] represents a distinctive experience" (Barthes 1964 [1972], p. 214).[31] Déak argues that structuralist theatre is one such activity, as its purpose—here in concurrence with Kirby and Carroll—is to generate an experience of structure (Déak 1979, p. 12). From this perspective, Déak analyzes key moments in the performance which enable such an experience: first, the absence of a classic plot; second, communication as structure, arising from constant, abrupt shifts in the dialogues or the plurality of language styles; third, the visualization of theatrical codes, such as the process of denominating elements of the stage set; and finally, structure as a hermetic system within the performance, in the sense of references or dislocations that are exclusively internal. I have attempted to consistently expand upon Déak's analysis by defining the *Tell Me* performance as a mode of play with the roots of language, as a play of differences by means of syntagmatic dislocations, paradigmatic substitutions, arbitrary attributions, or linguistic equivalences. Such an interpretation already resonates with basic structuralist concepts and approaches in the work of Cointet. Furthermore, I aim to posit structuralism as a horizon for the reception of Cointet's performances, in order to finally elucidate the specific relationship between subject and object against this backdrop.

25   Initially, the figures in Cointet's performances always seem to assume the task of naming the objects on the set. They are the ones who manipulate and designate the objects and incorporate them into their narratives. For the most part, the objects submit to them as "open signs". At the same time, however—as the art historian and curator Brugerolle, in particular, has pointed out—we repeatedly gain the impression that the objects are the true catalysts of the action:

> Indeed, during the performances the story went off at a tangent every time an object was touched. The props were [...] acted upon, actors themselves, and manipulators. They triggered actions and directed the 'drama' in the etymological sense of the term of 'deed' or 'act'. (Brugerolle 2011, p. 76)

26   But it would be mistaken to conclude that the props in Cointet's pieces are intrinsically capable of action—in the sense of current discourses on the agency of things. Rather, this impression is conveyed because both objects and subjects are circulating elements in the symbolic order of language. The fact that the objects momentarily appear to have the capacity of stimulating an action stands in correlation to the weakening of the subjects, who do not possess a substantial core. This was also noted in several reviews: " The three female characters aren't characters at all; they're abstract voices—vehicles of conversation identifiable by clothing color: red, white and black" (Kurcfeld 1979, p. 38). Although the stage figures have the function of naming things, they are not superior to the objects, but are literally *sub-iecta*, in the sense of being "subordinate" to the structure. They are not meaning-giving or discerning subjects who ascertain their substantial identity through their counterparts. Rather, they serve as "the missing link (element) that when put between the language and visual sign, completes the structure." (Déak 1979, p. 19). They do not speak from the core of their being, but—as a central maxim of structuralism states— "language speaks them". It speaks right through them, and not only because they are already a medium for communicating an underlying dramatic text in their function as actresses; but also because what they say, and how they say it, has already (and repeatedly) been articulated as a gesture, as a literary or philosophical text, as small talk, as a dialogue in a film, television, or radio production. They are subordinate to these codes of speech and language, with the consequence "that codes do not know subjects, or rather transform them immediately into elements of an order that controls them from that point onward" (Stiegler 2015, p. 71).

27   This "antihumanist" impulse can simultaneously be viewed against the foil of structuralism and positioned at the interface of developments in media and technology during that period, along with related questions about identity, simulation, and duplication that were especially articulated in the popular media. In an article from 1980, for example, the three figures in the *Tell Me* performance were characterized as "three computers [that] had gone mad" (Gordon 1980, p. 45). And when a figure from Cointet's last completed work, *Five Sisters* (1982), poses the ultimate question—"Is this me or is it a duplicate of me?" —the critic David E. James suggests that there is just one lonely hero of that era who can provide an answer: "Only the Blade Runner knows for sure—and he's gone north." (James 1982, unpag.). As manifested in the works of Cointet, the concept of the subject thus differs greatly from the practices of body art, which in the 1970s was still widely influenced by a "deep belief in the ego as subject" (Stiles 1998, quoted after Krystof 2002, p. 45). While the discussion above has placed Cointet's artistic practice in the context of experimental theatre under the heading of "structuralist performance", in the following I will more precisely describe its

opposition to contemporary forms of body art performance, finally focusing on the specific theatricality that distinguishes Cointet's work.

