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Robert Wilhite and Guy de Cointet at as-is.la

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Text by Sampson Ohringer

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*Robert Wilhite and Guy de
Cointet (installation view) (2022).*
Image courtesy of the artists and
as-is gallery. Photo: Carlotta
Guerra.

Early on in *Iglu* (1977), a play co-created by artists Robert Wilhite and Guy de Cointet, one character, Julian, walks onstage carrying a viola. He notices a jagged, rhombus-shaped plank of white metal with black markings scrawled in even lines across it. The markings appear to be a musical composition, and Julian asks two other onstage characters if he can attempt to play it. He sits down purposefully and, with the viola placed awkwardly in his lap like a miniature cello, begins scratching out a sharp, atonal melody. He is quickly interrupted by another character, Rosa, who alerts him, and the audience, that the notations he is attempting to play are not musical notes. The scene is meant to be humorous; *Iglu* is a riff on the sitcom. However, what follows complicates the classic sitcom mix-up: Rosa begins lecturing on the notation in the manner of a museum docent. As she gestures at different markings, low, humming tones emanate across the theater, suggesting some hidden connection between the visual and the sonic.

This scene well illustrates the collaborative theatrical work of Wilhite and de Cointet. On view at as-is.la, the enigmatic sculptures cum props—from two of their plays—take on a purely aesthetic function, left to be studied intently by gallery-goers. De Cointet, a French artist who spent much of his career in Los Angeles working in Larry Bell's studio, was long fascinated by the cryptic nature of language. For de Cointet, a word or object speaks polyvocally; there is always a code that must be unlocked. For his part, Wilhite constructed many of the theatrical props, such as the oversized drawing/musical score, for their collaborative productions. In their collaboration, the props take on a life of their own, furthering the plays' narratives as much as the actors.

With only limited context provided in the press release and in the midst of an exhibition layout that more closely resembled contemporary art, I was tempted to read the sculptures as art objects. In doing so, I took up the same position as the stage actors, encountering these semi-abstract objects and attempting to untangle their hidden functions. Paradoxically, then, engaging with the works as art objects made them feel closer to their original theatrical function than if the props had been presented as such.

When confronted, the intersecting black lines that form the musical notations from *Iglu* first resemble a circuit board, like an Ulla Wiggen diagram. This playfulness extends to other works as well. A large coral wall piece, which includes a triangle extending

across the entire base towards the work's center, is simultaneously geometric abstraction and, in *Iglu*, a window looking out onto a burning home in the Hollywood Hills.

Ethiopia, the second play with props on display, premiered in 1976 at Barnsdall Art Park. The play focuses on the main character, Julie, reminiscing with her two cousins about their shared childhood. Set in their family home, the characters are surrounded by colorful, evocative props. Throughout the production, each character takes a turn introducing a new set element, describing in vivid and imaginative language how, for example, a bisected black orb set on top of a bright orange L-shaped pedestal is in fact a treasured percussive instrument. Seeing it in the gallery, though, this work appears more ominous, like an explosive precipitously close to falling from its perch. Given Wilhite's *Nuclear Bombs* (2007–19) series, I suspect this effect is the point.

Like language itself, these sculptural props gesture at something—an instrument, for instance—but a gap remains that allows for creative interpretation, a decoding of sorts. Seen in the gallery, the works gain new layers of interpretive meaning beyond their original, theatrical function. With this sleight of hand, the exhibition reinvigorates the playful conceptual games that Wilhite and de Cointet conceived for the stage close to fifty years ago.

Robert Wilhite and Guy de Cointet runs from November 5–December 23, 2022 at as-is.la (1133 Venice Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90015).



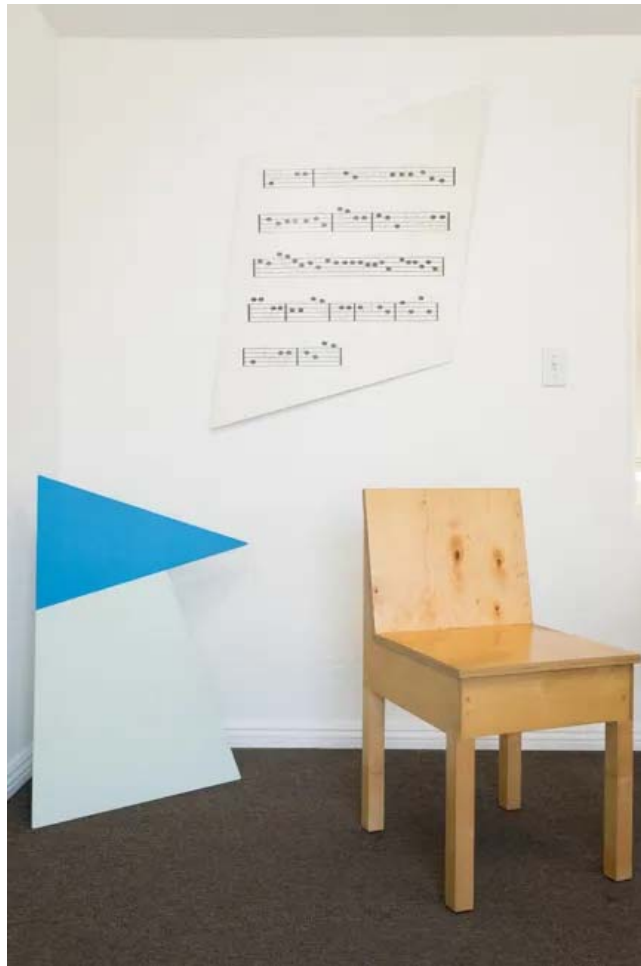
Robert Wilhite and Guy de Cointet (installation view) (2022). Image courtesy of the artists and as-is gallery. Photo: Carlotta Guerra.



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Sampson Ohringer is a Los Angeles-based writer, originally from Chicago. His research interests focus on global shipping and logistics networks as they intersect with other disciplines.

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