

MAP – Journeys in Contemporary Art

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Guy de Cointet

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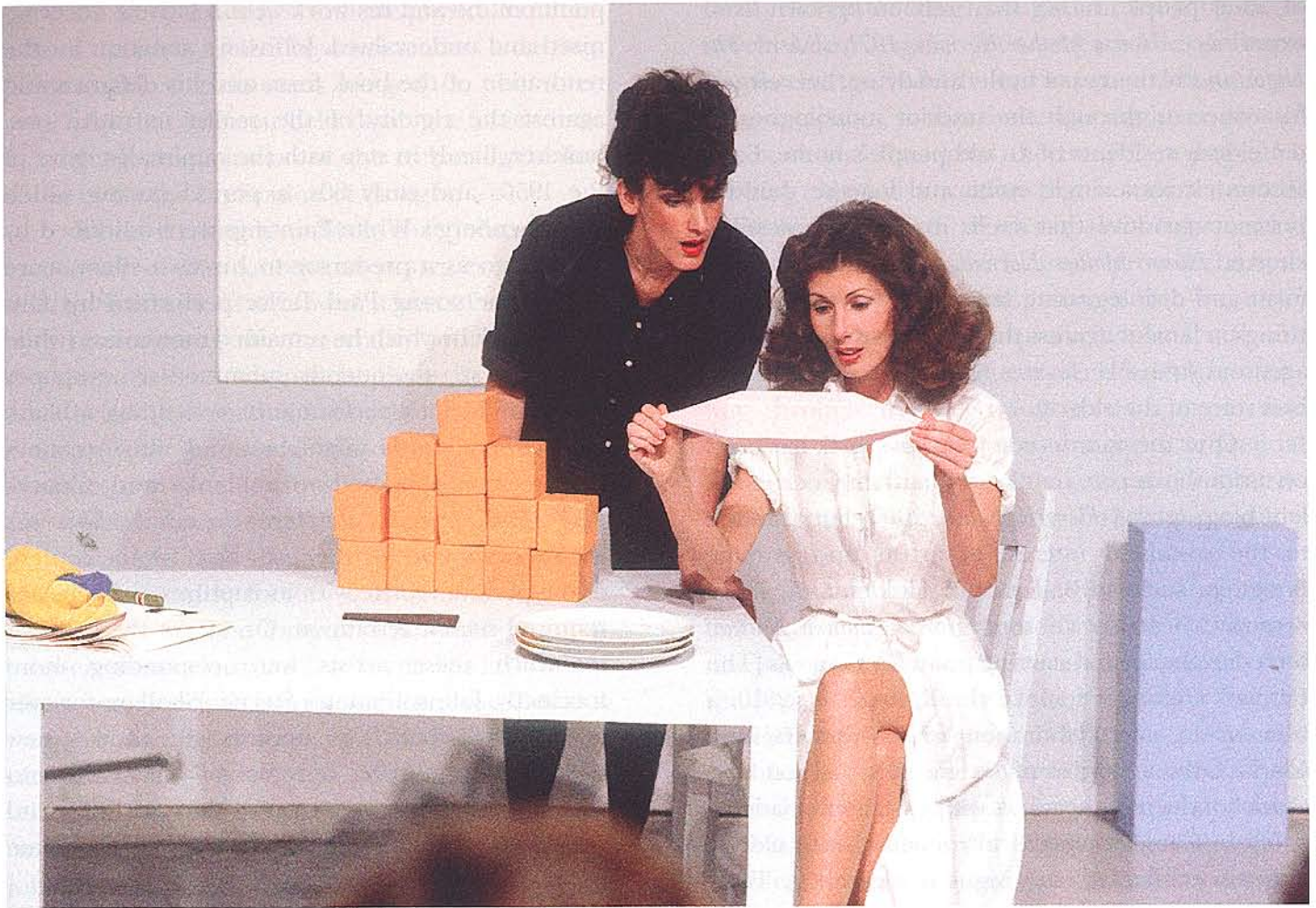
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Above and right: 'Tell Me', 1979, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles

Guy de Cointet

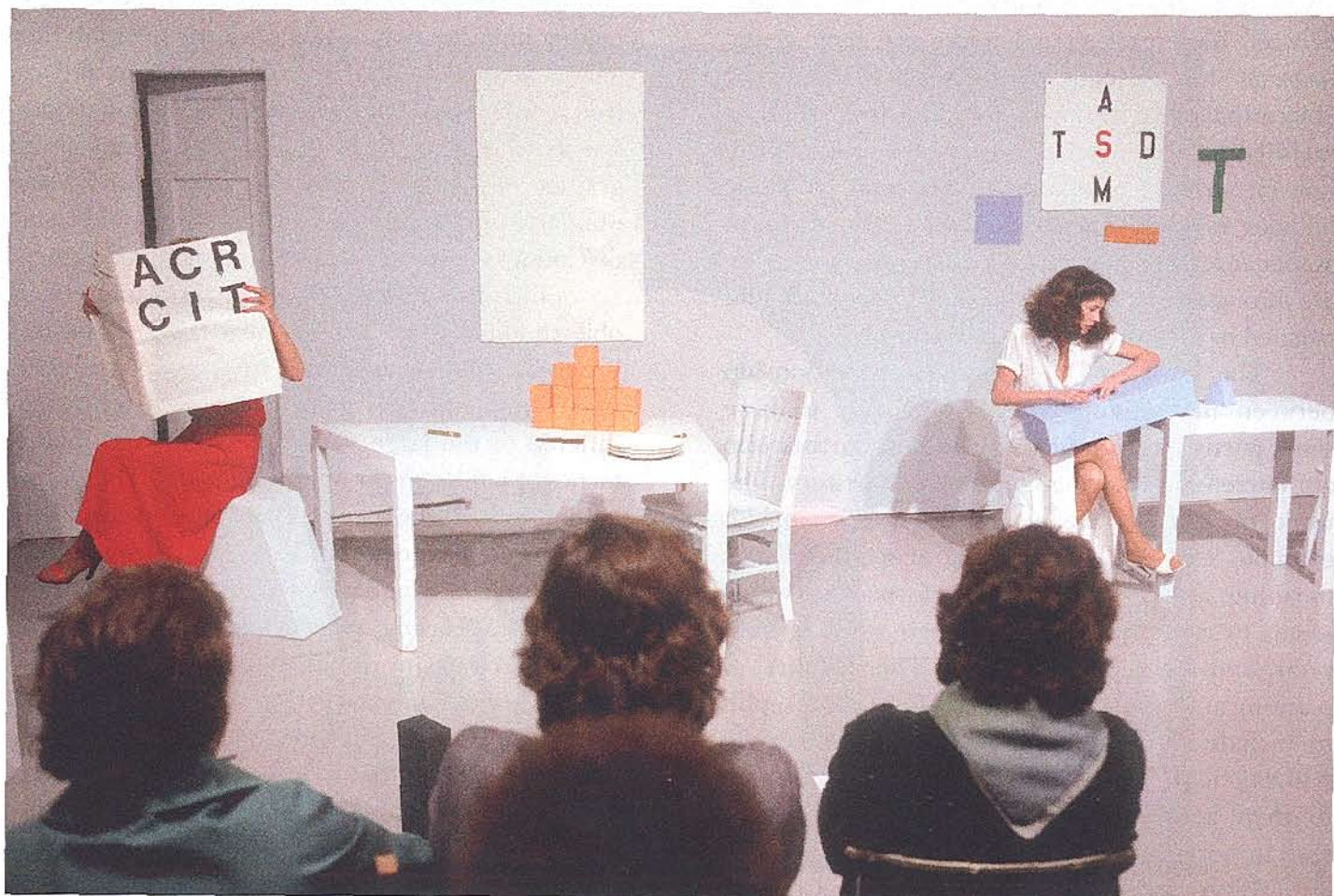
Giles Bailey meets Marie de Brugerolle to talk about the renewed interest in the avant-garde artist's surreal performances

Marie de Brugerolle is in the midst of a whirlwind visit to Belgium and the Netherlands. Every day she spends away from Lyon where she lives and works has been crammed with activity—workshops, lectures, discussions, castings and screenings all concerning the artist Guy de Cointet. We meet in a noisy café, opposite the offices of De Appel in Amsterdam, to discuss the current enthusiasm for this late French artist, and her role as the inaugural researcher on the new Performance in Residence project initiated by curatorial platform If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution.

As an art historian and curator, she is at pains to emphasise her direct approach and eager, close relationship between the work she studies and the bigger questions that her research poses. In describing her project for Performance in Residence (the ultimate product will be the staging of Cointet's 1982 work 'Five Sisters'), she stresses the rare and exciting potential of her collaboration with the institution. Until 11 May next year, she will be addressing

the complications and pitfalls associated with resurrecting the piece, through extensive historic research, and dialogue with the original actors and her hosts If I Can't Dance... The duration and ambition of the project, not to mention the fact that its attentions are focused on a single work, reflect something of a unique commitment to the concerns of current performance making.