4. The Theatricality of the Code

28 After seeing a performance by Guy de Cointet in 1975, James Welling wrote in an article that appeared in *Artweek*, a monthly American arts magazine:

> What is most obvious about Cointet's performance [...] is its theatricality. The story is, first of all, absurdly far-fetched. [...] And then the story is played out in the exaggerated style one associates with acting. In the use of theatrical supports Cointet's entire *mise en scène* offers a significant alternative to much performance work by artists. Interestingly he reintroduces these techniques which performers overtly avoid: this appears to cloud the issue of artist's performance vs. theatrical performance (Welling 1975, p. 16).

29 The use of the term theatrical to describe the performances is grounded in the fact that Cointet draws on forms of theatre, including its techniques and practices. The presentations are based on a dramatic text, which is interpreted by the actresses. Their physical gestures and facial expressions emerge from a repertoire of stagecraft that they use to create the fictitious characters. A narrative evolves, albeit one that especially in the late performances is broken up into its separate parts. Every interaction with the props was minutely planned during rehearsals. And above all: Cointet's works were and are repeatedly performed.

30 In her book *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, Juliane Rebentisch accurately observes: "to speak of theatricality" in the context of visual art "also means to speak of a critique of it" (Rebentisch 2003 [2012], p. 20). This makes reference to Michael Fried's "notoriously influential" article (*Ibid.*, p. 20), "Art and Objecthood", which was published in a 1967 issue of *Artforum* (Fried 1967, pp. 12-23). In his writings, Fried cited the theatre as a critical metaphor for rejecting the minimal art of the 1960s. First of all, he identified the "stage presence" of minimal art as a theatrical aspect—i.e. its relation to the viewer, specifically its dependence on an audience (*Ibid.*, p. 16). And secondly, he perceived the "latency and hiddenness of anthropomorphism" in minimal objects, an attribute that he regarded as "incurably theatrical" (*Ibid.*, p. 19). Most perfidious about their theatricality, according to Fried, was the fact that the objects feigned a pure "objecthood", yet at the same time took on a "*masked* anthropomorphism" (cf. Rebentisch 2003 [2012], pp. 53f.).

31 Fried was not alone in his critical assessment of theatricality in the late 1960s. Not only was the term theatricality highly controversial (a fact that is often overlooked) in the context of performance art—though art critics like Douglas Crimp or Rosalind Krauss characterized the latter as "theatrical" in a narrower and already positive sense by the 1970s (Krauss 1977 [1981], p. 204, Crimp 1979, p. 77). Even more: the emergence of performance art can be understood as a conceptual antipode to theatricality. For instance, the artist Chris Burden asserted that his sensational acts were free of any kind of theatrical illusionism: "there's no element of pretense or make-believe in it" (quoted after Carlson 1996 [2018], p. 122). He even postulated this equivalence: "It seems that bad art is theatre" (*Ibid.*). However much artists struggled to formulate a unifying definition of what constituted performance art, its diametrical opposite, which the new practices were reacting to, was unambiguous: "theatre", as the dramatic historian Marvin Carlson states, "was probably the most common 'other' against which the new

[performance] art could be defined" (*Ibid*., p. 123). He argues that the "decline" of the term theatricality in the 1970s could be correlated to the rising "success" of the term performance (Carlson 2002, p. 239).

32   The criticisms of theatricality that have been briefly sketched here converge at a single point: they stand in opposition to the theatre's inherent structural duality, which becomes especially apparent on the stage. Thus they reiterate one of the oldest criticisms of theatre: namely, that a staged work articulates a mimetic "doubleness" which, in contrast to the privileged authenticity of life, must always appear to be secondary, as it is inevitably derivative (*Ibid*., p. 243). This line of argumentation is based on a particular attribute of the theatre, elucidated by Fischer-Lichte in this way: the theatre is constituted without any need for new signs, but operates with the same material signs that "are found in culture to begin with", and then employs them in a specific way as "signs of signs" (Fischer-Lichte 1983, p. 19). In this sense, theatricality means that a person or object becomes something else on the stage, yet still remains itself: hence it is experienced in its structural duality.

33   Against the backdrop of such critical views of theatricality, Welling's ambivalence in identifying theatricality as a characteristic of Cointet's works in the above cited article is understandable. In this way, he implicitly—and also accurately—positioned Cointet's work in clear opposition to the predominant genre of body art. However, as has already been shown, Cointet's performance art was even better subsumed under the rubric of experimental theatre, yet as a form of "structuralist performance" that attempted to escape its conventions.[32] Cointet still had sufficient reasons for choosing the theatre and its specific structural duality as the medium for his creative work. It enabled him to stage the theatrical transformation of his artworks.

