

Equal Players

In Guy de Cointet's 1979 performance work *Tell Me*, a trio of friends spend an evening at home preparing for a guest who never arrives. The stage set is a precisely placed group of twenty-odd brightly colored geometric sculptures that function as props. As the performance unfolds, we learn the identities of these objects one by one, revealed by the ways the actresses use and reference them. These attributions—by turns logical and incoherent—are unimpeded by the conventional divisions between sensory registers. A tumbling stack of table-top orange blocks, for example, reveal themselves as a “precious book” which has toppled into a heap of sentences and words: “Half a sentence is broken! I’ll fix it later... But there, I’m afraid one word is beyond repair. What a shame! An important word...” Not long after, a green and white striped painting on the wall is appreciated not only for its visual appeal but for the tactile pleasure it offers: “What a pretty painting! No—it’s not pretty, it’s soft!” one of the actresses exclaims while rubbing her body against it in apparently erotic enjoyment.

These are just two examples of Guy de Cointet's reshuffling of the registers of sensory experience, in which words become objects, vision dissolves into touch. Though these moments don't make sense in conventional ways, their non-logic feels deeply familiar, immediately recognizable as a regular occurrence in dreams, just outside the cognitive grasp of waking life. Dream logic often manifests as a parade of synesthetically tangled sense experiences, perhaps an embodied memory of how we felt the world before we learned the right ways to categorize our perception. Cointet's performance works invite us into these tangled relationships between language, objects, and people, as if he were trying to help us unlearn the

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calcified distinctions through which we read our surroundings.

Situated among the colorful polygons that comprise the set of *Tell Me*, we find a few items I can only describe as *real* objects: two (albeit oddly shaped) tables, two stools, and a vaguely Arts-and-Crafts-style slat-backed dining chair, all painted the same monochrome white. This “real” chair sits across the table from a squat iceberg-shaped wedge labeled “seat” in the artist’s 1979 drawing of the set—an attribution consistent with its use as a seat throughout the work. Of the many categorical crossings variously encountered in Cointet’s sculptures and performances, I’m curious about this one: how this abstractly rendered shape/seat’s copresence with this recognizable chair directs not only our interpretation of these “blank” objects, but also informs our perception of this “regular” chair. How does its copresence with this assortment of stubborn geometric abstractions change the way we read this familiar thing?

Discourse around sculpture often focuses on individual objects at the expense of analyzing their interrelations. This interrelation—between more and less recognizable objects—holds a particular fascination for me, and frequently animates my approach to my own sculptures and the interplay between them. How does our read of a recognizable object change when we encounter it adjacent to a less recognizable one? Or when we see it with objects that are not recognizable at all until we experience their uses, their identities revealed through the way performers engage them? *Tell Me* asks us to wait patiently as the function of each unreadable object reveals itself—are told to us—through use.¹ The performance’s temporal withholding of the identities of each of the objects on stage extends to those I think I recognize: I wait to

be shown how this regular chair, this “real” chair, is, in fact, not a chair, just as I have been introduced to the unexpected designations of Cointet’s abstract sculptural objects through their interactions with the people who use them. This work asks me to *not know* something that I would otherwise accept as common sense: the use of a regular kitchen chair. Abstraction, in Cointet’s sculptural language, functions to break down and rebuild the way we read objects, extending to objects that are not, at least at first glance, sculptures at all.

I am working on this essay en route to an exhibition of my sculptures that will open in one week. The works are finished and we will install them upon my arrival, and four days later three dancers will arrive at the gallery for me to teach them the choreography of the performances that will accompany these sculptures. I don’t know what this choreography will be. I have a few loose images of what may happen, but as I made the sculptures, I tried not to think about how the dancers and I will use them in performance, waiting until we are with my objects in the gallery for them to tell us what will happen on, with, and around them. This sequence of events is an intentional strategy for preventing the sculptures from becoming props for the performance, subservient to the needs of human performers. Instead, the objects come first, and we are tasked with responding to their prompts.

