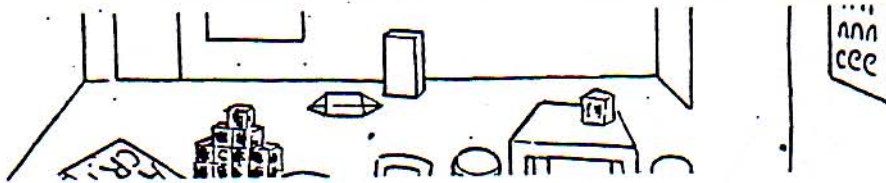
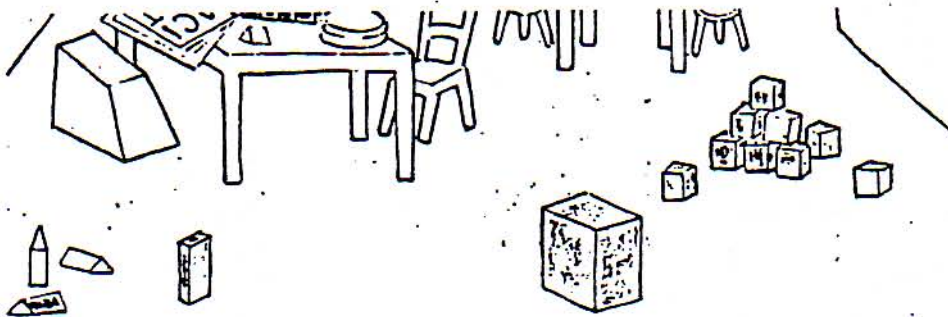


Tell Me



a play by Guy de Cointet



by František Deák

We can in fact presume that there exist certain writers, painters, musicians, in whose eyes a certain exercise of structure (and not only its thought) represents a distinctive experience, and that both analysts and creators must be placed under the common sign of what we might call structural man, defined not by his ideas or his languages, but by his imagination—in other words, by the way in which he mentally experiences structure. (Roland Barthes The Structuralist Activity)

In theatre, a heightened perception and experience of structure is possible in three kinds of work. The first is theatre based on strong codified conventions, as in Oriental theatre and a large part of Western folk theatre. In viewing Kabuki or No productions my awareness of structure is heightened not only because of the great variety and distribution of theatrical signs and their apparent systematic

codification but also because, as a foreigner to Japanese culture and theatre, my attitude during the production is one of deciphering. Through the elements that are repeated over and over, I begin to unravel the structure of what I am seeing.

Another type of work that heightens the awareness of structure is work that tampers or experiments with the structure itself, or at least with one of its elements. The history of the avant-garde theatre is full of examples in which one or a series of elements are used in a new and unusual way, causing the audience to ponder the resulting new arrangement. The different uses of space from the proscenium theatre to environmental theatre, the changes in the relationship between stage and audience, for example, heighten an awareness of structure.

The third group of works that results in the mental experience of theatre structure are works deliberately conceived with this purpose in mind. If in the two previous cases, the experience of the structure was secondary, or even accidental, in view of the dominant aspect of the work, in the structuralist theatre the experience of the structure is not only dominant but the purpose of the work as well. It is possible that when it becomes clear that structuralism is not just a method or technique of analysis but an activity (comparable, according to Roland Barthes, to Surrealist activity) or a way of perceiving reality that it can also become an important way of art making. It would then be possible in the future to talk about a structuralist artist as one talks about a political one, the latter being concerned with politics (any kind of politics) and the former with structure (with various structures and different ways of experiencing them).