34   The central motif and underlying structure of his performances is the objects' changing status, which oscillates between artworks in an exhibition and props in a performance.[33] For beyond their function as performance objects, in which they can represent artworks or something else, these pieces are—and always remain—works by Cointet. A version of *The Halved Painting*, which comes to represent an antique cryptogram in the eponymous performance, belongs today in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The ensemble of objects from the performance *Tell Me* was created in 1979 for the staged event; over the course of the performance, it discards the semblance of abstraction and becomes an interior. Just a short time later—still during Cointet's lifetime—the ensemble was exhibited in 1980, without any connection to the performance, at the Artists Space in New York and also at Hunter College Gallery (Giguère 2014, p. 276). The dual function of the objects as artistic works and as stage props is predetermined and aetiological in Cointet's creative process; both levels are mutually constituted. In the sense of this dual function at the interface of visual art and theatre, his objects can be described as theatrical. At the same time, his performances—despite their strong affinities with theatre—are rooted in the field of visual art, which has prompted me to retain the term performance in reference to his œuvre.[34] In the context of visual art, his works can be interpreted as a subtle commentary on the criticism of the theatrical nature of minimal art: for example, when small-scale, abstract, minimal art objects in the performance *Tell Me* cast off their phenomenological self-referentiality and turn into relatable objects in a seemingly trivial dramatic scene. But they can also be interpreted as a humorous gesture in regard to the self-referential tautology of conceptual art, with which Cointet's

paintings appear to have an affinity at first glance, due to the seemingly systematic use of letters and numbers. However, instead of revealing a conceptual core by means of a supposedly "transparent" script, the opacity of the ciphers in Cointet's work becomes the starting point for an arbitrary exponentiation of levels of meaning, playfully engendered in the theatrical act.[35]

35   This precise moment of multiplication, involving the arbitrary attribution of fragments of meaning to cryptic sequences of signs in a theatrical, deictic act, also coincides with Cointet's interest in codes. In a most general sense, a code signifies a "coupling of two systems", correlating elements of two different set of signs (i.a. Eco 1968 [1991], p. 63). A code thus comprises a dual structure; and theatre makes it possible to experience a dual structure in the moment of performance. Cointet was never interested in uniqueness, singularity, or a core identity, but devoted his efforts to the generation of surfaces and stereotypes through repetition, duplication, transference, and correlation.

36   According to the theoretical doxa of this period, coding allows processes of transformation between two systems. At least since the 1960s, the development of electronic communications media enabled a seemingly infinite, high-speed transferability of linguistic units. As early as 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote in his book *Understanding Media*: "Today computers hold out the promise of a means of instant translation of any code or language into any other code or language" (McLuhan 1964 [2003], p. 114). On account of Cointet's engagement with coding in general, and his direct reference to McLuhan in the newspaper *ACRCIT* in particular—who in turn was said to have purchased an artist's book by Cointet in 1979 (Brugerolle 2011 p. 25)—it has been argued that his graphic œuvre anticipated the approaching age of digitalization (Evers & Holzhey 2013, p. 12). But at the same time, as the art historian Gregor Stemmrich has pointed out, while a correspondence cannot be denied, it is analogue in nature and occurs without the use of digital media: namely in the medium of graphic art, as Stemmrich states (cf. Stemmrich 2013, p. 23)—but also in the medium of performance. This can be taken one step further: in his performances, this essay will finally argue, Cointet dramatizes and fictionalizes the operation of the code as a prescriptive key of correlation.

