





in his last sleep...

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(ärt)

# guy de cointet

by Michael Kurcfeld

\* In the beginning was the word.

"Our job," said the count, "is to see that all the words sold are proper ones, for it wouldn't do to sell someone a word that had no meaning or didn't exist at all. For instance, if you bought a word like *ghlbtsk*, where would you use it?"

THE PHANTOM TOLLBOOTH by Norton Juster

If you crossed James Joyce with Marcel Duchamp, added Harold Pinter, Roland Barthes and a dash of Sesame Street, you'd get a lumpy prototype of Guy de Cointet. He's a mild-mannered Frenchman who braves the outermost wilderness of language, fashioning plays, operas, books and drawings that make alphabet soup of our most cherished linguistic packaging. Orthodox thinkers beware.

Born in 1940 to a French Army father and a mother who was a gifted linguist, de Cointet was exposed early on to a series of alien tongues. Arriving in Los Angeles in 1971, he began to create his cryptic little books, tidy volumes of codified texts that either scrambled the English alphabet or ventured into elementary glyphic systems. Apart from the purely optical pleasure of thumbing through these UFO operating manuals, the reader is denied immediate textual understanding in a way that produces reveries about the anatomy of language. The pages become meditations on the pre-logical way in which words bring sound and image together.

De Cointet loves contradictions. He's one himself. Involved in the avant-garde practice of borrowing literary connective tissue for his experiments, he is still a visual artist in the most classical sense. He finds beauty in the unfamiliar shapes of words composed either in cipher or at random, regardless of their function as conveyances of information. He explores mirror-writing as much for its affinity to sensuous Arabic calligraphy as for its possibilities as a codifying device. Most of his inventions, especially his immaculate drawings, show language to be an inexhaustible designer.

De Cointet's third book, *Espahor ledet ko uluner!*, was the basis for his first art performance. Midget actor Billy Barty, dressed to the nines, gave a blackboard lecture on the "meaning" of the inscrutable text. Appreciative audiences proved addictive to de Cointet, who expanded his productions into elaborately staged operas. Abstract plots and minimal plots became de Cointet's trademarks. Language remained the active ingredient, freely loaded with non sequitur and deliciously implausible distortions.

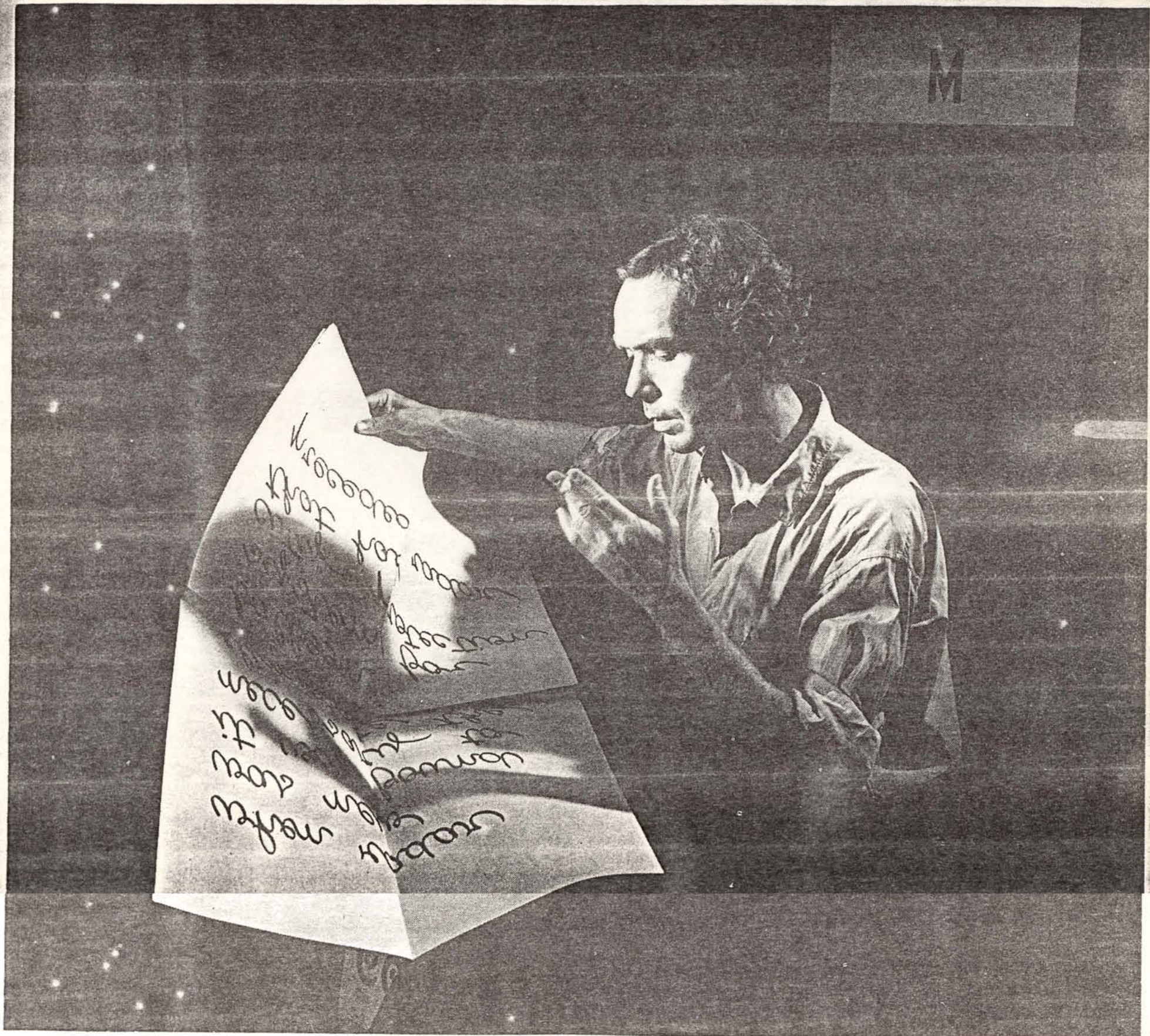
His latest play, "Tell Me," is a masterpiece of mischief and subversive dialogue. The three female characters aren't characters at all; they're abstract voices — vehicles of conversation identifiable by clothing color: red, white and black. The banality of their chatter leaves lots of room for de Cointet to twist reality and inject massive doses of ambiguity. Communication between the women often becomes exaggerated or undetectable to the audience. The commonplace is imperceptibly elevated to a plane of signs, symbols, incantations and universal categories. In short, language is stripped bare.

