Guy de Cointet: Encoder

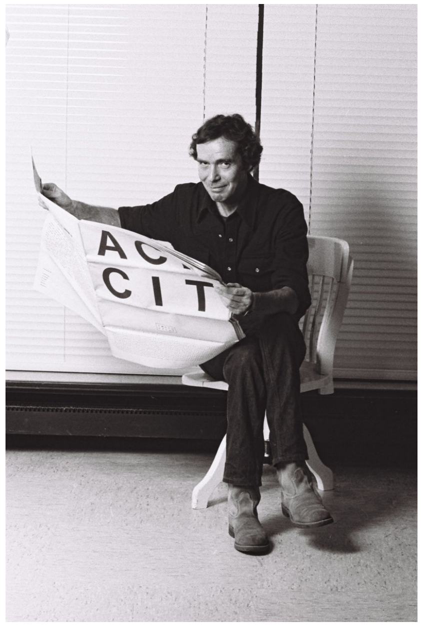

Fig. 1: Guy de Cointet with *ACRCIT*, 1979
Photo by Olivier de Bouchony

An inquisitive pedestrian in 1971 might have encountered, at any number of newsstands in Los Angeles, a rather curious object. On the front cover, six letters spread across two rows and strung together in no apparently meaningful order: “ACR” above, “CIT” directly below. Centered on the page, a small text box containing letters, once again organized along two rows, reads “TWOFU” and “FFDDT.” The cover is perplexingly nonsensical, following, at best, the logic of an ophthalmologist’s Snellen eye chart, with larger letters at the top becoming increasingly illegible as the eye traverses the page vertically [Fig. 1]. Yet, opening to any one of the publication’s 28 pages, it becomes clear that the cover is only one of a number of texts to be deciphered. The newspaper, designed by the artist Guy de Cointet and printed in an edition of 700, was disseminated freely at local newsstands. A trove of cryptographic strategies ranging from the encoding of text through graphic representation (Chinese ideogram, Braille and Morse code) to other syntactic systems following logics of permutation, substitution, and transposition, it would become the codex for his subsequent work.

As the Los Angeles-based artist moved increasingly into performance, first staging short monologues with local actresses, and then longer, more complex plays straddling the historical and formal legacies of theatre while charting new ground in the emerging field of performance art, his publications took on the particular status of performance objects. *ACRCIT* would indeed be employed in two of Cointet's performances, *IGLU* (1977)[1] and *Tell Me* (1979)[2] and in exhibitions, as an object on display. At once sculptural elements and props, Cointet's on-stage objects were diverse: there were the artist books of course, but also rather minimalist, humbly-though colorfully-painted geometric shapes made of cardboard, and the artists' paintings or framed drawings. None of these objects, however, was ever *only* itself; each maintained a deeply intermedial and intertextual status. As the critic and curator Marie de Brugerolle has noted, *ACRCIT* should be seen as a "trans-textual object": "at once a newspaper, an artwork, an information tool, a transmitter, and a receiver."[3] In this paper, I trace the operations of this trans-textual object through the interpretative principle at play in Cointet's work, focusing on strategies of encoding and transposition. In considering another book, utilized in his 1975 performance *My Father's Diary*, I examine Cointet's investigations of the structures of language, as they are enacted in his texts and in his subsequent performance objects.

Cointet's upbringing, as many critics have noted, proves remarkably revelatory. Born in Paris in 1934, he was the son a military man whose work took the family to Algeria and elsewhere during his early years; his grandfather is also claimed to have played a pioneering role in the invention of war camouflage technology. His strong interest in cryptography and code can doubtlessly be traced to this early moment. Later, in Paris, Cointet turned to illustration for fashion magazines before moving to New York in 1966 where he was introduced to Andy Warhol's Factory. There, through Factory starlet and actress, Viva, Cointet met the artist Larry Bell. In 1967, he would move to Los Angeles to become Bell's studio assistant. Bell humorously recalls their near inability to communicate: one hard of hearing; the other boasting a thick French accent which betrayed a limited mastery of the English language. Tellingly, while he became engaged with a community of artists in Los Angeles, which included CalArts figures such as John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, and Paul McCarthy, Cointet would always approach his experiments in language from the perspective of a second-language English speaker—that slightly estranged relation to another language that turns language's very substance and meaning into something more thing-like, malleable.