The work of Guy de Cointet, a Los Angeles artist who was born in Paris and who has lived in Los Angeles since 1968, can be considered structuralist in the purposeful sense. Guy de Cointet has been writing and staging his plays for about four years. He belongs to that group of artists (and tradition) who extend their work from one genre into another. In comparison with many contemporary artists who use performance or elements of theatre in their works, Guy de Cointet's productions are clearly theatrical. His way of working, writing a play, auditioning, then rehearsing is the way productions in theatre are traditionally done. He does not perform in his plays but hires actors and is his own director. Even the presentation of *Tell Me*, his latest play, performed twelve times in the Rosamund Felsen gallery in Los Angeles in March, 1979, was more typical of an off-Off-Broadway run than of performances by visual artists that tend to be given only once. However, what distinguishes Guy de Cointet from theatre artists is that, at least initially, he is not concerned with theatre. He does not conceive of his theatre pieces as a result of an analysis of theatre structure nor does he embark on doing theatre. He arrives at it. In his art work (drawings and artist books) Guy de Cointet is involved with translating the system of one language into another (often written language into a visual sign system) and with making cyphers, anagrams and other sign systems with complex codes. It was the continuation and extension of this work in time and space that led Guy de Cointet to theatre and which makes his plays and productions Structuralist.

The Play

The circumstances of the play are simple. Michael (used as a woman's name) and Olive are spending an evening at Mary's house. All three women are very good friends and have known each other for a long time. They expect Mark, Olive's boyfriend, to join them for dinner. Mark never shows up. They finish the evening by

going to dinner at Arthur's, a neighbor who has just moved in. All this can be inferred from the play, but it is not the plot or subject of the play.

In *Tell Me* there is no apparent subject, plot, conflict or denouement. Talking—a succession of conversations between Mary, Michael and Olive (in various combinations)—entrances, exits and an occasional soliloquy are what this play consists of. The conversations are usually casual and about insignificant matters. It would be possible to imagine these conversations (the parts of the conversations that are not purposefully dislocated) as having been taken from a realistic play. In this hypothetical realistic play, this kind of dialog would function as a filler, not contributing to the plot or to the apparent meaning of the play but necessary to satisfy the conventions of the realistic genre. From the point of view of the dramatic structure, *Tell Me* is a play in which marginal conversation—the stage business of dialog—is the dominant element of the play.

The first experience of structure results from the absence of structural elements (plot, conflict, etc.) that are otherwise considered indispensable. The structure that the audience is reconstructing (experiencing) is the structure of the realistic play or, even more closely—for those who are familiar with this genre—the structure of the television soap opera. A different experience of a structure results from all the attention given to conversation. The beginnings of conversations, the sudden changes of subject and completing conversations by constant repetitions are experienced structurally. Entrances and exits—parts of structure that are almost never considered when talking about the structure of drama (even if there are great differences in their use from Shakespeare to Ibsen)—suddenly acquire in their arbitrariness (there is no plot to motivate them) the status of important structural elements.

The play begins with Mary and Michael entering the room. Mary is carrying an object, a white cardboard square with black capital letters A D M T on the four sides of the square and with a red capital S in the middle. The two women refer to this as the "old map." The beginning of the dialog is typical of the casual conversation that dominates the play.

Mary: Michael, thank you so much. What a handsome present! This old map looks wonderful here ...and fits perfectly my living room.

Michael: It really does. Mary, I'm glad you like it. I found it this morning in a thrift shop under a pile of broken furniture...

