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A Selection of Early Works from the 1960s by Joseph Kosuth

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A Selection of Early Works from the 1960s by Joseph Kosuth

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Joseph Kosuth’s Early Work

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Artworks . . . describe *how* they describe What art shows in such a manifestation is, indeed, *how* it functions.

Joseph Kosuth, “Intention(s),” *Art Bulletin*, 1996

With such pieces as ‘Glass Words Material Described’ and his *One and Three* series, Joseph Kosuth initiated the new artistic category, conceptual art. He conceived (or thought through)¹ these and other conceptual pieces in the fall of 1965 and had a few of them fabricated at that time, even though he was beginning his first year at New York’s School of Visual Arts (SVA) and was working with limited funds. Representing an intensification of Marcel Duchamp’s well-known preference for epistemology over ontology and a recognition of the profound importance of his notes, Kosuth’s extraordinary advance came two years before Sol Lewitt’s famous “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” was published in *Artforum* in June 1967, and three years before Lawrence Weiner started his widely recognized conceptually based practice. Moreover, Kosuth’s innovation anticipates by three years the thoughtful tactics of the British group, Art & Language.

Kosuth’s contribution is not only remarkable for its new approach to artistic thinking, resulting in the demotion of form to referential status, but it is also astonishing when one realizes that he developed this radically new approach when he was only 20 years old. His letter of application to SVA, which has only recently been retrieved from the school’s files, indicates his thoughts about making conceptually based work even before he was enrolled there.² In the first paragraph of this application, Kosuth explains why he has chosen to make art rather than write:

There are several things that I have become involved with, and it is imperative that I devote my time to an attempt at working towards particular goals and answers. If I were a writer, that is to say possessing the ability to [construct] en masse thinkable planes through words, I could then realize it in that way. If I were more of an intellectual, I would just read and think. But things being the way they are, I accept that reasoning which tells me that I have “talent.” With it as a tool, I am able to visualize and, again, realize with [it] that which occurs graphically and evaluate the result.

Robert Hobbs is working on a major monograph on the work of Joseph Kosuth.

Kosuth admits finding the process of “working with my hands. . . stimulating.” But he emphatically avers, “My main interest actually is Philosophy,” and notes, “As a result Aesthetics is more appealing to me than, say, Painting Technique.” After commenting that artists should be categorized according to their commitment to “a mental activity [rather than] a physical one,” and after putting down “those who possess trained motor muscles,” Kosuth provides a completely original rereading of Clement Greenberg’s formalist approach when he cites this critic’s statement, “concept alone reveals good art,” as a reason for a new philosophically based art.³ Kosuth then points out that in the future “significant art will be made by artists who have eliminated limitations,” enabling them to “work with their eyes wide open.” He concludes with the following summary of modern painting and his challenge to it:

In the past seven decades we have taken the thing; broken it down, laughed at it, broken it up, spent the past ten years just looking at the paint, re-looked at it and laughed again, and now we are just trying to look. Anyway, by now we should be to a point beyond this front picket fence. I for one am anxious to begin.

Kosuth’s intention to go beyond “the front picket fence” that has precluded artists from coming to terms with art is consistent with the June 1965 letter of recommendation written on his behalf by Roger T. Barr, Director of College Art Study Abroad, who commended Kosuth for learning to work with “optical” art during his time in Paris, even though it was not his preferred métier. In Barr’s recommendation the term “optical” indicates that Kosuth was participating in an ongoing discussion concerning the relative merits of visual art and more philosophic work. Barr mentions that Kosuth finally accepted the constraints of the program in Paris and made “some very promising paintings, and a few ‘optical,’ painted sculptures.”⁴ Since Kosuth was beginning to establish the foundations of his philosophic art even as he continued to make paintings and sculptures, it should not be surprising that he kept on doing the same as a student at SVA where he received excellent grades in these subjects and was even honored in the spring of 1966 with his class’s first prize in painting. Even though he was making more conventional work for his classes, the receipts for materials purchased with funds from his SVA scholarship and submitted to the school in accordance with its rules include lettering and spray paint, which were crucial for developing his conceptual work.

Recognizing Kosuth’s central role in spearheading conceptual art, SVA made him a faculty member when he was only 22 years old. Because the development of this new stylistic approach is so extraordinary and because Kosuth’s reevaluation of art’s basic components have not yet been adequately understood, this essay will reconsider his three earliest groups of work, including his glass pieces, *One and Three* series, and *The First Investigation* ‘Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)’, informally known as Definitions—a term Kosuth himself uses. As it looks at these

early works, this essay will analyze the ways Kosuth disentangles form from content so that the latter can be understood as art’s ideal *sine qua non*.