By 1971, Cointet had begun to develop his own independent work—*ACRCIT* stands as his first major text, compiling his already prolific investigations of the structures of language. By then, he had produced a number of works on paper, including calligraphic texts written, in some cases, in reverse so as to be read through a mirror's reflection.

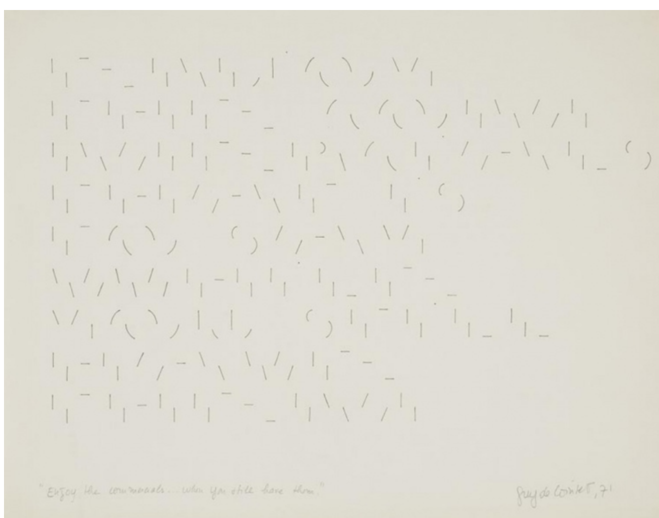

Fig. 2: Guy de Cointet, *Enjoy the Commercials*, 1971.
Ink and crayon on paper, dated and signed on recto. 47.8 x 60.5 cm

In other drawings such as *Enjoy the Commercials* [Fig. 2] from 1971, Cointet spelled out a phrase through abstract constellations of straight and curvilinear forms. A “legend” at the bottom left corner, written in legible, cursive script points to the equivalence set up between words and images, between the phrase and the graphic image above. This drawing in particular is striking for its reference to commercials. Channeling pop culture, everyday situations, and soap operas, his scripts too, recombined and transcoded Cointet material heard on the radio and on television, which he would play in English and Spanish in the studio all day while he worked. Traces of the influence of these materials is most evident in works like his 1974 text *TSNX C24VA7ME: A Play by Dr. Hun*, part of which was performed in November 1976 and broadcast on the Los Angeles KPFK show *Close Radio* hosted by artist Paul McCarthy. In Act 1, Scene 5, the monologue of Rosa Newton, actress Mary Ann Duganne’s emphatic delivery turns a meaningless string of letters and numbers into the stuff of soap opera, evoking the genre through the affect she achieves in her pitch and vocal register.[4] This way of encoding the suggestion of narrative into the way the text is read out loud, acted, and performed (in other words, its *dramatic interpretation*) reveals another more essential logic pervading Cointet’s work: the foregrounding of *semantic interpretation*, which plays out in his performance work. Yet, in turning to his first publication *ACRCIT*, we can already see that the use of language in the form of visual phonemes reveals several cryptographic strategies—strategies that bring to the fore not some latent meaning but rather the very act of interpretation itself.[5] It will suffice for me to point only to a few, whose enduring significance might emerge in the course of this study.

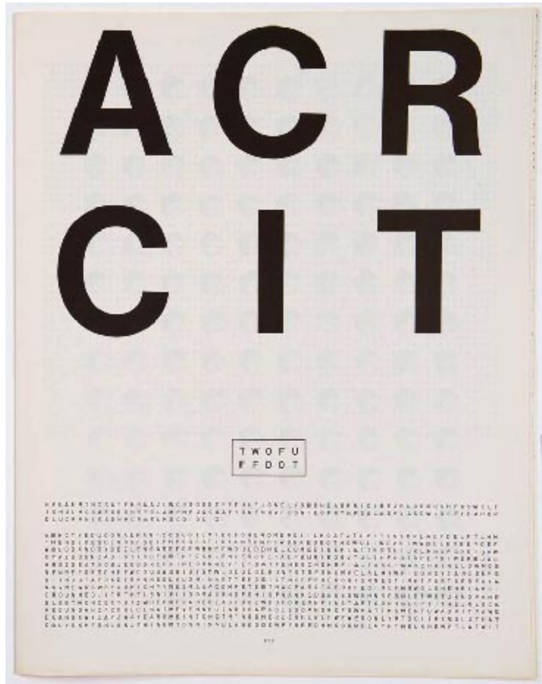

Fig. 3: Guy de Cointet, *ACRCIT*, 1971, 22 x 17 inches, 28 pages, Edition of 700.