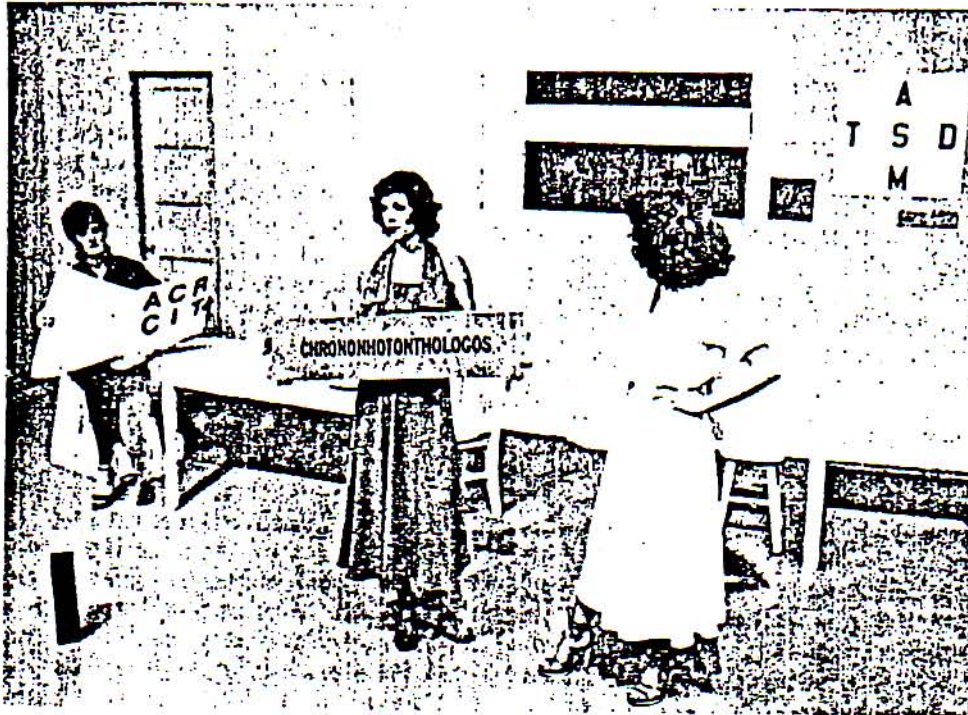
Here Michael, still describing the map, switches into rhetorical, literary language:

"Deep in the vast heart of Africa, encircled by treacherous desert, shielded by hazardous mountains, guarded by fierce and savage tribes, lies a legendary treasure: the fabled storehouse of King Solomon's mines."

Mary picks up the language and style.

Mary: The three-hundred-year-old map which led to the discovery of incredible diamonds! ...A priceless piece! ...

This rhetorical, obviously literary language is just one of the languages Guy de Cointet uses in his play. In other instances his characters switch from casual conversation into Chinese or Persian poetry, philosophical text (from Thoreau for



Michael (right) reading a newspaper, Mary talking about a tragedy Chrononhotonthologos.

example), lines from some exotic dime-novel or some B movie ("the beautiful Madame Tchang is smoking and she says to herself"). These borrowed, ready-made texts range from units as long as the quoted example from Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* to one line or even a single expression. At times they are transcribed verbatim. On other occasions they are slightly paraphrased. As a result it is not always possible to distinguish if a line or an expression in a given context comes from a dime novel or a Chinese poem. On the stylistic level the flight into rhetorical, literary language juxtaposes the lifelike casual conversation with contrived literary language. This juxtaposition points out that both are particular styles and that, with a certain distance, the casual conversation will appear contrived as well.

On the level of language the use of ready-made (found) text is of much greater importance. In the context of the obviously borrowed texts, the language of the casual conversation becomes a ready-made, found text as well. Actually it is a ready-made text. Guy de Cointet argues that there is no need for him to invent his lines. They are all over in books, newspapers, television soap operas, conversations, etc. He assumes that since somebody else used them and that he found them interesting will probably mean that other people will notice them as well. It is the heightened sensibility to ready-made expressions that anybody learning foreign languages experiences that Guy de Cointet communicates in part to his audience.

But in its implication, the coexistence of different languages (the language of polite, social conversation, with the language of poetry, the dime novel, philosophical reflection, etc.) points toward an understanding of a language as consisting of separate languages that interact in every single act of communication. This view of language in the play is emphasized by switching into another language

(Spanish) during a conversation, as well as by inserting into the conversation invented languages based on the five human senses. At times the communication among the characters is visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and even through taste.

Michael: *Don't worry. I'll go to the store. What do you need?*

Mary: *...Potatoes ...Bananas ...string beans...What else? If you can find some (she makes a gesture) it would be very nice.*

Mary tells a story to Olive. She gets confused and frightened and, at Olive's request, tells her the story by "writing" in a touch language into Olive's hand.

