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 ingenuous 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.

“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), Alan Houser (1944) and John Baldessari (1931), in which performance is combined with a visual idiom.

ACRCIT

This newspaper, like his ‘Rosette 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.

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

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.

Guy de Cointet’s versatile practice.

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 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. objects are autonomous characters, to which colour

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 blond! (or De Toutes les Couleurs)’ from 1982, performed at STUK.

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

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PHOTO: Guy de Cointet. "Comme il est blonde!" (1973), two women waiting in a room. The letters of the alphabet are distributed free to passers-by via newsstands.

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**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 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.

One group of drawings uses different sequences of numbers and letters from 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 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.

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 images, 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 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, written in an entirely absurd and unreadable language. 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 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 advertisements. These titles often provide a clue to deciphering the works, but never explain them.

De Cointet was both ambidextrous and with the ability to write backwards. This changed in the early 1970s, when he inherited his fascination for codes from his parents. 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.

**DRAWINGS WITH THE ALPHABET (1971–76)**
In Tactus 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 visual patterns. Systematically omitting part of the graphic information means that the text is no longer immediately legible. The alienating effect is even stronger in Enjoig the Commerciais (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 geometric graphs. These titles often provide a clue to deciphering the works, but never explain them.

This changed in the early 1970s, when 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 sequences, texts and shapes.

**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 Esphar ledet ko ulume! (1973) and TSNX C24vA7 ME (1974). The first book comprised the familiar encoded languages, which corresponded with the drawings from the same period; the second was written in entirely an absurd and unreadable language. Performing the unreadable ‘stories’ from these little books makes the work more accessible to the spectator.

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 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 usually stylishly dressed.

**SETS**
De Cointet’s sets consist of minimal, colourful objects, such as a table, a painting, a chair or geometric 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.

“Well 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.”

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 overhead 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.

**LIKE YOUR SHIRT, 1980**
In ‘Like Your Shirt, Aimée and Christophe receive a strange letter from their friend Gizella, who is looking for a job. She writes: ‘...goisseytu vejannhnu hiptpnt’... 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’.