

IF I CAN'T DANCE, I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF YOUR REVOLUTION AND MARIE DE BRUGEROLLE

IN CONVERSATION

If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution is presenting the play *Iglu* (1977), written by Guy de Cointet and Robert Wilhite, at Frascati WG, in collaboration with the Stedelijk Museum, Kunstverein and STUK kunstencentrum. Following the performance, Marie de Brugorolle, leading expert on the work of Guy de Cointet, will give a lecture that takes place on Thursday 11 November at 17.00 hrs at the Stedelijk Museum.

If I Can't Dance invited Marie de Brugerolle to be the first cultural practitioner to carry out research in the new programme Performance in Residence. Performance in Residence aims to research performances on a case study bases, in order to reactivate them by connecting archival research to practice. The staging of *Iglu* and the lecture at the Stedelijk Museum mark the start of this research period.

Marie de Brugerolle is an art historian, curator and dramatist. She is a professor at the École nationale des beaux arts de Lyon in France. She has curated several exhibitions on Guy de Cointet and has been involved in the restaging of his plays. She authored the first monograph about his work, which will be published by JRP|Ringier in October 2010. Her documentary film *Who's that Guy? ... tell me more about Guy de Cointet* will be presented to the public this fall. We speak with her about Guy de Cointet's work, life and interests.

First of all, could you tell us: who is Guy de Cointet?

Guy de Cointet was a French artist born in Paris in 1934. After spending a short period in New York, where he was the assistant of Larry Bell, whom he met through Warhol's star actress Viva, he moved to Los Angeles. There, from 1966 until his death in 1983, he developed an extraordinary amount of work in a variety of fields such as poetry, calligraphy, painting, sculpture, cinema and theatre. He became an 'artists' artist' for the relatively small art scene of Los Angeles. Paul McCarthy, Bob Wilhite, Mike Kelley, Barbara Smith or Richard Jackson all pay tribute to him, as do Allen Ruppersberg and Matt Mullican.

Guy de Cointet is a singular figure who introduced a legacy of Surrealism to the Conceptual Art scene of the West Coast. The specificity of his work, based on a deep knowledge of language, is to examine and deconstruct the structures of his time using the tools of pop culture. The rhythms of the commercial and the soap opera are an important starting point, for example. His work is also linked to contemporary history through his interest in subliminal imagery and the spying and controlling aspects of the media. As Marshall McLuhan put it, "the medium is the message". This has a clear echo in today's global village and he has been rediscovered by a younger generation of artists, from Dora Garcia to Julien Bismuth; artists who use performance and language as common tools in a sophisticated and elegant way, just as he did.

In 1996 you worked at the CNAC - Le Magazin in Grenoble and, together with Paul McCarthy, curated *And Gravity* (1996), a tribute to Bas Jan Ader, Wolfgang Stoeckle and Guy de Cointet, who were key figures in the underground performance scene of Los Angeles in the 1970s. How did you first come to know the work of Guy de Cointet?

I discovered Guy de Cointet while I was a curator at the MNAM Centre Pompidou in Paris, from 1992-1994. While preparing the exhibition *Hors Limites, l'art et la vie* (1994), I read an interview of Mike Kelley by John Miller. Mike was speaking about artists who had influenced him and among others, he mentioned Guy de Cointet. There was a small image of *Tell Me* too. I was intrigued by the image and this name, the only one that I did not already know. I asked the artists I met during the installation of *Hors Limites* if they knew who this Guy de Cointet was. (The pun of the exhibition title *Who's that Guy?*... developed at this time.) Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley were the only ones who knew him. Paul was his friend. Mike hadn't met him directly but had heard about his work through Paul and Bob Wilhite, and had seen videos. Paul told me then that one day he would like to make a tribute to these three European artists who had been important for him and the L.A. scene of the late '70s and had had tragic and premature deaths.