I recognized this reversal of the conventional relationship between performers and props

1 In an interview with Emily Hicks conducted in 1983 while seriously ill a week before his death, de Cointet describes this temporal unfolding of his objects’ attributions: “All the objects are used in the action so it all comes together. The

performers talk about all the objects, one after another, until the enigmas are resolved.” Guy de Cointet, interview by Emily Hicks, in *Summer 1985: Nine Artists* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), n. p.

immediately in my first encounters with Guy de Cointet's work. His objects are *primary*, and they propel the action of the performers as equal players. Early in his career, in works such as *Huzo Lumnst* (1973) and *Two Drawings* (1974), Cointet employed a similar sequence—making the objects first and then determining the performance that would emerge from them. In later works, including *Tell Me*, the objects and the performance came into being simultaneously, human and non-human actors performing side by side with little consideration for the ontological distinctions between them.

In Marie de Brugerolle's 2014 documentary, *Who's that Guy?*, the actresses Denise Domergue, Helen Berlant, and Jane Zingale who portrayed the three onstage characters of *Tell Me* in both the 1980 and the 2006 iterations, describe their experiences of this reordering of the relative importance of people and things. Brugerolle queries: "Did you have the feeling when you were playing that the props really became at one point a character?" Domergue responds by describing how "lots of the props were imbued with characteristics that were beyond objecthood...another character in a sense." To which Berlant adds, "Equal players, I would say—the props and the actresses were equal." As these actresses' experiences from inside the work attest, Cointet asks us to reconsider the divisions between sensory registers—between sight and touch, between language and objects—but also, at least temporarily, to reconsider the widely accepted hierarchy of people over things. In his performances, the actresses are on equal footing with the props that both propel and anchor the action. How should we interpret the upending of one of our most invested systems of value, that of living beings over inanimate objects? Are the

objects being raised to the status of the human? Or are the performers being lowered to the status of things?

One way to approach these questions is to look at the ways Cointet's objects and performers go about doing the work of each of these roles. To me, the characters in *Tell Me* read as not entirely people—as if Cointet wrote them to be characters, not humans. Their exaggerated and theatrical delivery, the way their language flips from one register to the next like changing TV channels, the actresses' campy self-awareness, all combine to result in the odd sensation of watching a person performing performance. Similarly, the blank, lightweight, and hollow-seeming sculptures feel as if they are playing dress-up as real things, almost as if they are stand-ins for other real things that will ultimately replace them. The ultimate effect is an ongoing awareness of watching a performance in which people and objects are both acting. In this sense, Cointet seeks not to raise or lower the status of people or things, but to show us both objects and people that refuse to play the roles we expect of them, offering us a temporary reprieve from the hierarchy itself.

As artists, we relate to artists of the past through form, recognizing co-conspirators across time, language, and geography. I have felt this throughout my research on Guy de Cointet and his odd, uncategorizable sculpture-based performance practice in which I recognize so much of my own. File under: Artists I would have known about a lot earlier if they hadn't died from AIDS in the '80s. In this case, 1983, the year I was born. When I was in my twenties trying to explain that formally reduced geometric abstract objects don't belong to Donald Judd, Tony Smith, and Robert Morris...it would have helped to know about Guy de Cointet's

stubborn sculpture-props, his dedication to meaning deferred, these introverted objects that come to life through theatrical use. In the decades since Cointet's death, a community of queer artists and theorists (of which I am a part) have articulated an approach to abstraction as a method for rethinking the ways gender and sexuality appear in visual art. While I am sometimes associated with the tendency of "queer abstraction," I instinctively bristle at being labeled as part of a coordinated art historical moment.² Nevertheless, the embrace of abstraction as a method for conjuring bodies without picturing them, resisting expectations of gendered legibility, and speaking of as-yet-nonexistent futures has been hugely generative for me, in both the work I make and the ways that the work of others has helped me retrain my own perception of gendered bodies in my day-to-day life. If Guy de Cointet had lived longer, his work might have been considered a precursor to this investment in abstraction as a way of producing new systems of logic that enable us to think about bodies and their uses in unfamiliar ways. We need a history of events that did not occur, of art that was not made. Perhaps we find one partial remedy when we, better late than never, allow the work of those in the past to press up against our own in the present.

² For more on "queer abstraction" see, for instance, David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in *Queer Abstraction*, ed. Jared Ledesma (Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–75.