



Guy de Cointet. *Tell Me*. 1979. performance.

ARTFORUM

NOVEMBER 1979 \$4.00/ F.Fr.20/ £2

GUY DE COINETET weaves abstraction and language together in deliberately theatrical performances that can only be described as elegant. American abstract art in the early 20th century was, in the critical view championed by Willard Huntington Wright, adamant in its rejection of the "extraneous" element of literature in art. De Cointet's *Tell Me* is, in his words, "a performance about language and abstraction, and how they are perceived by the mind and the senses." Monologue, dialogue, sign language, song, and, if you'll excuse the expression, body language are played off abstract forms, objects, and games in a production that veers from sense to nonsense and back again.

In 1971 de Cointet started to make books whose texts were generated from found and invented codes and symbols, from newspapers and cheap novels. These books formed the basis of his first performance in 1973, and they continue to make appearances as important props, often transformed into abstract objects. In *Tell Me* a stack of blocks forms a book whose words tumble over into incoherent "broken sentences." The play between visual and verbal signs, exemplified by a se-

quence of storytelling sign language, is carried over into frequent rhapsodies concerning an abstract painting, a painting removed from the wall and hauled around the stage, literally "propped" against the proscenium arch. Everything becomes an open sign, presented as a riddle to be solved. The characters in the performance, Olive (Helen Mendez), Michael (Denise Domergue), and Mary (Jane Zingale) are dressed in white, black, and red, respectively. Is their chic costuming a '70s allusion to Munch's *Dance of Life*?

The sort of performance art that I find most appealing is that which springs from a pre-existing form: Robert Kushner's "fashion shows," Michael Smith's "stand-up comedy," and the like. De Cointet's performances are decidedly theatre at heart. He writes, produces, and directs, and professional actors perform. At times his method of verbal/visual connection and disconnection verges on the predictable, slowing down the pace of the performance. But while the method may be predictable the content is not, creating a seamless weave of words and images.

—CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT