

GUY DE COINTET

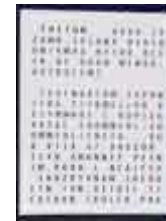
by Judith Hoffberg

([Cirrus Gallery](#), Downtown) I met Guy de Cointet in the 1970s through his books, which were available in such venues as the Pasadena Art Museum bookshop, where most of us bought our artist books because of the courage of the bookshop manager, who sensed a publishing movement within the artist community. Guy's books were not "legible" in the literal sense, since they were books created by strange languages created by Guy, including codes and new alphabets. How could you disagree with the author who wrote a book entitled *Espahor ledet Ko Uluneri* (1973) which indeed was a straight narrative with plot, development, climax, denouement, written in a deathless prose such as "Misdod, lerbrnazs ko troukalf," and was later performed by actor Billy Barty as *Mr. Qei No Mysrdod* in 1973 at Cirrus Gallery when it was located on Manhattan Place!



"Billy Barty Performance",
from "Qei No Mysrdod",
May 22, 1973.

Born in Paris, he came to the United States in 1968 and settled in California in 1970. His first publication, *ARCRICIT*, a newspaper on book paper which included pages of tiny palm trees, a page of domino-like symbols, a page of large expanded Baskerville type exploded (and this before computers, so the enlargement had this soft edge to each letter), which sold for only \$2.50 (one copy was purchased by Marshall McLuhan in our bookshop called Artworks in 1979).



"1 Page from My Intimate
Journal," screenprint, 30 x
22",
edition 50, 1974

The aforementioned novel, *Espahor*, included a portfolio of 12 prints which de Cointet pulled himself. Symbols of concave and convex strokes, interspersed diagrams and imagery and statements such as "A fine head of hair is the pride and joy of every woman's heart" with mirror-image texts in gorgeous calligraphy distinguish these images. Another series of prints consisted of calligraphy from texts about a Greek sculptor, or texts about Africa or exotic islands, or symbols against a background of stars, lozenges, and diamonds, with the statement "I lost control for a second." But this artist never lost control, using language as his medium, his structure, and his form.



"At Sunrise a Cry Was
Heard,"
with Mary Ann Duganne-

More a concrete poet than a visual artist, he constructed things with words but words without meaning, words that were broken down into letters themselves and their visual

components. Being the prime appropriation of language, he used the components to make a visual statement. He became a true artist because he managed to transform the language experience into a visual experience.

De Cointet also was a listener. He listened to the radio, to people he knew, to everyday conversation. He was alert to the imprecision of language, yet observed how people still seemed to understand each other, even though their words could be interpreted in many different ways. As a result, from a visual point of view, he sensed that with a little work, the viewer could accommodate the artist's vision of language as a medium, with its own rhythm, plot and dynamics.

In 1974, he created a play, *TSNX C24VA7ME*, a play of Dr. Hun, which was a drama with Sylvia Oronmel, including props of license plates, phone numbers, movie ratings, words, all emerging tenuously in its own logic and story.

In an interview with Emily Hicks, de Cointet cited the fact that he turned to performance to explain the books, to make them more accessible, because he wanted to present different relationships visually. In these performances, he created props which were used in the action, so that everything comes together. Each actor (and he used professional actors) explained each prop as part of the organization of the progress of the play, so that the audience begins knowing nothing and ends when their confusion about the objects has been resolved. The objects ranged from geometrical forms of various sizes, paintings of letters and/or numbers on the wall, or as in *Five Sisters*, there were no props except lighting by the late artist Eric Orr, who employed a wide color spectrum such as purple, magenta, yellow and blues.

De Cointet traveled his performances throughout the U.S., working closely with Bob Wilhite on many of the pieces. He died prematurely in 1983, leaving a legacy that has influenced such now key artists as Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Allen Ruppersberg, Larry Bell and Orr. This exhibition of prints, paintings and video should be an important visit.

Glicksman next to "The Halved Painting," performance at the Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles, CA, August, 1976.



"Untitled," ink on paper, 1971-72.