From the very cover of the newspaper [Fig. 3], we are confronted with a substitution code. The small text box is the key, indicating that in any text to which the rule applies, the letters in the second row will be used in the place of those directly above in the first. The title of the newspaper, as well, is an anagram. As the artist's notebook from the same year shows, Cointet had toyed with different letter sequences and combinations, settling finally on ACRCIT [Fig. 4].

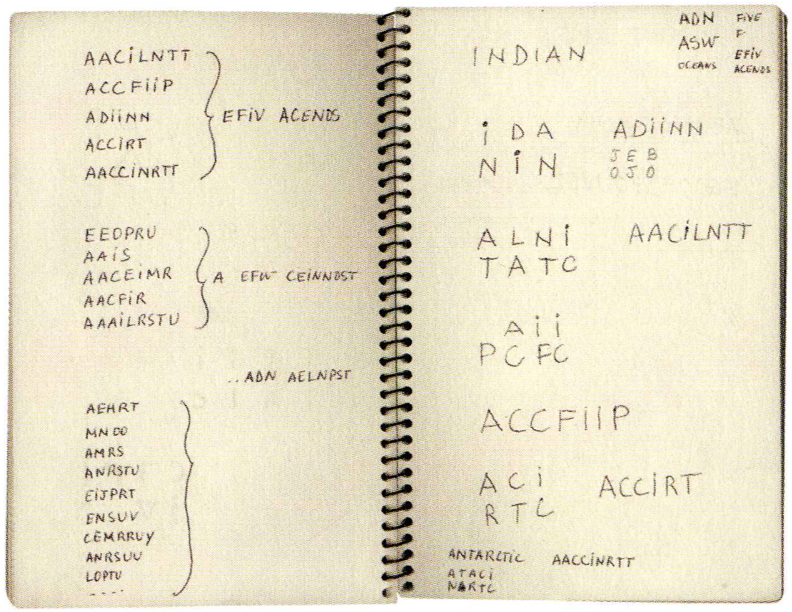

Fig. 4: Guy de Cointet, double-page spread, NSP EPE WAR notebook, 1971
64 pages, 22 x 16 cm

This title, as De Brugerolle has argued, bears similarities to the acronym ASCII, which stands for the American Standard Code for Information Interchange, a character-encoding scheme that operates on 128 characters (the ten digits, lower and uppercase letters, and basic punctuation), turning them into seven-bit integers. And homophonically, ACRICT is only a few small steps away from "ECRIT," the French word for "writing." It can also be considered anagrammatically, drawing the reader to the word "ARCTIC." Indeed, Cointet's notebook sketches the five oceans, of which the arctic is the northernmost. Let's turn to this anagrammatic proposition.

As we know from the literary critic Jean Starobinski's important research published in *Words Upon Words*, Ferdinand de Saussure dedicated a large portion of his life and career to the study of anagrams in ancient poetry. He filled notebooks with exercises in decoding, diagnosing the practice of anagrammatic encoding as an "*absolutely total* phenomenon."[6] For Saussure, the anagram was historically linked to the text in which it occurs: the relationship of historic event to the legend into which it is transposed, is akin to that between the hypogram (or "theme-word") and its development within the poetic text.[7] The hypogram is a "verbal sub-ensemble and not simply a collection of raw materials," and designates the "theme-word" that the text is ultimately aiming to express. Saussure intuited that "the developed poem (the whole) is simultaneously the carrier of the same sub-ensemble and the vector of an entirely different direction."[8] Thus, the text operates on two levels. It has a more overt directionality and meaning and a subtending, anagrammatic structure. "To write lines incorporating an anagram," Saussure claims, "is necessarily to write lines based on that anagram, and dominated by it."[9] The anagram points to a persistence in language of the *legendary* embodied by the theme-word (in other words, of the historical process of transposition of the historic event), and manifested as a "mnemonic supportive device for a poetry of improvisation and then as a regulatory process inherent in writing itself."[10]

