

LANGUAGE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Guy de Cointet: Drawings, Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles,  
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Guy de Cointet's current exhibition at Cirrus Gallery presents a fascinating selection of the artist's drawings from the years 1971 and 1972. The fact that the works on display are from earlier years need not surprise us: indeed, it serves to emphasize the consistency and the maturity of this artist's vision, and the continuity between the drawings and the performance works in which he has been deeply involved in the intervening years.

The work may seem difficult to approach at first sight. A part of this difficulty, I think, is inherent in the context in which we inevitably see it: it sits uncom-

fortably in the tradition of strictly conceptual word-art as it has developed in the United States in the last decade. Its true roots lie in the aesthetic tradition of Raymond Roussel--a writer whom this artist greatly admires, and indeed emulates in his performance work; of Tristan Tzara and other French language-experimentalists of the early part of this century; and, more recently though less directly, in the aesthetics of structuralism which seeks, through scientific or quasi-scientific analysis of systems and structures, alternative approaches to the traditional concerns with "form" and "meaning" in the arts.

The first series of drawings in the current exhibition are language "through the looking glass" in the most literal sense: they consist of short quotations or phrases done in mirror-writing and hung left-side-up. The effect is of sometimes bold, sometimes delicate Arabic or Persian manuscripts--and this series is certainly the most beautiful in its visual appeal. For the other series shown--the exhibition groups drawings according to a variety of visual systems employed--the metaphor holds good: words and individual letters of quotations and phrases are broken down and re-

structured on the paper, with the result, in each case, that the language experience is transformed into visual experience.

The visual image in each drawing is accompanied by a title, generally excerpted from the quotation, which offers the viewer a clue, a point of entry into the labyrinth of visual language. Patient viewers will be drawn into a pursuit of the system and eventual (partial or completed) reinterpretation of the visual image back into language. But this effort, though challenging and tantalizing, fails to exhaust the available information: the "meaning" of each drawing is not reducible to the "message" of its text (a quotation from McLuhan used in one of the drawings may clue us in to this point). The code curiously retains its integrity, even when broken. Meaning, then, in its literal sense, becomes a tease to engage rapt attention rather than a final possibility of exit. The significance of the drawings lies in the continuing interchange between the reader, the signifier and the signified, rather than in any solution to the puzzle.

The titles tease us in other ways, too. Some seem at

first sight to offer themselves as rational keys to the systems: "How high can you count the diagonal system", for example, or "The phenomenon of mirroring is an obvious..." But, as the incompleteness of the latter title suggests, rational reduction turns out to be as much a red herring as literal meaning. (It occurs to me to wonder whether we would not be left with "conceptual" art, if this were not the case?) Similarly, other titles entice us into melodramatic or startling situations: "Deep in the... circled by hazardous..." But the melodrama is inevitably counterbalanced by the impassive, the (almost) impenetrable surface of the systematized language.

"Reading" de Cointet's work is an experience akin to reading the author who provides him with the source of many of his quotations: Jorge Luis Borges--a writer who delights in constructing enigmatic and seemingly irreducible systems, which nonetheless tempt the reader on with the bait of melodramatic narrative, philosophical reduction or interpretation. Or again, it is akin to the experience of reading poetry: all the quotations used are "poetic" in the sense that they offer us images or ideas which have an absolute clarity, but a clarity which defies logic or understanding--or

rather creates its own. Poetry, as Sartre said, is not a use of language--it is a madness within language.

De Cointet's method is analagous to that of the poet: he constructs things with words. But where the poet generally uses words as a medium evocatively, with their whole superstructure of significance and associative values, the artist's medium is more purely visual: he breaks down the words and letters themselves into their visual components, and uses the visual elements as medium for reconstruction, or "creation". (The French word invention could be a useful one here--carrying, as it does, the sense of artistic creation along with the sense of technical invention: making something, practically, new, out of already existing parts).

"Through the looking glass" suggests not only the inversion of known reality, the reverse image. It suggests, too, a metaphysical game; and, at a deeper level perhaps, transformation, even transcendence. In view of these associations, I think it an appropriate metaphor through which to approach this work--which

does indeed play games with language; but with the serious purpose of transforming it into another medium, transcending--and this, too, is the hope of the poet--its logical and literal limitations. There is, finally, something magical about the works, illusory on the one hand but, beyond that, truly mysterious. It is in this respect that de Cointet points beyond conceptualism--and in ways which are truly important. If we will listen to him.

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