



Guy de Cointet, *Ethiopia*, 1976, installation with Robert Kilhito, MAMCO collection, Geneva. Photo: Marc Domage. © CRAC-LR, Sète

GUY DE COINETET: MAKING WORDS WITH THINGS

CENTRE REGIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN, SÈTE
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Guy de Cointet's work is full of the aura specific to rarely shown, underappreciated artists, and remains complex to exhibit. If the ideal contextualisation of his textual and sculptural pieces is the performance, a cryptic nostalgia prevails when encountering the drawings, books, props and stage sets by the artist, and it is reinforced by the displays (editions under windows, objects on platforms, video recordings with their dated textures) used to give an account of this seminal work. This specific relation to time and museum is not just a side effect of the French artist's premature death, in 1983, in Los Angeles; it is also a deliberate aspect of his work.

The space between his primary, nearly primitive, brightly coloured sculptures and the kind of hyper-sophisticated protolanguage of his texts and dialogues is in many ways filled by de Cointet's claim for an independent and eccentric position. Uneasy with connecting to an epoch or a movement, his artworks seem to stem from contradictory time flux. They distinguish themselves from minimal art by the ambiguous superficiality and lightness of the easily disposable abstract sculptures; from conceptual art by their surrealist poetry imbued with American vernacular pop references; and from performance art by the exaggerated theatricality of the acts.

On the day of the opening at CRAC Sète, two performances, *Tell Me* and *My Father's Diary* (both 1978), were re-enacted by the original actresses. This subtle historical masquerade, and the peculiarity of its exactitude, made tangible the oblique fetishism of the original staging. The actresses seemed

to be wearing a mask, allegorical altogether of time and camp beauty, their dialogues sounding alternatively archaic and contemporary: the sculptures and paintings they manipulated, freshly covered with a coat of paint (de Cointet used to paint them over and over again), functioned as overly made-up props charged with spiritual power. But beyond this esoteric conglomerate of elements and levels, there is genuine playfulness and freedom.

In one of the drawings from the series *My Marriage*, one can read, handwritten on top of a delicately coloured trapezoidal shape: 'When I got divorced, it hit me bad.' Of course, like the rest of de Cointet's works, this drawing is encrypted: behind the abstract shape is a letter, behind the sentence is a symbol, behind their association is a subconscious meaning. But this cryptic quality doesn't rest on any opaque intellectualism. Rather, it unveils the mechanisms of language with the help of raw material, such as TV slogans, ads and heard conversation, and demystifies abstraction and formalism through this direct technique of collaging elements together (to borrow a neologism from General Idea), treating them on an equal level, as no more or less than signs. With this particular blend of abruptness and refinement in his method, Guy de Cointet was a major influence on the artists present in this show: Catherine Sullivan, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, whose installation *Performance Related Objects* (1977-9) functions well here, as if mirroring and allowing *Ethiopia* (1976), another performance ensemble by de Cointet, to fully exist - without, however, being 're-activated'. *Ophélie Reynaud-Dewar*