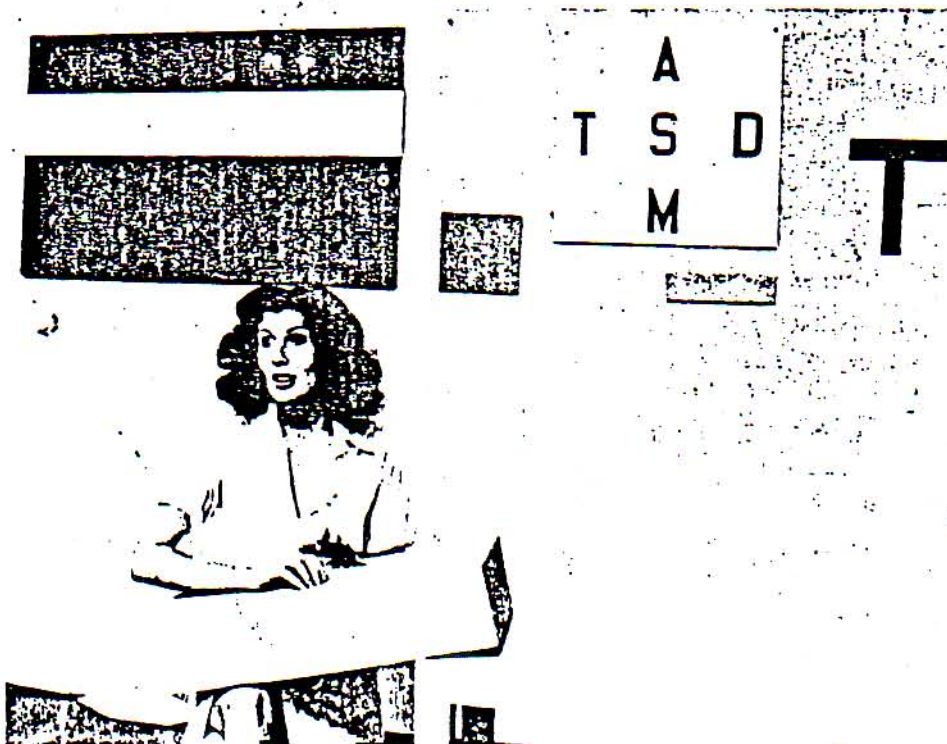
Olive: *Please, Mary, tell me. (Olive holds out her hand to her. Mary tells the story into Olive's palm.)*

Mary: *How smooth and soft this palm is... (Olive holds out both hands.)*

Olive: *Tell me more... (Mary tells story in both hands.) Obviously it was the wrong box.*

Mary: *Absolutely.*

Olive writing a "sound letter" to Mark.



Michael tells Olive the story of her landlord who has disappeared. In the middle of the story she switches into phonetic language.

Michael: *Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were having a cup of coffee in the kitchen of their condominium when...toctoctocto...toc...*

Olive: *Please go on.*

Michael: *It's not a simple story. Nobody, not even Mrs. Johnson, knows how the whole thing started. There's still a lot of confusion. I'll tell you what I saw ...Toctoctoctoc...toctoc...toctoctoc...toctoc...toctoc...etc.*

In a similar manner the communication through taste and smell, which occurs less frequently, is incorporated into a text.

Another means by which the casual conversational language is dislocated is by the substitution of one word in a text for another.) A mosquito flies around Mary's head and she catches it.

Mary: *These snails. They are all over the place this time of the year.*

Both sentences are correct except that Mary calls the mosquito a snail. This kind of substitution is common in the text, at times going on for a while before switching back to the proper word. Mary and Michael are talking about Michael's grandmother when Michael asks for a cigarette, thus changing the direction of the conversation.

Mary: *Your children must be very fond of her.*

Michael: *They are. Mary, can I have a cigarette?*

Mary: *A cigarette? Wouldn't you rather have a Scotch?*

Michael: *No... I prefer a drink.*

Mary: *What would you like to drink?*

Michael: *A Marlboro.*

Mary: *I'm sorry, Michael, I'm out of Marlboro. I drank the last drop of it yesterday morning ...What about a Havana?*

Michael: *Fine.*

Mary: *Here it is. Enjoy yourself. You're lucky! I just came back from Havana a few days ago. These are delicious...I'll drink one too.*

Michael: *Did you see your brother over there?*

Mary: *Yes, I did. Such a sad story! His wife is terribly ill, and he lost his job.*

Michael: *I'm sorry to hear that. Your brother and I were such good friends a while ago...*

Mary: *Fortunately, my cousin Daisy lives in Cuba right now. She's got an important and interesting government position. She said she'll find him another job...*

Michael: *...And a serious doctor for his wife, I hope.*

Mary: *That's more difficult. Serious doctors...*

Michael: *You're right.*

Mary: *I'm right about what?*

Michael: *This Havana is a delight! ...Are you expecting some people for dinner?*

The substitution of drinking/smoking and scotch/cigarette (Havana) dislocates the casual dialog but also makes any further reference to drinking and smoking ambivalent as in the following scene toward the end of the play.