Guy de Cointet was an influential if somewhat marginal figure in the Los Angeles art community from the 1960s until his death in 1983. Despite great popularity during his lifetime with several prominent artists, writers and thinkers including Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Barbara Smith and Allen Ruppersberg, it is only relatively recently that he has become more widely appreciated by a new, younger audience. Arresting images documenting his campy, theatrical performances are ever present in the consciousnesses of readers of the art press—the enigmatic character of his brightly coloured abstract stage sets have a curious contemporary resonance.



If I Can't Dance... 's recent production of the work 'IGLU', 1977 (written with Robert Wilhite), in collaboration with The Stedelijk Museum, Kunstverein and STUK arts centre at the Frascati Theatre in Amsterdam, was a sell-out event that truly illustrated an eagerness to experience the work at first hand. Seeing the live performance also reinforced the great sophistication of his practice and its extension beyond what might at first appear as seductive formalism, to precise and often highly comic, experiments in language.

The fragmentary narrative that makes up the piece skips from subject to subject in the register of daytime television melodrama. Amid this constantly renewing dialogue, built up by three female performers, other examples of the linguistic detritus strewn around the set, are coyly introduced. 'IGLU' mimics the distracted chatter of a half-attended radio, the persuasive empty rhetoric of commercials, while hinting toward literature and the esoteric qualities of critical theory. Refreshingly there is no suggestion of cynical critique in this world's weaving, which instead focuses on the deep affection of the interplay between these exaggerated voices and their elastic verbiage. Nor is there anything trivial about the objects that make up the set (for instance in 'IGLU', a rakishly angled set of chairs and tables, musical notation on an easel and several other quasi domestic oddities evoke hard-edged forms of the classical avant-garde). Defying any decorative purpose, they are brought into being, activated, contorted and negated by the words spoken by the actors.

The testing of this contingent relationship between matter and language appears to have some particular significance to several artists who are currently exploring comparable territory. The work of Michael Dean and Falke Pisano, for example, explores the charging of sculpture with meaning at the instant of performance, which seems to create problems for their work as both prop and autonomous entity. The labours of painting are expanded by Alexis Marguerite Teplin to include strange composite dramas. A certain syntactic logic to the treatment of objects relative to their accompanying performed texts can be read in works by Ruth Buchanan.

When asked how she accounts for Cointet's

contemporary appeal, de Brugerolle explains that she sees it linked directly to his use of what she terms 'readymade language types'. She points to the 'codes and rhythm of soap operas, on which these generations have been raised', and explains, 'these kind of TV programmes were first broadcast in France in the early 1980s. Also, the use of fragments and editing processes coming from cinema, TV, and for Cointet, his deep interest in literature, are a common basis for most artists who have studied at art school and know Joyce's *Work in Progress*, Raymond Roussel's method and Gysin and Burroughs' cut ups. It is a pragmatic way of using language as a tool and feeling of being free to take from common culture.' She continues, 'It is an understanding of language as a system, a code, that Cointet shares with some younger artists, such as Julien Bismuth for example. It is more of a liberation from all the post-post discourses, a rediscovery of some "avant-gardes" from the beginning of the 20th-century, a liberation from the heavy ideologies and cynical appropriations. I think about the work of Karina Bisch or Aurélien Froment, artists who are neither imitative nor nostalgic but use the tools they have. They work with an intelligent humour and are free to follow up their own paths addressing modernity as an ongoing open project. I also think about graphic designers such as Will Holder who make wonderful books and beautiful calligraphies: Guy de Cointet's first training was as a graphic designer.'

To frame historically a return to interests in objecthood by the artists mentioned previously, Brugerolle points to a moment in the late 1990s when these concerns gained a new currency that differed to the large scale production and market tactics of Jeff Koons or Matthew Barney. Their retaliation against the dematerialising endeavours of conceptual art acquired a new intelligence and recognition of language's dynamic and enriching possibilities. Having made many interviews during her research of Guy de Cointet and most recently as part of her documentary *Who's that Guy? ... tell me more about Guy de Cointet*, she identifies Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley as key examples, mentioning how they describe the influence of de Cointet's use of sculpture as phonemes or sculpture as a dramatic character on their practices.