Starobinski warns that Saussure's refusal to present this research publicly during his lifetime is in fact symptomatic of the potential hypertrophy of the anagrammatic principle, its tendency to be proved and disproved infinitely, without, for that matter, providing a verification of the author's intentions. Casting Saussure's efforts into doubt, Starobinski finally writes: "instead of being the guiding motif of poetic creation, the hypogram might be only a retrospective phantom evoked by the reader: a game of patience always assured of 'success'."[11] And yet, without discrediting it altogether, he acknowledged that the ecstasy of Saussure's discovery, the vertigo of its infinite potential, may point, to one of the many "regularit[ies] (or law[s]) in which the arbitrary quantity of the theme-word is confined to the necessity of a procedure."[12]

If I am lingering on this notion of the anagram, it is to point both to its intentional employment as a structuring tool in Cointet's work, and to the necessarily flexible interpretative mode which it entails. If the anagram has the potential to denote a perimeter of fifty lines or more (as Saussure suggests and as Starobinski points out, could rather go on indefinitely, in accordance with the reader's propensity towards decrypting), then we might read Cointet's statement that this newspaper represented "something [he] could work on a long time, something which would develop by itself"[13] as an indication of the newspaper's ambition. The anagrammatic principle would continue to play out its effects beyond (and through) *ACRCIT*.

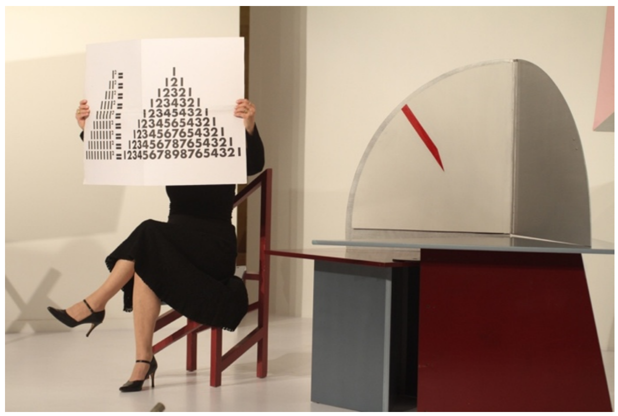

Fig. 5: Guy de Cointet with Robert Wilhite, *IGLU*, Museo Tamayo Auditorium, Mexico City, January 10, 2013
Photo: Ricardo Guzman

In 1977, *ACRCIT* appeared as a scenic object in the 35-minute play *IGLU*.[14] Here, the actress refers to it as "today's newspaper" [Fig. 5]. Flipping it on its side, and then upside down, in the next breath, she renames it as "yesterday's newspaper." All that has happened to indicate this change is that the cover has been flipped inside out. In this new configuration, one of the double-page spreads is rendered visible [Fig. 6]—on the right page stands a numerical pyramid facing, what appears to be, on the left, the equivalent values noted in Roman numeral to the power of two. Bringing to the fore this logic of equivalency—which also evokes the recombinatory logic of the anagram—the use of the newspaper here denotes an economy of means (one object fulfills two functions) and meanings as the actress decries, putting the newspaper aside: "it just sounds the same!" The publication acts as a foil for itself: equal to its initial identification as newspaper, it is *this* newspaper as well as *another* (ie: both, or "the same") and also *neither* of these things.

