

ETHIOPIA, 1976

This installation is the stage set from the first performance that de Cointet did with the sound artist Robert Wilhite. The performance centred on the idea of a split personality, which is expressed in the objects on the stage and in the dialogues. The stage set consists of various geometric and colourful sculptures, such as a cone, a sphere and a cube, and a house. The different

objects are autonomous characters, to which colour adds an emotion. Sound – radio fragments and advertising jingles – plays an important part in the process: by adding sound to the objects, they assume an identity, as does the spoken word through one of the characters.

ROOM 18**TELL ME, 1979**

As in **Tell Me**, where three women wait for a fourth character, many of Guy de Cointet's performances are about waiting for something that will never come. There might be a reference here to de Cointet's own experiences during the Second World War, when his soldier father went off to fight, without knowing whether he would ever return. **Tell Me** is about language and abstraction, and how we perceive and interpret everyday reality. De Cointet also wants us to think about the status of artworks. He doesn't show them in a museum context, but as props in a domestic environment.

“The way these women behave, listen to one another and talk how they observe an interpret their environment: that's what interest me...”

The loose storyline in the performance is related to American soaps, melodramas and fashion magazines. De Cointet was also inspired by women he heard talking in the street and by the things his friends said. The actresses' mundane conversations testify to the same superficiality as the coloured artworks. The objects take on meaning as the women talk; a black cube becomes a camera, for instance; a cube a letter; the orange cubes oranges, and so forth. Although the story has no dénouement, there are several sub-plots about boyfriends, beauty and a new neighbour. The piece was first performed in 1979 at the County Museum of Los Angeles.

De Cointet plays with the confusion of meanings and with the viewer's expectations.

ARTIST'S BOOKS 1972–75

A Captain from Portugal (1972) is the first in a series of five artist's books. It comprises a collection of encoded language systems in octagons, games like solitaire, and magic squares. **Animated Discourse** (1975) is the result of a special collaboration with the artist Larry Bell, who gave de Cointet 29 photographs to encode; each photograph corresponds with a letter or punctuation mark. In visual terms, the dancers jump, pose or walk for the camera. If you flick through the book quickly, they move fluidly.

Espahor ledet ko uluner! (x. 1973) and **TSNX C24VA7 ME** (x. 1974) form the transition from drawing to performance (see below). In his final artist's book **A Few Drawings** (1975) de Cointet abandoned the idea of a book as a story with a plot, turning it – as the title suggests – into a collection of drawings.

NOTEBOOKS

Guy de Cointet filled 28 notebooks with personal thoughts and plans between 1971 and 1983. Eleven of them are exhibited here. These private books form a rich archive, in which the development of the artist's work can be followed. Ideas, sketches, quotes, addresses, plans, alphabets, drawings and theatre texts – every aspect of his work comes together in a stream of information.



A recording of **Tell Me** from 1979 can be seen in room 18, as well as a reenactment from 2007.



Een radiofragment waarin wordt voorgedragen uit **TSNX C24VA7 ME** kan je beluisteren in de zithoek.



M VAN
**MUSEUM
LEUVEN**

**GUY DE
COINTET**

17.09.15 × 10.01.16

Guy de Cointet (Paris 1934–Los Angeles 1983) was fascinated by how language is used in different forms, from advertisements and conversations to literature, soaps and radio. In his drawings, texts and performances, he introduced new ways of engaging with words, form and meaning. This exhibition brings together examples of his work from 1965 to 1982, creating a survey of de Cointet's versatile practice.

Guy de Cointet was born in France, but emigrated in 1965 to the United States, where he discovered Andy Warhol's pop art. The pop influence is visible in his early work, which consists of simple volumes in bright colours (**Sans Titre, 1965**). Like the pop artists, de Cointet questioned contemporary society by isolating specific elements, enlarging and reproducing them. As Larry Bell's assistant in New York, he was also introduced to minimal art before moving to Los Angeles in the late 1960s.

Taking his cue from the readymades of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Guy de Cointet explored ways of reducing the artist's hand in the work. His art derived, for instance, from an ingenious system – a kind of code capable of generating endless variations. His exploration of the possibilities and limits of a system links de Cointet's work to that of minimal artists like Sol LeWitt.

“He's a mild-mannered Frenchman who braves the outermost wilderness of language by fashioning plays, operas, books and drawings that make alphabet soup of our most cherished linguistic packaging.”

Guy de Cointet's impact on the California art scene is visible in the work of artists like Paul McCarthy (1945), Mike Kelley (1945–2012), Allen Ruppersberg (1944) and John Baldessari (1931), in which performance is combined with a visual idiom.

ACRCIT

This newspaper, is like his 'Rosetta Stone' and was one of de Cointet's earliest works. It presents an overview of the different systems underpinning his drawings and books, such as crossword puzzles, mirror writing, number series, Morse code, Braille and decorative motifs.

