

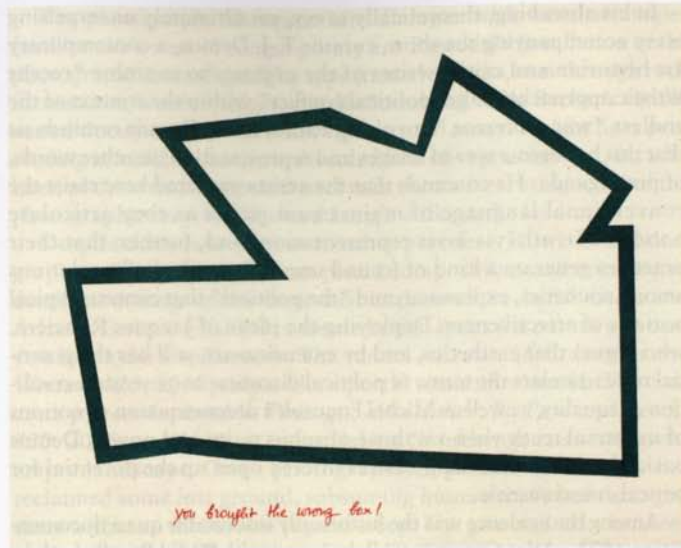
Guy de Cointet

GREENE NAFTALI GALLERY

Ferdinand de Saussure's famous *Course in General Linguistics* (published posthumously in 1916) defines language as "a system of pure values which are determined by nothing except the momentary arrangements of its terms." Such a characterization—a radical proposition in its day—has over the years become largely taken for granted. Most people, it seems, would admit that words are tethered somewhat arbitrarily to what they signify ("A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"), but however well-established the idea might be, we rarely see this premise of instability in action. For the most part, our day-to-day lives are governed by semantic assumptions; if we ask the appropriate vendor, for instance, "May I have a banana, please?" we expect to be handed a yellow, crescent-shaped fruit.

But in Guy de Cointet's universe, such bets are off. Indeed, the artist—who was born in Paris in 1934 and lived briefly in New York before moving in the late 1960s to Los Angeles, where he worked until his death in 1983—made words into things and things into words. This is to say that the materials of communication (letter, convention, gesture, cliché) in Cointet's work are rendered obtuse and—perhaps counterintuitively, then—visible. And, in his performances, the objects that serve as props and that might normally pass under the radar, their use-values openly displayed, somehow become unnaturally animated, as though they (more than even the performers around them) are endowed with individuating traits, personalities of a sort.

One risked seeing none of this if one passed too quickly through Greene Naftali's exhibition, the first large presentation in New York in over two decades of the artist's works on paper from the early '70s to the early '80s. The show was overdeterminedly quiet. But rather than being staidly silent, or reserved in their withholding, these works convey the sense of having tape over their mouths, of having streams of babble kept contained, but only barely so. Elegantly geometric, simple, and smallish, the pieces (mostly drawings in ink and colored pencil)



Guy de Cointet, *You brought the wrong box!*, ca. 1982, ink and pencil on paper, 11 x 14".

appear one part post-Minimalism and one part design, with toppling, repeating shapes hovering between grapheme and phoneme.

So what to make of *You brought the wrong box!*, ca. 1982, a drawing whose thick, continuous green line traces an irregular—unnamable—shape that would remain fully abstract had the title not been written into the picture with red pen in polite cursive? It helps to look at *I Smoke All the Time* from around 1983, a strangely iconic rendering of what appears to be a small, hillside town, the title mysterious only until you recognize that the composition's lines are the phrase's letters, deconstructed and then reconstructed. In these drawings, and others, Cointet implies that language is a terrain to travel, a space to peruse, a rabbit hole to fall into.

Cointet is primarily known (when he is known at all) for his performance works, in which paintings or other objects (usually encoded with linguistic elements) are called upon as props carrying dense, if not immediately accessible, content that lies rather alchemically in wait, needing a kind of activation. In a remarkable event accompanying the Greene Naftali show, Mary Ann Duganne Glicksman, the original actress in many of Cointet's performances, presented three of his theatrical works, having returned to the States from France. For a night, the kind of unmoored dialogues embedded in his work made an unforgettable "live" appearance. During the rest of the exhibition's run, one had to listen a bit harder, but the whispers still emanated from the walls.

—Johanna Burton