

## Questions of Language and Meaning

Los Angeles / Peter Clothier

Guy de Cointet has been a presence on the Los Angeles art scene for a number of years now. He occupies, unchallenged, a very special piece of turf, surely because he has very special knowledge of the traditions he's working with — all of them French and surviving the transplantation from Paris to Los Angeles remarkably well.

Working initially with codes and ciphers, alphabets and languages, "translating" whole systems of language into visual logic, and vice versa, de Cointet soon incorporated these concerns into making narrative and drama. His hermetic approach to language follows nicely in a rarefied, highly intellectual line, among whose modern masters are the Mallarme of *Un Coup de des*, Raymond Roussel and Tristan Tzara. The current French critical interest in semiology — in systems of signs and processes of signification — owes much to this lively tradition.

In addition to the latter, de Cointet works with the tradition of the ontological drama, a chronologically parallel development in twentieth century theater which addresses itself to the problematical nature of reality and our faltering and fragmented perceptions of it. In de Cointet's current work, *Tell Me*, any given image, emotion, situation or system of communication is subject to immediate transformation into another, often contradictory one. One set of hypotheses, keyed by a single word, image or impulse, leapfrogs dazzlingly into the next. Stories, lyrical or melodramatic, begin to unfold with absolute persuasiveness — only to dissolve without trace. A "tranquilizer" (the stage prop is a structure not unlike a short, double-pointed fence post) turns out to be a "trumpet." Buzzing creatures, whisked in annoyance from around the face, are low-flying

"snails." A wordless letter, tapped out in drumbeat on a dust-blue cardboard box, must be rewritten because "You shouldn't write that, it's not true."

Our acceptance of each successive reality depends largely upon the skill of the actresses, who must persuade us through their own unquestioning assurance. The three-woman cast in this play does an excellent job, the result of obviously meticulous rehearsal. Jane Zingale, Helen Mendez and Denise Domergue, the three actresses, have no "character" or "relationships" to work with, in the traditional sense. Instead they represent what can best be described as "figures," each with a structural function in the drama and with the characteristics embodied in her individual physical presence, but otherwise with only a sense of timing and technical precision to guide them. Their success in dealing with this unconventional material is quite remarkable.

Intellectually resolved as the work is, and partly because it is so well staged, I found that it left my sense of drama less than fully satisfied. True, the argument of the piece — that reality will always refuse to resolve itself — is alien to resolution. Moreover, de Cointet is at pains to replace the mythic patterns of comedy with a structural circularity, returning to certain images and phrases at the end. Yet something in me, seduced into the ancient and ritual pleasures of drama, wants more than simply a cutoff point — where the latest illusion ends and the next, this time, does not begin — and more than a structural circularity, intellectually perceived. Engaged by drama, my ancient gut feels as much in need of satisfaction as that which my intellect enjoys. It occurs to me that this might be the point at which "performance" ends and "theater" begins.

I've mentioned what I take to be the philosophical



GUY DE COINETET: TELL ME, with (l-r) Helen Mendez, Jane Zingale and Denise Domergue.

and esthetic underpinnings of de Cointet's work at the risk of making it sound esoteric. It is indeed. But this might leave the reader with the wrong impression. Amazingly, beyond its urbane intelligence, it manages to remain light, approachable, delightfully sensual in tone. It can be enjoyed very simply, as a rather wacky form of entertainment, and though it's nice — for myself at least — to know the underpinnings are in place, you can have just as much fun without. One of the pleasures of reviewing this performance is that I can actually urge the reader to go to see it. The play continues Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights thru March 24, 8:30 pm, at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles. Seating is limited, so book ahead. □