Olive: *Mary, are you interested in Arthur?*

Mary: *I guess I am. But I'm fond of Michael too. And Michael seems very fond of Arthur ...*

Olive: *So I noticed. I bet she's still at his house.*

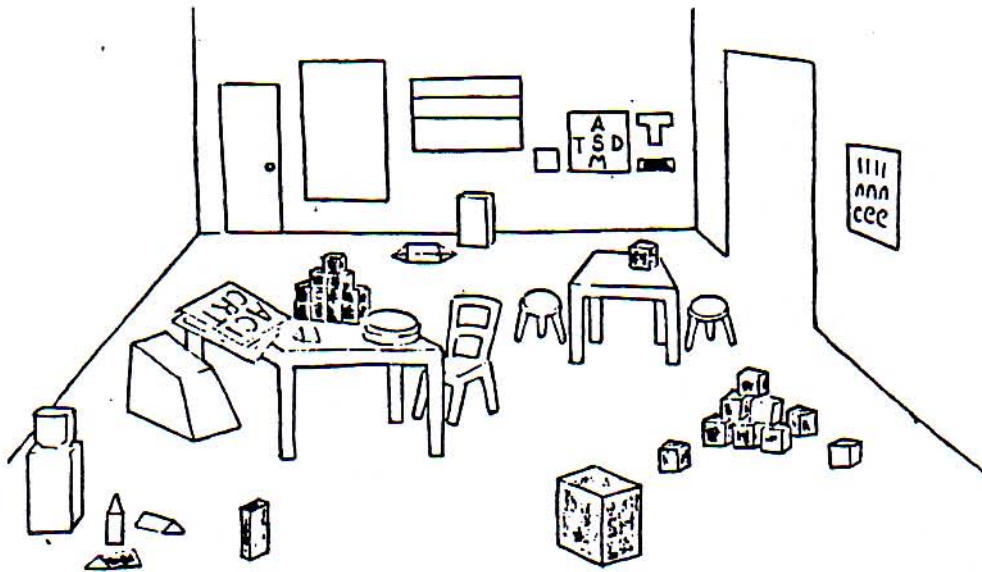
Mary: *Probably smoking.*

Olive: *And drinking ...*

Mary: *All those fancy cigars.*

Toward the end of the play some of the lines, expressions, images and specific dislocations are repeated again. Stories that were told by Mary, Michael and Olive are again alluded to—often just through a word or a sentence. As there is no plot, the play can not be resolved: the repetitions are the reiterations of the structural element. The structure is hermetic (one element referring to another) and generative (the play could go on generating scene after scene).

The set designed by Guy de Cointet is not just the physical space where the play takes place but a conceptual and structural element of the production that he had in mind while he was writing the play. The playing space is delineated by the walls of the gallery. In the middle of the wall directly across from the audience, a "painting"—a rectangular piece of cardboard with three stripes: green-white-green—is hanging. On its left hangs a white rectangular piece of cardboard ("painting") with the longer side vertical. Next to it is a door. The wall on the left side, which is perpendicular to the back wall faced by the audience, is empty. To the right of the green-and-white painting, on its lower side, is a smaller light blue square and next to it a small, orange, rectangular piece of cardboard. On the extreme right is a T-shaped piece of green cardboard. On the right wall, perpendicular to the back wall, is a door through which the audience enters and, next to it, closer to the audience hangs another painting, a piece of white cardboard with three lines of signs: ||| on the upper line; nnn on the middle line and ccc on the lower line. Under the green-white painting is a light blue cardboard box. In the playing area are two tables with chairs. One of the tables, the larger one, is left of center, the smaller is right of center. On the bigger table are: orange cubes arranged into a pyramid, a sheet of paper with the big black letters A C I on the first line and C R T on the second line. Next to it is a small blue triangular object. On the other smaller table is a black cube. In front of this table are more cubes: seven black, one white and one green. More toward the right and closer to the audience is a red cardboard box. Next to it toward the left are a few triangular objects of blue, white and red. Next to them is a black cardboard box.



Framed by the white walls of the gallery, these objects in their geometrical shapes and color schemes appear to be possible art objects. The impression given is one of an installation. The aspect of installation, disappears however, as the actors enter, transforming it into a set and identifying it as the living room of Mary's house. As the play proceeds, each object on the set is identified, either by being directly named or through an action. The green-and-white striped piece of cardboard becomes a painting when it is described as such. The white piece of cardboard next to it does not turn out to be a painting but a mirror. The green T-shaped cardboard becomes a telephone. The orange cubes that form a pyramid on the table are a book. The set that was an abstract installation becomes a concrete one as the performance advances.

This process of denomination of stage and properties, the establishment of a specific code system (what represents what) is fundamental to theatre. Even in a realistic set that allows the majority of objects to be identified on the basis of recognition from life, there still remains some that are identified only through the action. Just as, for example, the audience learns in the production of *Tell Me* that the door on the left facing the audience is a door to the kitchen and that the door on the right leads outside the house, the audience would learn the function of the doors in any realistic set. The process of the recognition of the objects and their function on the stage, the conventions and codes that are involved in it, are usually perceived automatically without any conscious effort. By transforming the abstract set into a concrete one through the theatrical action, Guy de Cointet makes this process visible and conscious.

Acting has a very special function in the production of *Tell Me*. It is the element that unifies the text and the set. The fact that it is a unifying element does not make it special. Acting usually has this function in the structure of the dramatic theatre. What makes the case of *Tell Me* special is that the unifying function of acting is purposefully pointed out. In the first scene of the play when the old map (a white cardboard square with black capital letters [A D M T] on four sides of the square and with a red capital S in the middle) is put on the wall, the already quoted text from *King Solomon's Mines* follows. The relationship between the old map and the text from the script is not comprehensible. It becomes so when Denise Domerque, who

plays Michael, coordinates the text with the capital letters of the old map. The actress reciting the text points toward the map: "Deep in the vast heart of Africa (she points to A), encircled by treacherous desert (points to D) shielded by hazardous mountains (M), guarded by fierce and savage tribes (T), lies a legendary treasure (T): the fabled storehouse (S) of King Solomon's (S) mines."

The actress is the connecting element between the linguistic and visual elements. She does not decipher the old map. She is just the missing link (element) that when put between the language and visual signs, completes the structure. In so doing, she makes it comprehensible in each of its elements as well as in its entirety.

In view of the numerous dislocations of text and the abstractness of the set, the blocking, timing and acting in general had to be very clear and precise, with no ambiguities of any kind. The actors played it completely straight. They had to relate to the objects and props on the set in a clear and convincing way. The acting was devoid of any irony, detailed characterization or subtext. During the rehearsals that lasted a month and a half, Guy de Cointet put great emphasis on the exactness of blocking, timing and clarity in every movement and gesture. Prior to the beginning of rehearsal, he blocked the entire play from moment to moment in colorful diagrams. He explained on the ground plan of the set the identity and function of all the objects and props. The three actresses (Jane Zingale, Helen Mendez and Denise Domerque) who played Mary, Olive and Michael are physically well-distinguishable types. They all wore simple but elegant clothing (Mary in red, Olive in white and Michael in black)

Michael reading the old map to Mary.



and high-heel shoes that, on the small stage, emphasized their walk. The color scheme of their costumes (only major colors, no half-tones) and their simplicity (no ornaments but clear lines) corresponded visually to the set and gave the costumes an aspect of abstractness as well. During the rehearsals, Guy de Cointet encouraged each actress to develop a very distinctive stage figure based on her own temperament. The result was three stage figures that in their manners, gestures, movements and voice were the most constant and unambiguous structural elements of the production.