We can begin this account of Kosuth’s reconfiguration of art in epistemological terms by starting with his interest in the New York painter and irascible critic of modern art’s excesses, Ad Reinhardt. In the fall of 1965 Kosuth wrote a paper on Reinhardt for the SVA philosophy of art class taught by the former critic-turned-art-historian Dore Ashton.⁵ Although it is generally conceded that Kosuth modified Reinhardt’s *art-as-art* dogma into his own doctrine of *art as idea as idea*, the nature of this connection has not been sufficiently explored. Having survived several decades of endless cycles of New York vanguard art activity, Reinhardt was sardonic about them. No mere art-for-art’s-sake effete, he essentialized his *art-as-art* approach so that it represented the single overarching system he characterized in terms of the following linked sequence: “*Art-as-art. Art from art. Art on art. Art of art. Art for art. Art beyond art. Artless artifice.*”⁶ In his first *art-as-art* piece in the Spring 1958 issue of the periodical *It Is*, Reinhardt wrote, “The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is *art-as-art* and everything else is everything else.”⁷ Reinhardt’s single-minded, holistic approach, which worked in tandem with his desire to rule out anything that was not pure, no doubt inspired the young Kosuth to look for a way to understand art as a unified concept. But unlike Reinhardt, who considered this unity in terms of formal essences, Kosuth regarded the subject categorically and defined art in terms of operative strategies so that his work could focus, in structuralist fashion, on the underlying rules framing it. This basic difference distinguishes Kosuth’s heteronymous operational view of art from Reinhardt’s autonomous formalism. Although Kosuth, like Reinhardt, supports art’s autonomy in one sense, he develops a specialized discourse capable of moving beyond formal limits by making its modus operandi explicit. Moreover, while Reinhardt was ironic about his distilled formalist aesthetics, Kosuth was serious about separating aesthetics from formalism.

Years later, Kosuth reflected on Reinhardt’s contributions, noting that he “was more than just a producer of paintings; he was a producer of meaning.”⁸ Reinhardt’s meaning, however, is intrinsic rather than extrinsic, and it is assertively tautological. In his parodic *Art News* self-interview, published in 1965, the same year that Kosuth wrote a paper on him, Reinhardt pointed out that language in art resists aestheticization:

Words in art are words.
Letters in art are letters.
Writing in art is writing.⁹

In this short refrain, Reinhardt affirms the fact that writing remains resolutely itself even when presented in an art context, and this may be the reason he chose not to include language in his art. Considered in relationship to Kosuth’s later work, Reinhardt’s observation can be seen as

a means for breaking through formalist art's closed system by setting within it a literal element capable of undermining the coercive tactics of formalist aestheticization.

Beginning in 1965, Kosuth started to break through the closed system of post-World War II formalist art, when he leaned sheets of glass—either the same dimensions as Reinhardt's 60-inch square black paintings or smaller—and contrasted them with a label certifying the overall work as art. As Kosuth has pointed out:

I liked glass because it had no color to speak of, except for the color it reflected from its environment. There was always the problem of form though. So I tried presenting it in different conditions – smashed, ground, stacked, and this led me in another direction. The first use of language began with this work. With the first glass piece it was the label, which took on a great importance. That piece was just a five-foot sheet of glass which leaned against the wall, and next to it was a label with the title . . . I succeed in avoiding composition, and I had succeeded in making a work of art, which was neither a sculpture (on the floor) nor a painting (on the wall).¹⁰

Using glass, which was then customarily employed to sheath framed works of art, as a major element in such works as 'Glass Words Material Described'—the other part being the proverbial museum wall label—Kosuth enacted a structural shift of enormous import, since it first broke up the presumed unity of traditional works of art into the two components of object and label before reorienting them so that one would mirror the other, thus establishing an internal dialectic. This subtle play on museum presentation created a situation in which the work of art is able to remark on itself, or, as Kosuth noted, "a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art."¹¹ Instead of looking for a way to underscore art's autonomy as Reinhardt did through the Negative Theology of his black paintings, Kosuth found a means to manifest art's contingency through an internalized dialogue in which one part of the work is forced into a dialogic relationship with the other. In addition, the glass comprising part of this work takes on an additional structural resonance, since it literalizes and dryly parodies the presumed transparency of art's content at the same time that it gives a nod to Duchamp's famous *Great Glass*.