37   On Cointet's stage sets, codes are both present and absent: the presence of cryptograms, encoded texts, and graphic symbols initially suggests the existence of a key; or in other words, that the obscure arrangement of ciphers is based on a rational code. At the same time, as I have attempted to demonstrate with the analyses of various performances, such objects do not actually reflect the existence of a comprehensible, underlying system of correlations, but are the graphic representation of an encoded message as a recurring motif. The correlations of meaning or the process of signification is completely shifted to the act of performance, which completes the structure between objects, signs, and possible meanings as a connecting element. In Cointet's performances, no code exists apart from its theatrical actualization; the performance is neither subordinate to the code, nor based on it. Rather, the code is manifested as a theatrical act. From another perspective, this means that the theatrical act assumes the function of an internal code, as defined by Fischer-Lichte (1983, pp. 10 and 21, with implicit reference to Eco 1968 [1991], p. 58): on the stage, it determines which material elements are given the status of meaningful units, how these units are combined with one another (syntactic rules), and what these units can refer to (semantic rules). The electronic age's promise "of instant translation of any code or

language into any other code or language" (McLuhan 1964 [2003], p. 114) finds its artistic correspondence in the theatricality of the code on Cointet's stage: any sign, or any object, can be transformed into an infinite potential of meanings, articulated through performance.

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NOTES

1. These works come to mind: the 1967 series *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* by Joseph Kosuth, or On Kawara's *Today Series*, from 1966. Cf. Rebentisch (2013, pp. 140f); Kotz (2007, p. 186).
2. Original: "L'acteur donne une interpretation du travail du HUZO LUMNST" In the conceptual phase, the fictive artist Huzo Lumnst was male.
3. The scripts of his performances, along with numerous illustrations and archival materials, are published in Decointet, Piron & Thiébault (2017).
4. For biographical information, see Brugerolle 2011, especially pp. 9f.
5. Cointet initially distributed the newspaper *ACRCIT* (screen print, edition of 700) for free at news stands throughout Los Angeles, without any accompanying information. In the first

exhibition devoted to his graphic art, which was mounted at the Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles in 1976, the newspaper was included as an exhibit. In his later performances *Iglu* (1977) and *Tell Me* (1979), the newspaper served as a prop. For more on *ACRCIT*, see Desclaux and Lemaitre 2014, pp. 99-112, especially p. 102; Brugerolle 2011, pp. 25-27.

6. Original: "Inventer un artiste, plusieurs artistes ayant des relations très étroites les uns avec les autres. L'œuvre inventée d'un artiste inventé."

7. The first performance, which consisted of a reading from the artist's book *ESPAHOR LEDET ULUNER!*, took place in May 1973 at the Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles. The diminutive actor Billy Barty, known for his work in television and film, played the role of the artist/author under the pseudonym "Qei No Mysxdod", an encoded version of the name Guy de Cointet. The third and last artist figure conceived by Cointet in April 1974, *Sophie Rummel*, who also presented her *Recent Paintings* at the Cirrus Gallery, was impersonated by Susan Hoffmann, alias Viva, who had gained a reputation as a Warhol "superstar".

8. Rachel Valinsky speaks of an "act of interpretation" which is brought to the fore in Cointet's œuvre. Cf. Valinsky (2016, pp. 4 and 14).

9. Guy de Cointet is represented by Air de Paris; a large part of the Fonds Guy de Cointet in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky at Centre Pompidou has been digitized and is accessible online at: http://archivesetdocumentation.centrepompidou.fr/ead.html?id=FRM5050-X0031_0000037#FRM5050-X0031_0000037_e0000083 (accessed 1 Oct. 2018). The Guy de Cointet Society was founded in 2016 and maintains the website http://www.guydecointet.org (accessed 1 Oct. 2018), which provides an excellent overview of his œuvre. Also especially noteworthy is the 2011 monograph by art historian and curator Marie de Brugerolle, whose work has been a significant factor in the rediscovery of this artist.

10. Here and in the following, I quote the English translation of the original French script, published in: Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, pp. 37-40, here p. 37). The analysis of this work is based on photographs of the historical performance from 1973 and two video recordings of later performances under the direction of Yves Lefebvre in the Galerie Air de Paris (2012) and at Centre Pompidou (2013).

11. Original: "Il me semble qu'elle s'explique en général mieux de vive voix que de toute autre façon."

12. The premiere took place in 1974 at the Art Gallery of the University of California, Irvine. In 1976, the Biltmore Hotel, designed in an eclectic, ostentatious Beaux-Arts style, served as the backdrop for the performance.

13. The premiere was held in 1974 at the Art Gallery of the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Further venues were The Portland Center for the Visual Arts in Portland, Oregon (1977), and the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut (1978).

14. Other unrevealed literary quotations are taken from such authors as H.P. Lovecraft and A.E. van Vogt, and also from a biography of the dancer Isadora Duncan (Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, pp. 75 and 79).