ACRCIT was published in a large print-run and distributed free to passers-by via newsstands. The artist especially liked the anonymity and enigma that surrounded his little paper. The title too remains a mystery; there are several possible explanations for 'ACRCIT': the title is linked phonetically, for instance, with the French word écrire – to write – and to the acronym ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) – a computer protocol used to convert the alphabet and other symbols into numbers. A new edition of the paper has been produced especially for the exhibition at M.

1. The Rosetta Stone is an inscribed granite block discovered in 1799, which led to the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

curator: Eva Wittocx

In collaboration with the Estate of Guy de Cointet & Air de Paris, Paris

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Guy de Cointet is also one of the central artists in the Playground festival (a collaboration between M and Kunstencentrum STUK). Two performances will be staged during the festival:

- 22 November at 2 pm: a reading from *Espahor ledet ko uluner!* at M
- 21 November at 9 pm and 22 November at 4 pm: live performance *Comme il est blonde!* (or *De Toutes les Couleurs*) from 1982, performed at STUK.

Click here to see the full festival programme: www.playgroundfestival.be

The exhibition Guy de Cointet is part of the 'Alfred Jarry Archipelago' project, in collaboration with La Ferme du Buisson (Noisiel), Le Quartier (Quimper) and Museo Marino Marini (Florence).



Take a free copy of ACRCIT in room 18.

ROOM 15

DRAWINGS

Guy de Cointet produced over 200 drawings between 1970 and 1983. They occupy the midpoint between logic and game. In his earliest drawings, de Cointet toyed with our familiar Arabic numbers and Roman letters. He used mirror writing in several of them to encode his text. The artist was left-handed, but was forced as a child to write with his right hand, leaving him both ambidextrous and with the ability to write backwards. De Cointet's fascination for numbers, figures and letters led him to copy countless number sequences, texts and shapes.

MIRROR WRITING

A large drawing from 1971 (**Sans Titre, 1971**) consists of five columns of text resembling a page copied carefully from a newspaper. The text does not tell a clear story; the artist borrowed fragments instead from various sources, including a popular guide to health, an adventure novel and a scientific article. Mirror writing makes it harder to read. Assembling different sources from popular culture, everyday life and literature is a thread running through both Guy de Cointet's drawings and his performances.

ROOM 16

De Cointet explored language by deconstructing it. He broke language down and transformed letters into visual, rhythmic signs with clean lines and primary colours, demonstrating in this way that language is about systems and agreements. By stripping these down to visual puzzles, codes and his own systems, he places the reader in a prelingual state, in which language is merely form and sound. De Cointet appears to have inherited his fascination for codes from his parents.

It would be selling the drawings short, however, to view them solely as codes to be broken. De Cointet confronts us instead with the impossibility of interpreting a drawing unambiguously. The attempt to decipher – the act – is more important to him than finding the solution, which does not always exist. Encouraging the viewer to decipher the text is not the meaning of his art, merely a means of creating a dialogue between the artwork and its beholder.

De Cointet's earliest drawings with numbers and mirror writing either have no titles or ones that are merely descriptive. This changed in the early 1970s, when the artist began to give his drawings surprising titles – quotes from authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Jorge Luis Borges, for instance, sentences heard on TV and references to adventurous and exotic places. These titles often provide a clue to deciphering the works, but never explain them.

NUMBERS

One group of drawings uses different sequences of numbers in mirror writing (**1970...1973, 1971**) (**Suite de chiffres de 1930 à 1989, 1971**). They comprise number series and significant dates, some of them with a historical significance, such as 1914–18 (the First World War), while others are relevant to the artist's biography.

SUMS

Several drawings contain sums written in a black marker on a white sheet (**Sans Titre, 1971**) These additions, subtractions, multiplications and divisions are made up of striking numerical sequences. The apparently complex mathematical formulas often have surprising and visual solutions.

SIGNATURE DE MAHOMET

This print with two interlocking crescent moons, one reversed, looks like a quick drawing exercise on paper. It supposedly represents the signature of the Prophet Mohammed. Another version of the drawing merely heightens the enigmatic character. A text in mirror writing reads: *I dare say Muhammad drew in one stroke, with the point of his scimitar, his signature of two crescents back to back*. The sketch on paper was supposedly drawn with a single stroke of the pen. The inscription challenges you to try the same exercise mentally.

DRAWINGS WITH THE ALPHABET (1971–76)

In Tacuar everyone knew him as an Englishman from Oaxaca (1971) is an example of Guy de Cointet's manipulation of the traditional alphabet.

He constructed letters of his own based on underlying frameworks such as octagons. Systematically omitting part of the graphic information means that the text is no longer immediately legible. The alienating effect is even stronger in **Enjoy the Commercials (1971)**, in which the drawing has been reduced entirely to dashes and arcs.