In this type of work, Kosuth's art is poised on an ontological and epistemological divide crucial to both this piece and his future work. His early work remains balanced between these two alternatives because he respects formal art's text as the ideal context and subject matter for his pieces. Text in this situation is the structuralist reference to both the work of art and the assumed protocols for approaching it – a situation that Kosuth literalizes so that his objects reiterate and reveal some of the customary rules binding them into an art discourse. In this way they remain open to the larger and certainly more contingent epistemological text that has

come to be identified with conceptual art. The artist is also keenly aware of the paramount impact that any text, considered in the structuralist sense, has on a work of art. As he explained much later, "Only a state of deep denial could keep an artist from avoiding the fact that seeing isn't as simple as looking: the text the viewer brings to a work organizes what is seen."¹²

Although it is tempting to view Kosuth's 'Glass Words Material Described' as a premier example of structuralist art since it was made at a time when this theoretical approach was widely endorsed, his piece is actually a very early example of post-structuralism since its presentation demonstrates an appreciation of the breaks and gaps in the then accepted discrete parameters ratifying it as art. Rather than searching in art for a unity analogous to that of many structuralists in the mid-twentieth century, including Claude Lévi-Strauss and, at times, Roland Barthes, Kosuth looked for ways his work could reflect on the limitations of its given text in terms of its structural make up and subject.

An excellent example of Kosuth's ability to pry art loose from the text encumbering and directing it in order to reveal its protocols as both subject matter and structuring principle is the ongoing dialectics distinguishing his Definitions. To Kosuth's contemporaries who do not recall seeing Definitions or other works by him until 1967, the artist has pointed out that working drawings for pieces and other such notations during this early period usually outpaced by months and even years his ability to fund their fabrication. For this reason the work's origin is dated at its first conception and Kosuth considers the *terminus post quem* for the Definitions to be 1966. Similar to his early glass pieces the Definitions are comprised of two separate parts; however, one component, the work's certificate, is private, while the Photostatic reproduction of the dictionary definition, which documents the idea giving rise to the certificate, is public. Because the Definitions' Photostats are graphic and appealing, the overall bipartite structure of this series has far too often been overlooked, and only recently have big auction houses been requiring owners to produce the work's rarely seen component, its certificate, which Kosuth has described in the following manner:

Ownership of the work is established by the production instructions, which double as a certificate. This is signed, but as a deed of ownership, not as a work of art. Thus, I've made it clear that these certificates are never to be exhibited, and they rarely are. The art itself, which is neither the props with which the idea is communicated, nor the signed certificate, is only the idea in and of the work.¹³

We might think of these certificates as a type of assisted readymade on the order of Duchamp's *Tzannek Check*, with the proviso that they signal a different epistemological shift that makes them a simulacrum of an artistic function and the generative stage rather than art itself. Under no circumstances, the artist has cautioned us, should these artifacts be construed as art. While the

certificates represent a potential pact or agreement with a collector and point to the source of the artist's concept in a literal cutout dictionary definition, they are the physical evidence of initial cognition, not the act itself. In addition to refusing to think about the certificates as art and relegating them to the status of placeholders for his ideas, Kosuth notes, "I have always considered the Photostat the work's form of presentation (or media); but I never wanted anyone to think that I was presenting a Photostat as a work of art."¹⁴

The public and visual aspects of Kosuth's Definitions are his Photostats, which are square in format like Ad Reinhardt's later black paintings but a foot smaller in both dimensions since that was the largest square-size format he could make with the Photostatic paper then available. The Reinhardt connection is wonderfully ironic, since the black paintings were intended to be the last vanguard works that could be made before the onset of an academic vanguard—a situation that more closely approximates the preferred work and approach of most conceptual artists, including Kosuth. Referred to as "props" by Kosuth in the above quotation, the Photostats are both copies of dictionary definitions and also inversions of them. Kosuth regarded these exhibition components as models:

It is not by mere chance that all of the works done by me included in this exhibit are labeled "model." All I make are models. The actual works of art are ideas. Rather than "ideal" the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind.¹⁵

Dependent on the overriding text encumbering and enunciating them, the Photostat's status as art is doubly contingent since the artist views them also as placeholders for art but not art itself. In Kosuth's less than idealist view, art hinges on both the generative concept and the specific artistic context ratifying it as art—not on the certificates documenting the forms in the former and the Photostat's function in catalyzing the latter.