The audience is entertained not only by the meticulously paced nonsense that passes for dialogue, but also by what the imagination brings in the attempt to decipher it. Ever the intuitive melodramatist, de Cointet creates a rhythm in his innocuous little narratives that teases the observer's appetite for logical meaning. The whole effect is one of tension between the mathematical orderliness of the player's private language and the chaos of the world it describes.

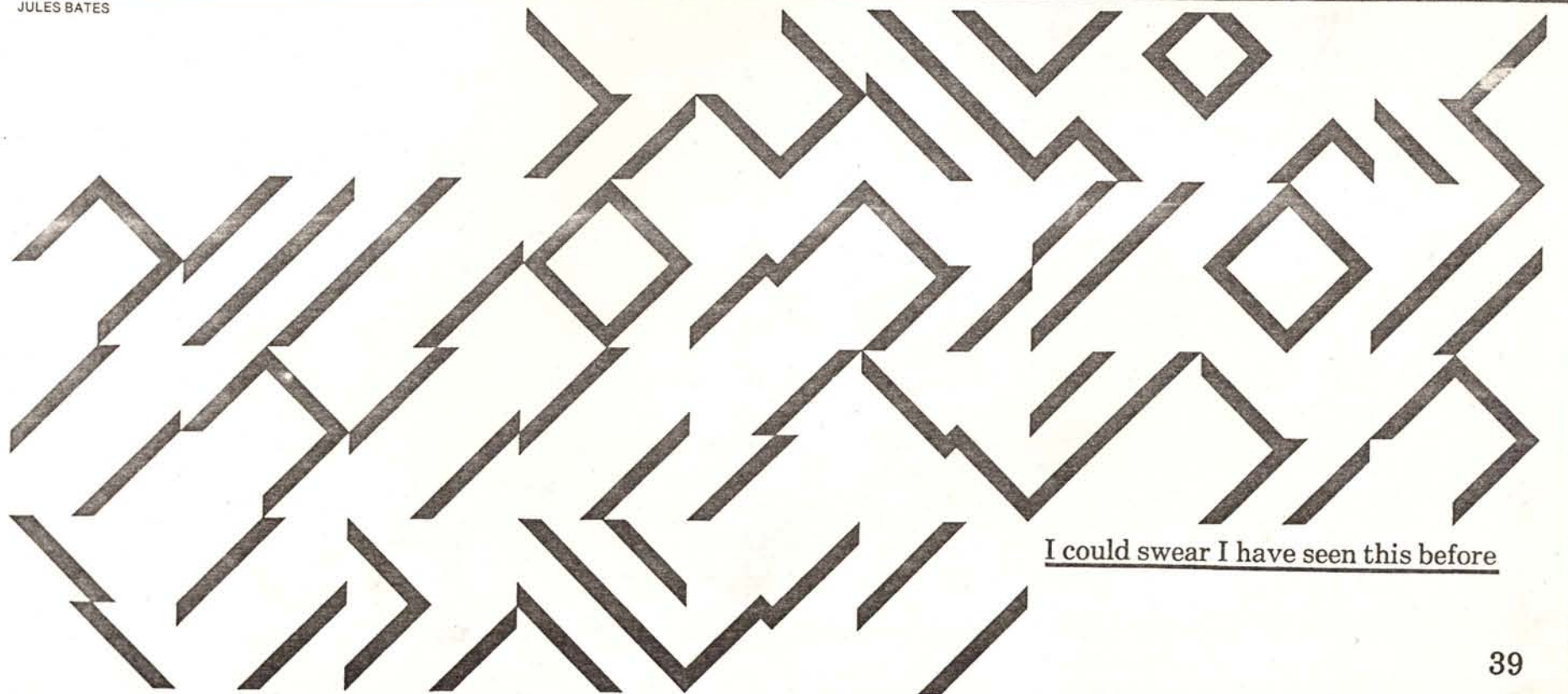
Because de Cointet is so irreverent with words and the texture of verbal communications, structuralist theorists find him irresistible. He's placed in a tradition of poetical alchemy that includes Rimbaud, surrealists Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara and Andre Breton, and a host of pranksters like Lewis Carroll, Jorge Luis Borges, Tom Stoppard and Ludwig Wittgenstein. De Cointet's own choice for spiritual fatherhood is French word-experimentalist Raymond Roussel, an early maverick whose virtually untranslatable jottings were all the rage among the Paris intelligentsia in the Twenties.