The initial idea that Guy de Cointet had was to write a play about and around people talking together who knew each other very well. As a result of this familiarity, they can understand or misunderstand each other without further explanation or without ever noticing it. The elements of conversation and the conversation itself are treated structurally in relation to this idea. Just by reading the play, it is possible to experience this structure to a degree. But in performance, when there is a sudden dislocation in the text without a corresponding dislocation in acting, the distance that is created between the text and acting makes the audience experience the structure of the conversation very strongly. This experience seemed to be objectively true from the reactions of the audience. I felt that Guy de Cointet, by making the process of stage denomination visible, was staging a theoretical hypothesis about the nature of theatre. This reaction was, perhaps, personal—resulting from my own preoccupation with the theoretical problems of theatre.

It is not unusual to talk about the subject, theme, acting and directing after seeing a performance. But it would be unusual to share the experience of the structure. First, the consciousness of structure in theatre is not too common and, second there is no precedent to talk about the structure of experience at all. Structuralist analysis concentrates on the work itself and not on the structure of experience of the audience, which obviously is the one that ultimately counts. Structuralist theatre, besides being a distinct way of art-making, suggests by its emphasis on the experience of structure a change in priorities from the analysis of the object to the analysis of the structure of experience.

ART REVIEW

4 Facets of the
Fit of Things

Otis-Parsons art gallery shows four L.A.-area artists in a group that strikes a neat balance. Artists have a common interest in the way things fit together. Otherwise they could not be more difficult, which makes for a lively experience.

Guy de Cointet has heretofore flummoxed this observer. On one hand, he is a performance artist and entrepreneur who writes and presents what one might call plays, if you use the term loosely. On the other, he brings forth little books and sheets covered with markings we are led to understand are some manner of code. This exhibition of drawings and one set piece are, first, far pleasanter to view than before. Handsome arrangements of ruler-straight lines have odd titles like "This is impossible. It must be a conspiracy."

At least part of the conspiracy is now clear. De Cointet appears to be fascinated with the underlying structure of things. If his plays do not make normal sense, at least it's clear they are plays, because they employ theatrical structure. If we cannot "read" his markings, we at least know they are systematized concepts.

Tom Holste is interested in the way painting becomes sculpture and vice versa. He has recently been up to making elaborate wall reliefs of painted geometric elements. They are freighted with heavy nostalgia for early moder-

nism à la Kandinsky and constructivist sculpture but they progressively convince us the possibilities are not used up. Until recently, Holste had a neoconstructivist comrade in Claude Kent who, alas, appears to have abandoned the form.

Photographers make up the other half of the exhibition. They continue the theme of structure but in radically opposite ways. Steve Kahn shows several sets of paired black-and-white oversize prints. Each pair consists of an anonymous doorway in a blank wall and a cloudscape over a low horizon. At first, each pair looks the same. In fact, they are all different. Apparently the interplay of the work intends to make us question the structure of our own perceptions. Why do we see the clouds as "atmosphere" and the walls as "solid" when they are visually and photographically identical? Why do we see things as different when they are the same and similar when they are dissimilar? The answers are fairly simple. The trouble with the work is that the questions are too complex.

Anthony Hernandez presents a photo essay, "Art as Social Reality." It looks like straight documentary photos of sculpture in public places and ranges democratically from the urban blight of the Triforium to works by Moore, Noguchi and Volkous. Hernandez's apparent objectivity dissolves when we see the works, good and bad, as altering the aesthetic ecology of their surroundings. One sci-fi sculpture looks like an invader from outer space on a quiet neighborhood. A Barnett Newman "Broken Obelisk" is downright iconoclastic in front of a church spire. Hernandez presents an unusually intelligent questioning of an establishment mentality that believes civic sculpture is always a good thing. He tells us the art establishment and civic bureaucracies simply have their unique ways of being dumb.

The exhibition by Otis-Parsons gallery director Hal Glicksman continues to Oct. 14. —WILLIAM WILSON