Since Photostatic copies in the 1960s were a well-established form of high-resolution copy, which had been developed decades before the advent of Xerox, they represent a highly mechanical as well as an old-fashioned way of working. This well-established technique dating back to the second decade of the twentieth century, with its connotations of fustiness, may be a reason why it appealed to the quasi-minimalist and future earth artist Robert Smithson and to Kosuth, who both chose to present some of their work as Photostats during the period of 1966-68 when they were frequently discussing art with one another at either the Castelli Gallery or the Dwan Gallery where they would hang out. The two men favored Photostats mainly for their dialectical capabilities. As Nancy Holt, Smithson's widow, recalled, "Bob often made Photostats because he wanted to see the negative of an image. He felt he could not predict the result in advance and was frequently surprised with the results."¹⁶

Far more than formalist exercises, Photostatic reversals were crucial to both Smithson's

and Kosuth's work at the time and constitute a record of their ongoing conversation about art as a mode of dialectic thinking—a view that proved crucial to Smithson's *Site/Nonsite* works of 1968.¹⁷ In addition to its antiquated modernist connotations, the Photostat provides a negative of an image that makes it inherently dialectical and useful for both Kosuth and Smithson. By utilizing Photostats in their work, both artists are able to set up ongoing conversations with the missing positive components giving rise to them and to imply multiple points of view and various ways of orienting oneself conceptually to the image at hand.

Seeing a Definition negatively as a Photostat and conceptualizing it positively as the dictionary cut out, thereby doubling it by making it an inverse mirrored image of its source, has a source in A. J. Ayer's term "definition" in his *Language, Truth, and Logic*,¹⁸ which attracted Kosuth's attention early in his career. Underscoring the basic tenets of logical positivism in this book, Ayer identifies a "definition" as the translation of one statement into a comparable one. Since Ayer is careful to distinguish his more far-ranging approach to definitions from those found in dictionaries, Kosuth's employment of dictionary sources in his Definitions can be taken as his ostensible subject matter as well as a means of thematizing the overarching structure of his works. And his Photostats can be considered as equivalent statements, acting in accord with Ayer's approach. The Definitions (or *The First Investigation*) first focused on the semantics of such qualities as the colors blue, orange, green, purple, red, and yellow in "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)" before Kosuth considered formulating theoretical descriptions of abstractions like *Meaning*, *Text*, and *Word*. In this way the Definitions call attention to art's overall abstract character by relying on Ayer's concept of definitions as statements of equivalency. As one moves beyond Kosuth's explicit works in this series to more implicit and definitely structural ones that focus on art's way of functioning, one can appreciate the type of equivalent statements articulated by the Definition's bipartite structure that joins the assisted readymade of the certificate with the Photostats (Kosuth's exhibition copies), which are at once extensions and critiques of Reinhardt's black paintings and inverse reproductions of dictionary definitions. In the Definitions Kosuth isolates and hypostatizes art's traditional generative and executive functions in terms of the two basic components of certificate and model or exhibition copy.

Now that we can see how Kosuth has broken up the traditional work of art and reconfigured it in terms of components that reify aspects of its text and context, we might ask why this process should be considered conceptual art. My response is that Kosuth has found a way to turn formalism back on itself in these works, so it becomes conscious of itself; in other words, it is able to move in and out of the art system, as well as the text that constitutes it. This ability to break out of an encumbering frame is akin to artificial intelligence, which computer scientists have defined as the capacity of a program to step outside itself in order to critique itself. Seen in relation to conceptual art, we might say that Kosuth has created a purposefully convoluted system in his Definitions, similar to a Möbius strip, whereby a work of art is able to fold back on itself and become self-aware. While Kosuth's tactical approach to art uses

formalism as its raw material, the result is definitely not formalist.