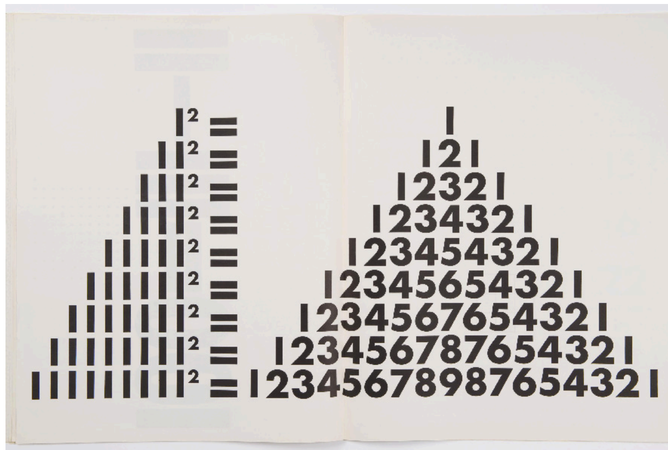

Fig. 6: Guy de Cointet, *ACRCIT*, 1971, pages 14 and 15.

In 1979, the newspaper would once again reappear in Cointet's 45-minute production *Tell Me* [Fig. 4], a more complex and even sophisticated play.[15] Here, the object had fully come to embody the media format which it natively referenced: the newspaper. Once again, the publication is taken up by the actress in a rather conventional sense, as a paper in which to read the weather report. It is only subjected to minimal manipulation and explication, in contrast to the surrounding scenic objects which are imbued with other, improbable characteristics. As three actresses wait for Mark's arrival for dinner, they discuss their lives and perform a variety of actions with the props on stage, revealing the shifting uses and statuses of these objects. Mary (Jane Zingale) and Michael (Denise Domergue) read Arthur's enormous book—a book that, as Mary exclaims, "is amazing" and "so well-written." The implication is that the typescript or design, rather than the content, is masterfully crafted. Olive (Helen Mendez) then *reads* the book silently, and at last appears affected by a foul smell. She exclaims: "It's disgusting… the nephew in the story smells so bad." Objects extend not only beyond their formats but also beyond their medium-specific limitations to create an atmosphere. To Olive, a white, ziggurat-shaped sculpture is a "rug" which she stands on, and receives silent "noises, kisses" and whispers from. Mary specifies that the rug is not a Lumanian but rather a Turkish design, a piece in the form of a prayer rug. She explains: the graphic elements displayed on each of the ziggurat's facets are numerical equations: "5+4," "50+40", "500+400"—each side a "new rule!"

The examples of this play's probing of language and abstraction are nearly endless. Yet, its objects of study are important in the way they testify to an impulse towards the intermedial and the interpretative. Books, as we have seen tend to be treated as books. Cointet's cabinet of abstract sculptures and props, however, are literately treated as blocks of modular and flexible meaning: they are both acknowledged for their shapes, colors, and intrinsic qualities and treated as vehicles for a multiplicity of functions to be identified and activated by performers. When Mary knocks over a stack of square, orange blocks laying on the table, she cries: "Oh! My precious book! Half a sentence is broken. I'll fix it later. One is beyond repair." Where the abstract props themselves stand in for a book, Cointet's process of transposition is most cast into relief. Each block would constitute a sentence, rendering the entire set in effect analogous to a complete volume.

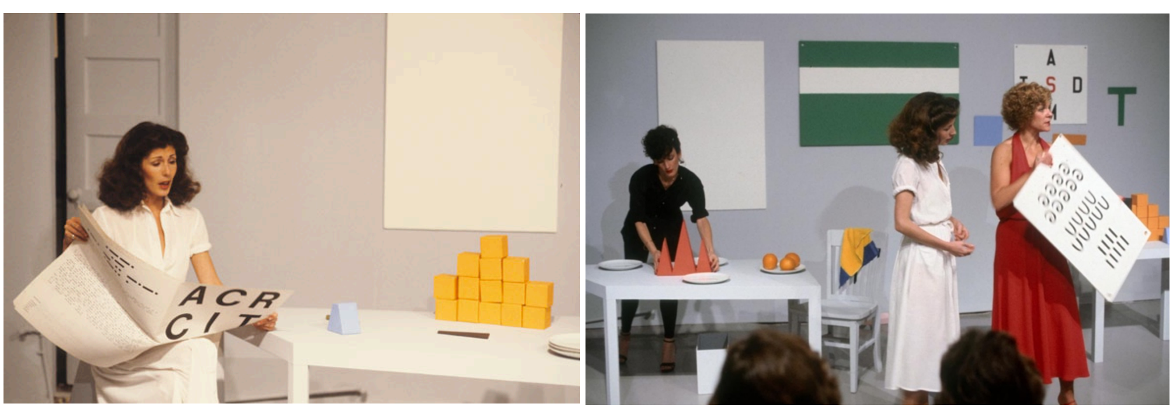

Fig. 7: Guy de Cointet, *Tell Me*, performance view, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1979. Courtesy of Air de Paris, Paris and Guy de Cointet Society.