15. In his article, Miller discusses the performance *Going to the Market* (1975), but its structure is equivalent in regard to the relationship between ciphers and decryption.

16. *Tell Me* was staged at the Centre régional d'art contemporain Languedoc-Roussillon Sète (2006), Tate Modern London (2007), STUK Kunstencentrum Leuven (2007), Getty Museum Los Angeles (2011), and Centre Pompidou Paris (2013), among others. For more in regard to the musealization of this work, see the dissertation by Giguère 2014, pp. 267-292.

17. Other cited literary works are by Henry David Thoreau, Henry Rider Haggard, and the Iranian poet Hafiz. Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 248.

18. Here we could point out the limitations of a purely semiotic reading of props as dematerialized signs. Cf. Sofer 2003, pp. 10 and 14f. He particularly refers to Rokem 1988, who had demonstrated the shortcomings of a linguistic approach in response to the Prague School.

19. The quotation reads: "Deep in the vast heart of **A**frica, encircled by treacherous **D**esert, shielded by hazardous **M**ountains, guarded by fierce and savage **T**ribes, lies a legendary treasure: the fabled storehouse of King **S**olomon's mines." Decointet, Piron & Thiébault 2017, p. 231.

20. Original: "Il ne faut pas se laisser emprisonner par le langage."

21. Structuralism is also mentioned as a context for Cointet's work by Brugerolle 2011, pp. 7 and 25.

22. In particular, two longer interviews with Cointet exist: see Braathen 1980 and Hicks 1985.

23. Original: "Le structuralisme ne doit rien à Albert Camus, mais beaucoup à Lewis Carroll." Deleuze 1973, p. 307.

24. A resonance with Roussel's work can be especially found in Cointet's fascination with the duality between the imaginary and symbolic levels of language. But recurrent motifs and key characteristics (riddles, cryptograms, exotic or the "flatness" of things and figures) also allow analogies to be drawn.

25. For a discussion of the reception of various structure-related terms in the New York art scene, see Schneller (2013, pp. 97-113).

26. *French Theory and American Art* is the title of a book which traces these reception histories. Cf. Lejeune, Mignon & Pirenne 2013, especially the essay therein by Schneller pp. 99 and 104-107.

27. In 1975, Kirby founded a theatre collective named "The Structuralist Workshop". See Kirby (1987, pp. 111-120).

28. Carroll (1979, p. 104) and Kirby (1979, p. 102); for more about the influence of Gestalt theory on the use of the term structure in the context of American art during the 1960s, see Schneller (2013, pp. 100f).

29. Carroll (1979, p. 104 and 110); (Kirby 1979, pp. 101f). Also see Kirby (1987, especially p. 23).

30. For a definition of post-dramatic theatre, see Lehmann 1999. Cf. Kirby's attempt to define a structuralist performance as a "nonsemiotic performance", (Kirby 1982); as well as a criticism of this approach in Carlson (1990, pp. 3-9).

31. Original: "On peut en effet présumer qu'il existe des écrivains, des peintres, des musiciens, aux yeux desquels un certain *exercice* de la structure [...] représente une expérience distinctive [...]", Barthes (1964, p. 222).

32. According to Mike Kelley, Cointet's work can also be classified within a lesser known area of performance art, which he designates as "late structuralist" and applies to his own artistic practice along with the work of such artists as Stuart Sherman, Julia Heyward, Michael Smith and Matt Mullican. Miller 1992, p. 9.

33. It is due to the efforts of art historian and curator Brugerolle, who has published essays and organized numerous posthumous exhibitions on Cointet's work, that the dual status of the objects has been recognized as a core concept of his œuvre (e.g. Brugerolle 2011, p. 76), and that the musealization of his work takes this into account by presenting his works both in the form of art installations and as staged performances. For more on this, see Giguère (2014, pp. 275f).

34. Especially in the German language, the term "Performance" is positioned within the realm of visual arts, at the intersection with theatre. This is particularly supported by the fact that the preservation and transmission of his works relies on a *Werkbegriff* (concept of a work of art) that is rooted in the visual arts. For example, the interplay of text, set, objects, acting, and staging—contrary to theatre in general—is viewed in its entirety as a singular work, whose integrity should be reconstructed and preserved. The publishers of his scripts, by contrast, prefer the term of the theatre, in order to differentiate his work from the performance art of the 1970s. Cf. Decointet, Piron & Thiébault (2017, p. 16).