PERFORMANCE

Iglu
Tuesday 9 November 2010, 20.00 hrs
Frascati WG
Marius van Bouwdijk Bastiaansestraat 54
1054 SP Amsterdam
Bookings: +31 (0)20 626 68 66
Tickets: EUR 10

Since that time you have become a leading expert on the work of Guy de Cointet. You have curated several exhibitions of his work, written articles, held lectures and were involved in the restaging of his performances. You have now also directed a documentary film about his life and work. Can you pinpoint what it is about him that continues to fascinate you?

I have always been intrigued by language and Guy de Cointet's work is deeply about language, codes, writing and meaning. Also, the *Hors Limites* exhibition was about the origins of 'happening' and 'performance', from Jackson Pollock to Matthew Barney and I was amazed how different Guy's work was from the art scene of the '70s. His successful plurality of direction surprised me as well. It is rare to find an artist who explores several genres and is so inventive in each one: writing, calligraphy, drawing, poetry, performance, painting, sculpture, film... each piece looks like the result of mature research. There are also links between the works. Structures and codes are revealed, turned upside-down, twisted and used in a new way. Letters in space, colours in volume, body language, filming as timing, television rhythm as the structure of theatre... He pushed at the boundaries of each field, while retaining his own single standard.

You describe Guy de Cointet as a 'secret figure', yet he was

well known in the art scene of Los Angeles in the 1970s, as evidenced by the friends and colleagues that speak in your documentary. In what way was de Cointet 'secret' or 'secretive'?

Everyone who knew him, friends or relatives, told me about his elegance and his discrete behaviour. His private life is totally unknown and he disappeared for short periods, traveling to Mexico or Costa Rica. His persona and the mystery surrounding him were partly created by his use of codes and secret languages in his work. I think that was totally controlled and purposely done. They called him the Duchamp of L.A., and like Marcel Duchamp, Guy de Cointet used silence as a tool and a weapon.

LECTURE

Who's that Guy? About Guy de Cointet
by Marie de Brugerolle
Thursday 11 November 2010, 17.00 hrs
Stedelijk Museum
Paulus Potterstraat 13
1071 CX Amsterdam
Bookings: www.stedelijk.nl
Tickets: EUR 5 plus museum admission

De Cointet's plays are embedded in the specific space-time of L.A. in the 1970s. They make much reference in the dialogue to specific aspects of American culture, such as the emergence of talk shows on TV and radio, the focus on feminine beauty and health, etc. What are your thoughts on why his work has come to prominence again now?

That specific space-time of L.A. was a 'Babel of languages', just like the global village of today. Marshall McLuhan's ideas have become our daily experiments. TV soap operas and reality shows have spread around the world. We could say that the merging 'space-time' of emptiness and fakeness that de Cointet quotes, from is everywhere today. 'L.A. existential' could be a term for this world culture in which we surf.

Because Guy de Cointet's work takes elements from vernacular culture, it speaks to everyone and sounds familiar. Also, since the mid '90s, with exhibitions like *Hors Limites* in France, and *Reconsidering the Object of Art and Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979* at the MOCA in L.A., new narratives of this history have been told. Younger artists, who discovered Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley or Matthew Barney at the beginning of their studies, are now in their 30s or 40s. They are familiar with these concepts, because performance was the milk that fed them. These artists are now also freely reconsidering early Modernism, not in a Postmodern or a nostalgic way, but taking their chances at re-constructing their own modernity. Just as Futurism, Dada and Raymond Rousset were key to the creation of geometric and inventive forms for de Cointet, new artists are finding fresh challenges in his work. In a way they consider him the 'unknown father' or the 'uncle from America', who has opened up new fields, compared to such boring businessmen as Koons, Barney or Hirst. It's Irish air. It gives us a breath, if I might make a pun with "give us a break".

If I Can't Dance is staging the play *Iglu* at Frascati WG on Tuesday 9 November, in collaboration with the Stedelijk Museum and Kunstverein. It will then be performed twice at STUK arts centre in Leuven, Belgium, on 11 and 12 November. What can we expect to see in *Iglu*, and how did this restaging come about?