Writing in 1985, theorist Friedrich A. Kittler has noted in his seminal *Discourse Networks*, *1800/1900,* that the structure of language is best revealed when it lays bare its deficiencies—these gaps would signify that a transposition of media is at play. Indeed, for Kittler, this transposition "is accomplished serially, at discrete points,"[16] and reproduces internal (syntagmatic and paradigmatic) relations between its elements from one embodiment to the other. It is "to a degree, arbitrary, a manipulation…it must leave gaps."[17] Opposing the transposition of media to the impossibility of translation, Kittler argues for the sublation of the latter by the former in the paradigm shift in discourse networks at the turn of the 20th century. He affirms the imperative that there can be no media other than writing.[18]

Cointet would indeed prove the rule. In transposing one graphic sign to another notation system, or one kind of object to another through the actor's use and naming of it, every move in Cointet's play would constitute a form of transposition. Yet his rebuses would further widen the gap from embodiment to embodiment, opening onto an atmosphere of diffuse causality where the arbitrariness of the sign is on display. See, for instance, this comical dialogue between Mary and Michael, where the actresses combine processes of transposition and substitution:

> Michael: Mary, can I have a cigarette?
> Mary: A cigarette? Wouldn't you rather have a scotch?
> Michael: No…I'd prefer a drink.
> Mary: What would you like to drink?
> Michael: A Marlboro.
> Mary: I'm sorry, Michael, I'm out of Marlboro. I drank the last drop of it yesterday morning… What about a Havana?
> Michael: Fine.
> Mary: Here it is. Enjoy yourself. You're lucky! I just came back from Havana a few days ago. These are delicious… I'll drink one too.
>
> *They both pretend to smoke the cigar*[19]

As Michael—a female character with a male name—makes her request, she points to a painting on the wall, with the letters A, M, D and T standing in for the North-South-East-West coordinate points, surrounding a central S drawn in red. She points to "M" when referring to a "Marlboro," to "D" when she asks for a "drink." The painting—another prop on the stage—serves as a guide, or compass for the script, but also as a linguistic anchoring for the objects she describes, whose meanings and implications have shifted from their names. In this very succinct scene, the economy of Cointet's writing becomes clear: we pass from language, through language, and into language, but the terms themselves are not quite as significant as the method of this passage. In the so-called "Introduction indispensable à la lecture de *Tell Me*" [Necessary Introduction to the Reading of *Tell Me*], Cointet wrote: "The significance of *Tell Me* resides, on the one hand, in the way in which the characters communicate with each other, and on the other, in how they perceive their environment. In other words and above all, it concerns communication."[20]

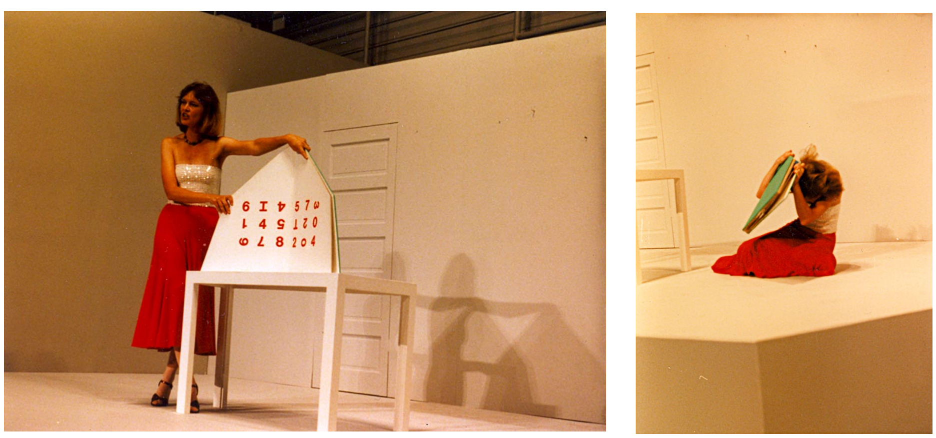

Fig. 8: Guy de Cointet, *My Father's Diary*, performed as part of "Nine Artists" at the Temporary Contemporary, MOCA, Los Angeles, 1985.