Guy de Cointet and Robert Wilhite: 'Iglu', 1977, Theatre Vanguard, Los Angeles



Above and right: 'Five Sisters', 1982, Barnsdall Park Theatre, Los Angeles/Strub Theatre, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

We discuss the questions that arise when considering a sculpture as a prop, actor or director; Brugerolle thinks that Cointet was the first artist to investigate seriously this unique, ambivalent status. To elaborate, she details how she interrogated the proposition in her own research, 'The renewed discussion surrounding the prop/sculpture/stage in the visual arts came after a decade of reconsidering the body in action, which prompted me to make the exhibition *Hors Limites l'art et la vie*, that took place at the MNAM Pompidou Centre in 1994. With the reopening of the question of the fourth wall and the stage from the mid 1970s, the question came back to prop/stage/objects within theatre, which was not the point of the early happenings, events and performances of the 1960s.

There is also a freer approach taken by a younger generation. For example, Catherine Sullivan, who remade the 1964 Beuys performances from Aachen in 2004, or Julien Bismuth who considers

that performance can be replayed or staged several times. This is not what we have learned in school, this is no longer only 'acting the text', 'performing the language', 'here and now'. Performance, as an artistic term taken from American analytical linguistics, is created from a theatrical field, and it comes back to this field via Cointet, after being filtered by TV and entertainment. The artists of today are aware of it and recognise that they can deal with it.'

Keen to emphasise the multifaceted nature of Cointet's practice and his investment in the constant explorations of new ideas, Brugerolle returns to the example of 'Five Sisters', a piece that features no set and in which all formal on-stage dynamics are controlled with colour and lighting effects. She explains how the idea for staging this particular work came from an invitation by Dora Garcia to co-curate the upcoming group exhibition *I Was a Male Yvonne de Carlo*. The exhibition, with its inspiringly wry subtitle 'Critical art can be

sophisticated and even entertaining’, takes its name from a 1968 film by Jack Smith and focuses on artists who use a subtle humour or entertaining theatricality to take a critical position and address urgent political questions. On the subject of this exhibition she explains, ‘Dora and I started a conversation and to share discussions when she invited me to give a lecture about Cointet in her seminar at the Fine Art School in Lyon. We shared a common interest in Jack Smith and she had read an essay that I wrote for the Belgian magazine *DITS* about “dandyism”. We also share a sense of humour, a special interest in “deep comedy”, and reflections about the public as a form, and awareness of being a public. We wanted to show a live performance by Cointet and “Five Sisters” is the most “elegant campy” piece that he had produced. It fits in totally with the concept of “satire as a weapon”. On a political level, there is critique of society in Cointet’s plays, expressed very subtly if you can read between the lines.’

Curious to hear more about the period of development with *If I Can’t Dance...* that is set to take place before ‘Five Sisters’ is staged in May, I ask about Brugerolle’s relationship with the archive. She explains that her training at the *École du Louvre* was very classical, but in reaction to this, and to ensure her proximity to artworks, she also trained in conservation. Emphatically she articulates how important it is, despite the necessity for rigorous historic research that the work remains urgent, immediate and living. ‘For many years I collected all the information I could about the work of Guy de Cointet: more than 300 drawings, five sets, 32 diaries, 20 scripts, 20 films and some video archives. I brought them to the family and advised them to create an estate, work with a gallery, and then give the archives to a museum (Mnam-Pompidou Centre), so that it was preserved and scholars could see it.

‘The first remake of the performance “Tell Me”, 1979, in 2006 at CRAC in Sète was made with the original actors, who also provided information about its staging and were generous enough to do it for free. I thought that the plays needed to be informed in that living way. It is like ethnological research, when you collect oral knowledge because beyond the scripts and diary notations, there are

invented pronunciations, improvisations by the actors and it is them who remember it. When we produced “Tell Me” in Sète, I really understood how funny it was. Also, the humour makes you understand the intelligence. It’s brilliant. The question was: how do you present works that are meant to be acted? How do you preserve the memory of it, besides the film that I am making?’

‘That is why I am very enthusiastic about *If I Can’t Dance I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Revolution’s* project. As Frédérique Bergholtz expressed her invitation to me, it is about “making ‘Five Sisters’”, not re-making or re-staging it. That means considering this play today, with a new team and a fresh reading of it.’

Giles Bailey is an artist based in Rotterdam

Marie de Brugerolle is an art historian, curator and playwright currently professor at the *École Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Lyon*. Her monograph of Guy de Cointet, published by JRP Ringier, and documentary film *Who’s that Guy? ... tell me more about Guy de Cointet* will be released in 2011