Iglu (1977) is a collaboration between Guy de Cointet and Bob Wilhite, whom he met in 1972. They made a number of plays together: *Ethiopia* (1976), *Ramona* (1977), *Cigar* (1977). *Iglu* was restaged for the first time last year in Los Angeles, at the Electric Theater in Santa Monica. It was performed for a private audience of friends, which included Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Nancy Rubins, Larry Bell, and Gus Foster. It was then presented by Maxine Kopsa as part of her exhibition *Paying a Visit to Mary* at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield in January 2010. The third restaging will be in Amsterdam and STUK this November.

Iglu develops specific aspects of sound, with the use of audio programmes for dialogues and ideas of synesthesia that the artist was elaborating. The stage objects have peculiar forms and colours, are mostly made of wood and lacquered, and have geometric shapes that are specifically linked to Futurism. For the restaging, Bob Wilhite has created portable pedestals for some of them. As in most of the plays, the rhythm is quick, there is the use of his own limited edition newspaper ACRCTT and a lingual mix of gossip, commercials and soap opera. Events, short stories and humour are mixed in with a certain political criticism towards the Vietnam war. For the remakes, the actors are new, although one of them, Helen Berlant, has played in other performances, as she was an actress for Guy in *Tell Me* and *My Father's Diary*. However, she is playing in *Iglu* for the first time.

As the main advocate of Guy de Cointet's work, you have also been involved with the restaging of *Tell Me* (1979). What is your perspective on restaging performances? In what way do you think the remakes 'reactivate' the plays? Do they place the works in a new historical framework or do they 'unarchive' the work from its historical context?

For the first survey of Guy de Cointet in 2004 at the MAMCO (Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain) in Geneva, I was concerned about presenting sets in the context of a museum show. My question was: what does it mean? Do I have the right as a curator when the artist is not there anymore? How shall I install part of a set? As a sculpture on a pedestal? On a stage? What does an object that is supposed to be acted mean when it is still?

I invited Bob Wilhite to give advice. As the set of *Ethiopia* (1977) had been made by him and Guy, he conserved it and gave advice on how to present the objects. At the time, I hadn't found the complete set of *Tell Me* or of *De toutes les couleurs* (1982). I decided to present the objects on the ground, which was grey concrete, with a white linoleum carpet for the *Tell Me* table where I installed some of the props on a large grey beam used as a shelf-pedestal for the books of *De toutes les couleurs*, and on the ground for *Ethiopia*.

I wanted to remake some of the plays, such as *Ethiopia*, which was the most complete at the time, but the timing wasn't right for MAMCO. When I had the opportunity to present *Tell Me* in 2006, the context was different. I had found the complete set and the actresses were keen to play again, which wasn't the case in 2004. The CRAC (Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain in Sète) was enthusiastic about remaking the play. In the meantime I also realized that the artist had himself solved my dilemma, as he had made a show, *The Set of Tell Me*, in a gallery. And, as Mike Kelley puts it in an interview that I conducted with him and Paul McCarthy: "the objects are sculptures". That means that when they are not acted they can be presented as sculptures, then have many different statuses and come back to being sculptures after the play is over.

I think that the remakes make the plays alive, understandable and contemporary. It is like Molière or Shakespeare or

any poetical work. "Words without soul never to heaven go": if they are not acted and believed, incorporated, they remain dead. As objects. That is why I titled the exhibition *I* made, about the status of objects after a performance is over, *Not to Play with Dead Things* (Villa Arson, 2008).