By way of concluding, let's turn to another of Cointet's books, one which, makes clear that the passage I have been tracing has also been one from text to performance object. Though they could be referred to as "props," his objects are more appropriately described as "performance objects" in order to highlight the centrality of Cointet's conception of the very performativity of the objects on stage, and their relationship to the performance and activation of speech. In the 1975 performance *My Father's Diary*, a large oddly-shaped book (the first to truly be outfitted as a prop for a play) is manipulated on an otherwise empty stage by only one performer [Fig. 8].[21] The actress Mary Ann Duganne appears to read from the book, gifted to her by her father on his death bed. She narrates the course of events, at the outbreak of the war, which sends her wandering aimlessly, separated from her fiancé who has been enlisted. Her monologue is both spurred on and confirmed by the book: sometimes she stops on one page, tracing the thick vertical and horizontal lines drawn on it as if they mirrored the events and topographies she is describing; at other moments she recounts being near a building in flames or in the vicinity of gunfire as she physically shields herself with the book—some holes in a page are to be taken as bullet holes; later still she "pricks herself" on a rose thorn and draws the audience's attention to some red geometric splotches which are to be identified as blood [Fig. 9]. On another page, undulating nonlinguistic marks are read as if they constituted a text, and as though the very length of the line and its swerve provided a score for the duration, tone, and affect of expression to be spoken.

Fig. 9 Prop for *My Father's Diary*, 1975.

The plot itself is, for all intents and purposes, not very consequential. Yet what Duganne performs is precisely the act of interpretation. Even as she demonstrates *how* this object and its texts might be decoded, such decoding reveals the narrative already encoded, or emploted within the pages of the book, which acts as a visual aid to its own interpretation. As Kittler notes, "literature that simulates or is constructed out of secret languages and that thus always stands under suspicion of being 'a kind of nonsense,' forces interpretation to rearrange its techniques."[22] He continues: "'a *littérature à rebus'* demands […] an objective interpretation on the model of cryptographic decoding techniques. The 'new symbolism' […] takes not 'feeling itself' as its theme 'but another distant object' under the rules of the transposition of media."[23] Interpretation, in this framework, is but one "special instance of the general technique of transposing media."[24]

Cointet's programmatic codex, *ACRCIT* certainly offered itself up to its audience as an object worthy of technical analysis: it provided an implacable system or structure of language encryption which would undergo a conversion in Cointet's performances. For if *ACRCIT* staged an invitation to interpretation for its readers, its reappearance in Cointet's later performances would only solidify the artist's transposition of the performance of interpretation, interpolation, and elaboration onto an even broader range of objects—some, like the elementary geometric forms I have been discussing, even more opaque in their latent suggestion of an encoded text. His last play, left unfinished at the time of his death in 1983, would have taken this "object performance" to the next stage by in effect reconfiguring a silent character as performative object. Titled *The Bridegroom*, likely after Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (or, *The Large Glass,* 1915-1923) the play would have presented—as indicated by the script and a posthumous, filmed rehearsal by Jane Zingale and Tery Arnold[25]—a dialogue between Aunt Harriet (Zingale) and Pamela (Arnold) in which the latter, outfitted with a mask, silently mimes and gestures while Aunt Harriet addresses her continuously. With a mask on, Pamela's emotional register would appear to remain unchanging, yet Harriet's provocations and reactions in fact spur on what is described in the script as a range of emotions and narrative developments in the conversation. In one of his few recorded interviews, Cointet noted that "in the plays, sometimes the performers just talk with sounds. But sometimes they talk with touch. Sometimes they just talk with movement or gesture. Sometimes they talk normally. Sometimes they speak foreign languages. They are silent too, they talk completely silently."[26] The direction of his project then, would suggest that the scenic dispositive he set in motion could accommodate for a performance in part without speech, where an object, acting as a rebus for any number of other verbal elements, could provoke events, plots, emotions, atmospheres, and performances, entirely within the realm of language. He would write: "The text is born only in relation to the object or rather, brings about the object…."[27] It would be up to the audience, then, to take each performance object and gesture within this greatly encoded text, and transpose it to determine, if not its meaning, at least its method.