In our visually overloaded culture, it's nice to see an artist getting back to basics. As we all know: *Cuk sistromag mlus hikpitutam.*



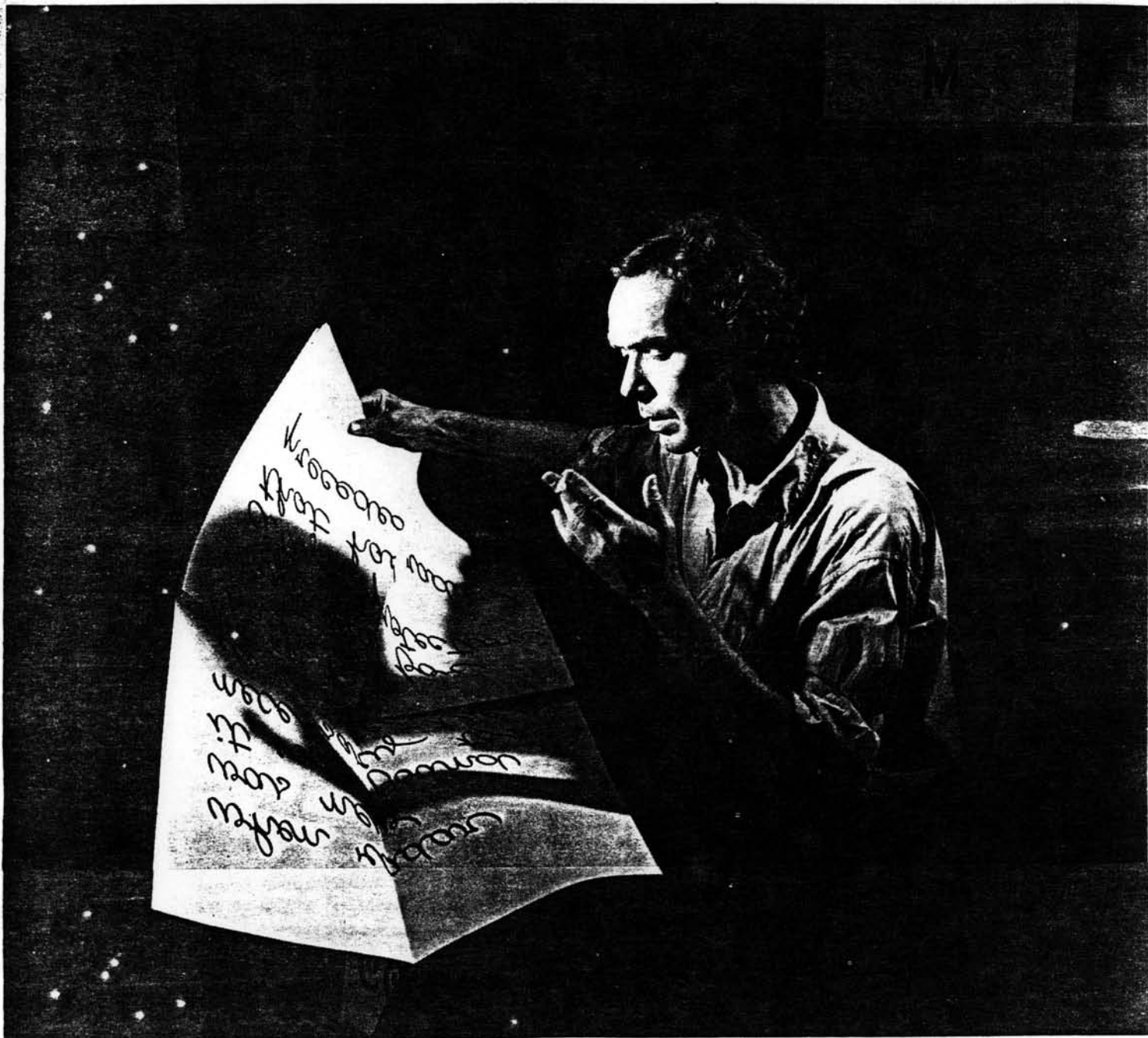