For de Cointet, the objects have a specific status that goes beyond only being props. That is why I invented the expression 'scenical objects' or 'stage objects' to indicate that they are not only props. They can become sculptures, texts, actors, props and directors, and then come back to being sculptures. This is the specificity of de Cointet. In classical theatre or in performance art, objects don't generally have all these aspects. Even if Beuys' things become sculptures in a fetishistic way, they are so highly charged that they remain classical museum pieces, like ethnographic or religious artifacts. For de Cointet, his objects are tools with different uses, but nevertheless tools, in the way Wittgenstein spoke about language as a 'tool-box'. They are simultaneously mysterious and functional, and because they 'pass the test' on stage, they can be used in everyday life. That is what de Cointet did in his loft: he used them as practical things. I have spoken elsewhere about his studio being like a scene.

So 'restaging' and all the questions this opens up is really a great opportunity to develop new thoughts and experiments. For example, there were discussions and debates with Bob Wilhite and the conservator at MAMCO about conserving the props in a museological way or a theatrical way.

In Sète, at the CRAC, I decided to invent a type of hybrid structure, in between stage and pedestal. So we built a scene, lower than a stage but higher than the ground and de Cointet's usual neutral grey. The walls and showcases with documents were also grey.

De Cointet worked with his friends and they were not professional actresses. They were his inspiration, as were his family or people in the street. He saw them as 'samples' or 'types' of women of his time. De Cointet asked them to exaggerate their feminine aspects slightly, though still in an elegant and sophisticated manner. In *Five Sisters* (1982) this is pushed to the extreme and the characters become stereotypes. I wanted to work with these actresses from the beginning, not because they are his friends but because of their knowledge of the original performances. There are many intonations, little gestures or invented languages that have not been written down and you cannot guess them from reading the scripts.

Also, the original actresses are still wonderful and beautiful women, and so funny and alive. They were not initially keen to re-visit the plays after thirty years, but then they came round to the idea and found it amusing. This is a step towards new casts and new interpretations. It is from memory but as we know, history is made always from the present, it is alive.

Where does the artist's interest in the live element in art stem from? And what can you say about the distinction between performance and theatre? De Cointet made lecture-like monologues, plays and these are even referred to as 'dramas'.

Drama means 'action'. The drama in a play is the moment when something 'happens'. So, it is an event, in both the usual understanding, and as the term invented by George Brecht in the mid '50s. I really think that de Cointet's work is more related to George Brecht than to Kaprow's happenings. If you look at some objects of Brecht, like his colour ladders or the game boxes with painted hashbills, and you look at some pieces of de Cointet from 1965, it's amazing how much they look alike. The first painting period, which I call with humour 'the ping pong period', is formally very close to Brecht. In one painting of a yellow square there is a moving line of ping-pong balls that you can hang in different ways with nails. This kinetic possibility and the permutation of colours is very close to the Heisenberg principle (the uncertainty principle introduced by Werner Heisenberg in 1927, ed.) that Brecht experimented with. When Guy de Cointet was young he read the same books on 'physique amusante' as Duchamp did. Also, his deep interest in language and in the writing of Raymond Rousset, Stéphane Mallarmé and Roland Barthes is rooted in a system of belief where words are used not for communication (which in fact means nothing) but as vectors to keep a movement going, the flow of things and thoughts. They are dancers. The drama is the movement of life.

EXHIBITION

Paying a Visit to Mary Part 2
with a.o., Guy de Cointet, Sarah Crowner, Elad Lassry,
Alexandre Singh and Robert Wilhite.
Friday 10 December 2010 – Sunday 30 January 2011
Kunstverein
Ruyschstraat 4 III
1091 CB Amsterdam
More information: www.kunstverein.nl

The props are important elements in the plays. Can you elaborate further on their role?

I can summarize by saying that the props have several statuses and that this ambiguity is part of what is interesting. They are objects and props: a chair is a chair, you can use it, sit on it, but when reversed it is used in another way. In a play with the tricks and magic of theatre, a green cube can be a salad, for example.

Again, this could be related to George Brecht, because his objects also retained their functional role. Think, for instance, about his *Event Chairs* series. This is a series of chairs on which you put an orange, a hat or an umbrella, but besides this 'event', you can sit on them, because they are normal chairs. It is different from the ready-made, because the ready-made never returns to the supermarket.