Notes

[1] First performed in April 1977 at the Theatre Vanguard in Los Angeles, with Monica Tenner, Mary Ann Duganne, Jane Zingale, and Glen Prior. Performance by Guy de Cointet and Robert Wilhite.

[2] First performed in 1979 at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Los Angeles, with Jane Zingale, Denise Domergue, and Helen Mendez.

[3] Marie de Brugerolle, "Guy de Cointet: In Correspondence." *Guy de Cointet: Tempo Rubato* (Mexico City: Fundación/Colección Jumex, 2013), 76.

[4] Cointet also sets this up in his introduction to Duganne's performance. In a heavy French accent, he announces: "the action takes place nowadays in Southern California. Rosa Newton, a modern and responsible young woman, after countless difficulties, has just broken up with her lover of two years, a doctor named SESPAN 500. She is presently all alone in the garden of her West Los Angeles home. Showing signs of emotional distress, she aimless wanders about hoping to find some comfort in the solitude of this summer night. Surrounded by the shadows of trees and bushes, the graceful woman is standing arms stretched out and she seems to address the moon."

[5] See Vanessa Desclaux and Christopher Lemaître's remarkable exposé of Cointet's repertoire of encoding gestures in their recent most study of his work: Vanessa Desclaux and Christophe Lemaître, "The ACRCIT Newspaper," in Frédéric Paul, *Guy de Cointet* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 99-111.

[6] Ferdinand de Saussure, "Vufflens, 14 July 1906," in Jean Starobinski, *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 9.

[7] Jean Starobinski, *Words Upon Words*, 11.

[8] Ibid., 44.

[9] Saussure, "Untitled School Notebooks, Ms. Fr. 3963." Cited in Starobinski, 19.

[10] Starobinski, 45.

[11] Ibid., 105.

[12] Ibid., 123.

[13] Guy de Cointet, interviewed by Barbara Braathen, *Pittsburgh Center for the Arts Newsletter*, Vol 2 No 2 (December 1980), 9.

[14] A recording of the January 10, 2013 performance of *IGLU* at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City is available here: https://vimeo.com/94672183. Performed by Allison Byrnes, Denise Domergue, Carmen Thomas, Leo Tolkin; directed by David Felder; music by Robert Wilhite.

[15] A recording of one of the March 1979 performances of *Tell Me* at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles is available here: http://guydecointet.org/en/performance/316. Performed by Denise Domergue, Helen Mendez, and Jane Zingale.

[16] Friedrich A. Kittler, "Rebus: Untranslatability and the Transposition of Media," in *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 265.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 267.

[19] Guy de Cointet, *Tell Me* [1979] (Paris: Air de Paris; Mnam-Cci / Bibliothèque Kandinsky, 2013), n.p. See a recording of *Tell Me* performed at the Centre régional d'art contemporain Languedoc-Roussillon, Sète, France, November 17, 2006, with Denise Domergue, Helen Mendez Berlant, Jane Zingale and directed by Noêlle Tissier, https://vimeo.com/40242722. Indication of stage direction mine.

[20] Guy de Cointet, "Introduction indispensable à la lecture de *Tell Me*," in *Tell Me* (Paris: Air de Paris; Mnam-Cci / Bibliothèque Kandinsky, 2013), 41. Translation mine.

[21] A recording of one of the 1985 performance of *My Father's House* at the Temporary Contemporary, MOCA, Los Angeles is available here: https://vimeo.com/175812597. Performed by Mary Ann Duganne.

[22] Kittler, 269-270.

[23] Ibid., 270.

[24] Ibid.

[25] *The Bridegroom* was staged as a rehearsal in November 1985 by Tery Arnold and Jane Zingale and recorded by Jamie Smith Jackson on camera.

[26] Cointet, Interview with Barbara Braathen, 10.

[27] Cointet, "Introduction indispensable," 41. Translation mine.

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