The letters in **... the ... (1976)** and **Night, Night... (1976)** are flattened. The notebook from 1975–76 in the display case gives a clue as to how we might read these drawings: the rotated and flattened figures refer to other letters from our alphabet, like a secret code.

LANGUAGE AS A GRAPHIC GAME (1978–82)

Although the underlying framework remains a constant principle, any reference to an existing, recognisable language disappears in the later drawings.

The race was over (15. 1978) is a graphic game consisting of brown and black lines. The drawing refers formally to the work of other minimal artists who worked with lines and characters, such as Frank Stella and Sol LeWitt. The game with language has not, however, disappeared in these drawings: de Cointet orders them



De Cointet was both ambidextrous and with the ability to write backwards

in a grid, with a black line separating the letters. In this way, the fourteen squares correspond with the fourteen letters of the title. The same coding principle was used in **Dr Johnson is coughing**, in which each coloured streak depicts a letter. You thus read the title of the drawing, letter by letter, from left to right.

PLAYING WITH IMAGE, SYMBOL AND LANGUAGE (1982–83)

From 1982, the drawings no longer follow an underlying framework or principle. Geometric figures in colour form twisted ribbons on paper (**It's like seeing with the eyes of a lion**). Any connection between content and form now seems to have disappeared.

Two small drawings, **He was talking to 2 ladies...** and **You shouldn't write that!**, show a pencil line that follows an ostensibly random pattern. The title seems to challenge us to look for a link between image and text.

The way Guy de Cointet plays with image, symbols and language is clearly on view in **Back in Jamaica** – a drawing in red and black ink. The print shows a landscape of houses, mountains, valleys and church towers; its title notwithstanding, this might refer to a French village where de Cointet spent a lot of time in 1983.

Colour and decorative motifs like stars, diamonds and mandorlas form a final series of vibrant drawings, including **As the shadows of night approached in Africa (1982)** and **I can't sleep anymore! (1983)**. The drawings have evocative titles. De Cointet uses mirror writing again, as he did in his earliest drawings. The calligraphic inscriptions are elegant forms, without meaning. As a child, de Cointet lived in Algeria for a while, during his father's military service. There is a possible connection here with the curly letters, which have an oriental feel.

ROOM 17

From the 1970s onwards, de Cointet staged 23 performances. They grew from his desire to explain his drawings and texts using objects and speech acts. In his first performances, actors read aloud from the artist's books **Espahor ledet ko uluner! (1973)** and **TSNX C24VA7 ME (1974)**. The first book comprised the familiar coded languages, which corresponded with the drawings from the same period; the second was written in an entirely absurd and unreadable language. Performing the unreadable 'stories' from these little books makes the work more accessible to the spectator.

ACTORS

De Cointet never acted in his pieces. He had actors or models perform his scripts, asking them to: 'Describe a painting very slowly, with repetitions, acting certain passages, so that at the end the spectator really does get an eyeful of painting'. His love of soaps and TV led him to give his instructions with a slight – yet elegant – form of exaggeration. Some authors have also detected

PERFORMANCES

In 1973 de Cointet began to write scripts for performances in which actors engage in a dialogue with his artworks. These fragmented and absurd dialogues include scraps of expressions and sayings, advertising slogans, conversations overheard in the street, trashy novels and B-movie scripts. De Cointet listened to the radio and to the everyday conversations of the people around him. Using this 'broken language' enabled him to play with formal aspects of speech, such as sound and rhythm.

As a Frenchman in the United States, Guy de Cointet was all too aware of the imprecision of language, the ambiguity of words and the misunderstandings that can go with them. He himself spoke English with a heavy accent, having picked up the language from his Chinese neighbours in Los Angeles. It struck him all the same that people always manage to understand one another, despite the fact that words can be interpreted in many different ways.

I LIKE YOUR SHIRT, 1980

In **I Like Your Shirt**, Aimée and Christophe receive a strange letter from their friend Gizella, who is looking for a job. She writes: 'xi goisseytu vejannhum hikpitu-tam'. A conversation then begins about fashion and the life of an artist. The artwork on which the performance centres is an orange book which, when opened, has a window you can look through. In the middle of the piece, Aimée wakes up in the book, which is inscribed with the words 'the poetics of dreaming'.

a reflection here on minimal art – a movement in which all symbolic meaning is banished from the simple objects. The actors or actresses had an appropriately 'Hollywood' look, and were always stylishly dressed.

SETS

De Cointet's sets consist of minimal, colourful objects, such as a table, a painting, a chair, or geometrical forms. He used these artworks as props to illustrate the conversations. Yet the objects are not just passive players: de Cointet made them subjects in their own right, with feelings and thoughts of their own.

"Each object is specific; each has its own function as much as the actors do, so each has to be different. Everything has to be placed as precisely as possible on stage to keep ambiguity to a minimum."



Please do not touch the artwork.



childhood friend Yves Saint Laurent made the costumes for several performances