35. This relates to predominant trends in conceptual art in the circle of Seth Siegelaub on the East Coast of the United States. At the same time, Cointet can also be positioned in the context of a more humorous mode of conceptualism on the American West Coast. Cf. Brugerolle (2011, p. 7), or Butler (2004, p. 418).

ABSTRACTS

Between 1973 and 1983, Los Angeles-based French artist Guy de Cointet staged more than twenty performances in which the exhibition became a stage and the interpretation of the work a theatrical event. Two central structural features are typical of his performances: on the one hand, an exploration of code via a cryptic artist's book, a series of graphics, a painting or, further down the line, an abstract object ensemble; and on the other, theatricality as the modus operandi of his performances through which Cointet directs scenes in interpretation, explanation and decoding.

Discussions on the response of French structuralism to Cointet's œuvre are based on contemporary reviews which locate his works within experimental, "structuralist" theatre. It will be argued that the central dynamic consists in playing with language structures, which sets the relationship between props and the performers in motion. Both objects and subjects become elements of a symbolic order which, time and again, Cointet experimentalises and challenges afresh by simultaneously playing with differentiation, dislocation and substitution.

This structuralist concept of the subject as well as the deliberate use of theatrical devices both underline the contrast between Cointet's pieces and the performances of the dominant form: body art. The final thesis argues that salient theatricality, as the characteristic and form of his works–and furthermore, as an essentially contested concept in the context of art in the 1960s and 1970s–correlates to his exploration of codes. Cointet was never interested in uniqueness or singularity, but devoted his efforts to the generation of surfaces and stereotypes through duplication, transference and correlation.

Guy de Cointet was born in Paris in 1934, moved to New York in 1965 and then, in 1968, he moved to Los Angeles whose art scene he influenced until his untimely death in 1983. His works and performances have most recently been shown at M-Museum, Leuven (2015), at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2013), at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), at the Getty Center (2011), at Tate Modern, London (2007), and elsewhere.

Entre 1973 et 1983, l'artiste français Guy de Cointet, alors résidant à Los Angeles, a mis en scène plus d'une vingtaine de performances où l'exposition d'art se fait scène et où l'interprétation des œuvres devient un événement théâtral. Deux éléments structurels centraux caractérisent ses performances : d'une part sa réflexion sur le code, notamment à travers le médium de livres d'artiste cryptés, de séries graphiques, de peintures ou, plus tard également, d'ensembles d'objets abstraits ; et d'autre part la théâtralité comme *modus operandi* de ses performances, qui permet à Cointet de mettre en scènes les opérations de l'interprétation, de l'explication et du décodage.

En partant de recensions contemporaines qui replacent les travaux de Cointet dans le cadre du théâtre « structuraliste » expérimental, nous réfléchissons ici en particulier à la résonance du structuralisme français sur son œuvre. Le jeu avec les structures de la langue apparaît à ce titre comme la dynamique centrale qui meut la relation entre les accessoires et leurs interprètes. Les objets comme les sujets sont les éléments d'un ordre symbolique que Cointet, par le jeu des différences, dislocations et substitutions, expérimente et met en question à nouveaux frais.

Une telle conception structuraliste du sujet, autant que l'usage résolu de moyens théâtraux, souligne également l'opposition entre les performances de Cointet et celles, alors dominantes, du Body-Art. La théâtralité apparente comme caractéristique et forme de ses travaux — et plus avant comme fondamentalement remise en question dans le contexte artistique des années 1960 et 1970 — doit selon notre lecture être mis en lien avec sa réflexion sur les codes. Cointet ne s'est jamais intéressé à la singularité, à l'unicité ou à l'essentialité ; par le jeu des redoublements, transports et catégorisations, il s'est dédié aux surfaces produites et aux stéréotypes.

Né à Paris en 1934, Guy de Cointet est parti pour New York en 1965 avant de s'installer en 1968 à Los Angeles où il a, jusqu'à sa mort prématurée, marqué la scène artistique. Récemment, ses œuvres et performances ont entre autres été reprises au Musée M de Louvain (2015), au Centre Pompidou de Paris (2013), au Museum of Modern Art de New York (2012), au Getty Center de Los Angeles (2011) et à la Tate Modern de Londres (2007).

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