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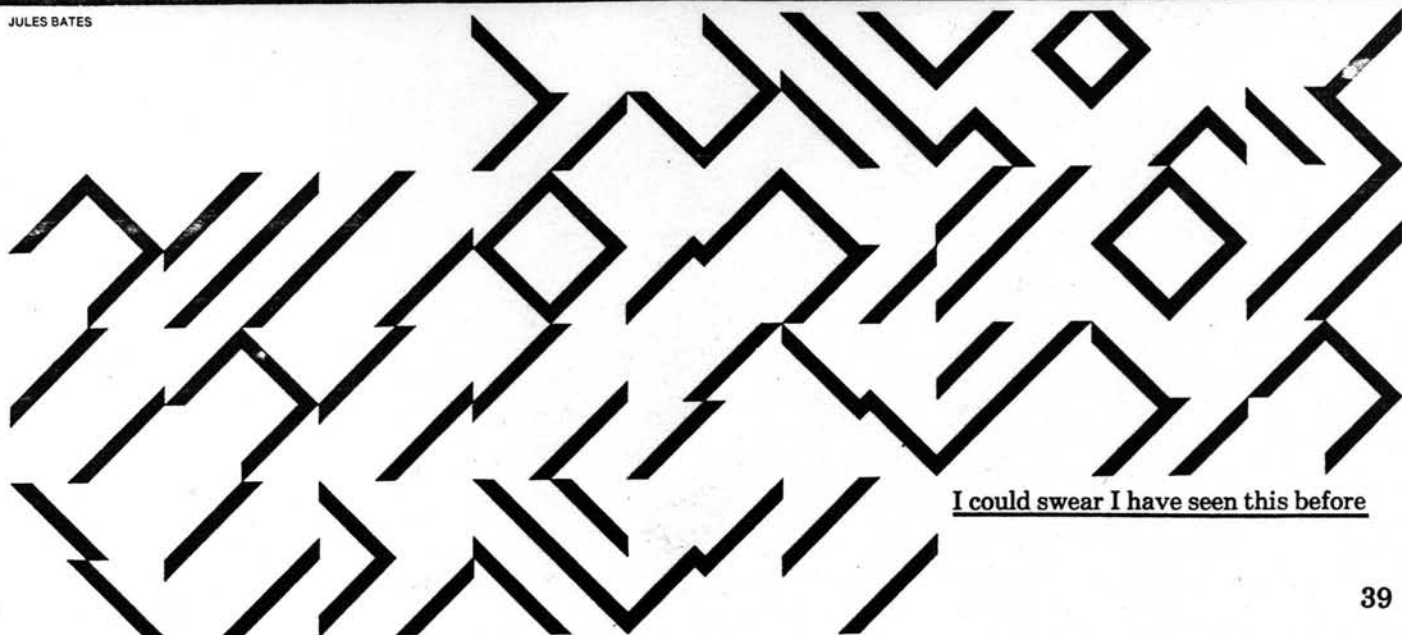


I could swear I have seen this before





JULES BATES



I could swear I have seen this before