This redeployment of formalism, so that it is forced to become in the Definitions a self-realization of the social and cultural *modus operandi* framing it, enables us to revisit some of Kosuth's earliest work and analyze it in terms of the circumstantial evidence my analysis proposes. Approaching Kosuth's work as a text substantiates the argument that such a piece as 'One and Three Shovels [Ety.-Hist.]', (1965), comes before the more complex Definitions of c. 1966 - 1968, with their internal and external dialectics. This difference is evidenced by the fact that 'One and Three Shovels' is much more straightforward in its tripartite organization than the internal dialectic and consequent inversion of the Definitions. Instead of setting up polarities between subject and object, private and public spheres, and generative and executive phases of creativity that are hypostatized in the form of the Definitions' certificate and model, 'One and Three Shovels' is predicated on ostensible formal and ontological differences between image, object, and linguistic text. This and other works in this series represent Kosuth's rethinking and extension of Duchamp's readymade in terms of its different physical manifestations of object, image, and text. Structurally the different physical manifestations of the shovel all exist on parallel planes of presentation, making them more straightforward statements of equivalency. Moreover, unlike the Definitions, the viewer's apprehension of them is more empirical and comparative, even though both groups are definitely epistemological in their intent.

In addition to straddling ontological and epistemological categories, Kosuth's Definitions overlap stylistic and analytic conceptual modes. Compelling visually, the exhibited components of the Definitions recall viewers' habitual attentiveness to painting's sure graphic pleasure at the same time that they mine this formalist apprehension in order to redirect it. In 1988 Kosuth defined this process "made-ready," an inversion of Duchamp's readymade, and described this new categorical designation as a "constructive appropriation."¹⁹ His "made-ready" employment of formalism as an empty category that can be productively rethought in terms of a dialectical proposition serves as one important component of his Definitions; the other is the assisted readymade that takes the form of certificates incorporating actual dictionary definitions.

From this discussion of Kosuth's remarkably analytical and epistemological early work, we can conclude that in his conceptual art, formalist ideas are emptied of traditional content and ontological surety, so that the impoverished forms manifesting them are doubly destitute. Thus Kosuth's conceptual work reveals itself to be not only a critique of formalist thought but also its apotheosis into blank subject matter.

¹Thinking in conceptual art needs to be considered praxis like painting, sculpting, and printmaking.

²On October 8, 2007, Kosuth provided written permission for SVA to release Xerox copies of his personnel files, which include materials from 1965-1990. These Xeroxes included Kosuth's very revealing application statement that

surprised even him with its prescience about his overall goals for his art. The following statements are taken from this application. SVA Personnel File.

³This rereading of Greenberg to achieve distinctly new ends that are out of sync with this critic's object-oriented and conservative approach was part of a generational rethinking of this critic's work. Minimalists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris were using Greenberg's emphasis on immanent causation in which the art object is reduced to its medium and mode of articulation as a basis for reducing their sculptures to inert objects, so that they could define the absolute and necessary limits for this type of art.

⁴Roger T. Barr, Recommendation for Joseph Kosuth, June 22, 1965. SVA Personnel File.

⁵Dore Ashton, "Kosuth: The Facts," *Studio International* 179 (February 1970): 44.

⁶Ad Reinhardt, "25 Lines of Words on Art Statement," *It Is* (New York) Spring 1958 in Barbara Rose, ed., *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, The Documents of 20th Century Art (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 53.

⁷Ibid. The italics are mine, not Reinhardt's, even though he often employed them for this term.

⁸Joseph Kosuth, "Intention(s)," *Art Bulletin* 78 (September 1996): 409.

⁹Ad Reinhardt "Art-as-Art Dogma, Part 5" in Ad Reinhardt, "Reinhardt Paints a Picture," *Art News* 64 (March 1965): 40.

¹⁰Joseph Kosuth, Conversation with Jeanne Siegel, April 7, 1970, Broadcast on WBAI-FM, Gabriele Guercio, ed., *Joseph Kosuth: Art After Philosophy and After, Collected Writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1993), p. 49.

¹¹Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy" in *Joseph Kosuth: Art After Philosophy and After*, p. 19.

¹²Joseph Kosuth, "Intention(s)," *Art Bulletin*, p. 408.

¹³Ibid., p. 407, fn. 2.

¹⁴Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy: Part 3," *Studio International* 178 (December 1969): 212.

¹⁵Joseph Kosuth, "Notes on Conceptual Art and Models" (1967) in *Joseph Kosuth: Art After Philosophy and After*, p. 3.

¹⁶Nancy Holt, Telephone Interview with Author, April 29, 2004.

¹⁷Ibid. It is worth noting that Smithson obtained through a trade with Kosuth a 1968 Definition entitled "Entropy," which was made expressly for him and is inscribed so on the back.

¹⁸A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1936, rpt. 1964).

¹⁹Joseph Kosuth, "No Exit," *Artforum* 26 (March 1988): 113.

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