The objects are also texts, as they contain part of the lines of the play in an encrypted manner. Some of them are maps, some of them are used to memorize part of a story, others as optical tools. For example the 'rope' in *Tell Me* is a cylindrical tube with octagonal sides that the actresses turn and that produces images like a kinoscope, zootrope or kaleidoscope. For de Cointet the props have a very specific role and they become actors. They are acted and they act, and then they become directors. Each time a character touches an object, the conversation skips. The objects are the drama. They activate the actors and at one point, the actors themselves become objects. That is unique.

In *Iglu* Cointet uses a phrase from Baudelaire's *Correspondances* (1857): "Nature is a temple of living pillars where often words emerge, confused and dim and man goes through this forest, with familiar / eyes of symbols always watching him... perfumes, sounds and colours correspond." In his plays, Guy de Cointet creates relations between images and words, creating situations in which the props and the script activate each other. In his later plays, the props are replaced by the use of

different colours of light. What can you say about his exploration of 'correspondences'?

Building webs of relations and using language in an open-ended way, the audience is disallowed a passive reception. What are your thoughts on the relation between the play and the audience in the case of the artist's performances?

If I Can't Dance invited you to be the first cultural practitioner to carry out research in our new programme Performance in Residence. You have chosen to examine Guy de Cointet's performance *Five Sisters*, which has not been staged since 1983. After six months of research, you will present the results of your findings and the play will be remade. Can you tell us a bit more about *Five Sisters*?

Five Sisters is the last performance to be staged during Guy de Cointet's lifetime, and was first performed in 1982 in Los Angeles at the Barnsdall Park Theater. He collaborated with the sculptor Eric Orr, who created the lighting and part of the sound, and the musician Joseph Hammer. There are no objects in this play, instead lights create the emotions. After he made the play *De toutes les couleurs* (1982), which is the culmination of the use of books and objects as props in his oeuvre, he wanted to explore new effects. He was interested in the Light and Space movement and worked with his friends Larry Bell and Eric Orr.

Can you elaborate on what you will be researching in the framework of the Performance in Residence programme, in order to stage *Five Sisters*?

As a reader of Mallarmé, he was interested in Symbolism, but he was also trying to explore and experiment with *synesthesia*. In the poem you mention, Baudelaire speaks about perfumes, colours, sounds, and their connections in nature. Nature is a book to be read by all the senses, to feel, to hear, to touch, to smell... In his plays people taste things, smell them, feel them and they speak about different levels of perception. It is a global way of understanding the world, of appearances and what is not visible. There is an idea of equivalence, as the drawings can be read and looked at, so legitimacy and visibility are the same.

Aren't we always in a passive reception when we listen to or look at someone? I think that is how and why it works. To get it, we have to let go of our knowledge and habits. As the common rules of language and codes are distorted, we are at first troubled, and then in a 'suspension of disbelief'.

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Can you elaborate on what you will be researching in the framework of the Performance in Residence programme, in order to stage *Five Sisters*?

I will be researching the use of lights and colours instead of objects, the 'dematerialisation of theatre'. I will examine new ways to stage the play. I will ask the original actresses about their memories and look for documents, especially about sound and music. Questions of space and light will be very important, alongside the rhythm. I will need to go through de Cointet's diaries and archives and look for material such as videotape and photographs from the time. There is the question of the type of actors, because it will be played with a new team, and we will also work with a director. In my analysis of Guy de Cointet's work, this play is a new step, as the relation to the objects changed in this piece and moved towards dance and mime, indicating the direction in which de Cointet wanted to go at the end of his life.

PARTNERS

Iglu is a co-production of If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, Stedelijk Museum, Kunstverein and STUK arts centre. Special thanks to Frascati theatre, Air de Paris, and Guy de Cointet Estate. If I Can't Dance is financially supported by the Culture Programme of the European Union and the Mondriaan Foundation.