Joseph Kosuth

Art after Philosophy and After

Collected Writings, 1966–1990

edited by Gabriele Guercio

foreword by Jean-François Lyotard

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FOREWORD: AFTER THE WORDS

Jean-François Lyotard

After philosophy comes philosophy. But it is altered by the after. After the *Tractatus* come the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* and the unpublished works. After the coveting of an absolute and pure language that speaks of the world comes the deceptive discovery of the plurality of tongues entangled in the world.

Between the two philosophies of before and after, words are revealed as things (as expressed by the Hebrew word *davar*), signifiers are grasped as enigmas, writing is set down as a material thing. In other words, thought is art. One mad act is completed, that of giving the world a picture, a *Bild*, of well-formed propositions. Sentences are not propositions concerning events; they are events that happen in the world of speakers, under the same rubric as resonant, plastic, visual, or tactile arrangements. After-philosophy was there well before philosophy.

The work of art "presents" in the perceptible space-time-matter, which here is visual, something—a gesture—that cannot be presented there. This "presence" cannot be a presentation. It remains silent. And this is its sign. The work is mute not because it is made of colors and forms but because it is inhabited, squatted on, by this "presence." Thought is also an art, because we think in sentences, and the sentences themselves also "present" gestures of the space-time-matter of language—gestures made in the thickness of words. Sentences, supposedly speaking of something to someone, remain tacit on the subject of their referent and their destination.

The space-time-matter of language is made perceptible, visible, by writing. Kosuth's work is a meditation on writing. According to the moderns, this writing is represented as the actualization (performance) of a system of arbitrary elements, the graphemes, which are the equivalents of what

the phonemes are for spoken language (competence). Their function is to convey distinctively the meaning of words. Decodable, transparent, they efface themselves for the benefit of meaning—they become forgotten.

Kosuth's visual work questions this forgetfulness and forbids it. Writing conceals some gesture, a remainder of gesture, beyond readability. The obvious meaning of the writing hides other meanings. The written sentence is never transparent like a windowpane or faithful like a mirror. Thought is art because it yearns to make "present" the other meanings that it conceals and that it does not think. There is, in art as in thought, an outburst, the desire to present or signify to the limit the totality of meanings. This excess in art and in thought denies the evidence of the given, excavates the readable, and is convinced that all is not said, written, or presented.

Limpid writing is therefore turbid, disturbed by the "presence" of the other in itself. This other erases its readability. The erasure can even infiltrate into the readability itself, confusion can lurk in clarity, the gesture of the sentence can be lost in the philosopher's coherent proposition. For example, the almost perfect gesture of the *Tractatus* must recognize *in extremis* that which it neglects or excludes, which does not enter into the picture.

But still that which, written neither black on white nor white on black, indicates the other in writing must be written. Writing leaves the remainder to be written, by the mere fact that it writes. There will always be the remainder. It is not words or letters that are the signs; it is what is between them. Writing is finite; its infinity inhabits its finitude.

Kosuth's visible works manifest this remainder secluded in readability. The visual is employed to "manifest" the unreadable of writing, to advance an absent "presence" from and to the perceptible, visible presentation. For the perceptible presentation is also affected by a disturbance, a darkness. The perceptible is not entirely perceived; the visual is more than the visible. In making a visible work out of writing, Kosuth immerses it in the visual field, and by the same token he establishes its opacity, its invisible and therefore unreadable otherness, its oblique remainder, its unseen and unwritten "context." The visible and readable tautology, *This is a sentence,* insinuates the necessarily unreadable antinomy, *This is not a sentence, but a thing. Davar* signifies both the word that commands *and* the thing that is done.

The absence of the visual from the visible evokes the absence of meaning from the readable signification. There are many ways of deciphering and interpreting the Letters that are consigned to scrolls by the Voice. Almost no one has heard the Voice. The Letters include no sign allowing them to be grouped into words, no punctuation to guide intonation, not a single mark of vocalization. There is no end to the completion of this

definitive and unfinished testament of the Voice. Already, few know how to read the Letters, even in Babylon. While the rabbis try to decipher Hebrew aloud, the commentators translate it into Aramaic, vocalize it and chant it, for the sake of the assembled people who have forgotten their language.

Language is forgotten, always. There are many ways of forgetting it (one of which is linguistic). Vocalizing writing in order to actualize it, like visualizing it, is not without danger. It is a kind of incarnation, but one made under the responsibility of mouths or eyes of the flesh, and not through the gracious gift of the Voice. It is an incarnation that marks and recalls the "present" absence of the Voice from the letter in making the Voice heard in the equivocality and multiplicity of earthly voices. This gesture of vocalized and chanted commentary pays homage to the gesture of language hidden in the Letters. Oral tradition is perpetuated by adding earthly gesture to earthly gesture; thus it presents the remainder of meaning that haunts the Letters, not by remaining silent but by proliferating. That which cannot be spoken of must be silenced, but it cannot be silenced except in speaking still.

While they were constructing the tower at Babel, nations spoke many languages, but they all understood each other. In constructing the single tower, they were saying to each other, let us make a single language out of all our languages; it will be the absolute language. The Voice forbade them to do this; it sent forth confusion. Babel signifies confusion and not mastery. You shall translate in anguish. Among the letters, among the commentaries, you shall not cease to die and to be born to meaning, condemned to misreading.

All translation interprets. It moves toward the other language and returns to its own language, as toward things whose meaning is not obvious, in the same way that the visible both hides and signals the transcendence of the visual. It is necessary to risk leaving the given and returning to it, to rewrite it and expose it. In visibly exposing written sentences, Kosuth presents them for translation, for interpretation. The words and sentences explode, in the tradition of a carnal exodus, an exodus from Babel. Nothing need be added to them. They possess the indefiniteness of their commentaries. We imagine they seek to deliver themselves from it.

I compare Kosuth's visual works with the square letters of the Torah. These letters are also texts, but they are waiting for their accents, their vowels, their punctuation, their intonation, their putting into practice. The words wait to be cut up and defined. It is this incarnation that ventures with severity and humility into the centering, the formatting, the neon underlining, the variation of typefaces and sizes. And the lexical definitions in several languages manifest that they are themselves made of

words and are still waiting for their meanings. The definition of a word is its usage. And usage is a homeless wandering and a faithfulness to an absent Voice. It is without end.

Kosuth's work makes very little concession to the color medium, not to say none at all. The work is certainly visual since it is located in space-time and develops there its space-time, but it neglects the visible medium, color. A text differs from a painting by its medium. The distinctive medium of a text is made not of color but of words. In inscribing these words in perceptible space-time, it is only a question of giving them the thickness that is theirs and that is forgotten in the reading of the printed word, the immaterial thickness of the forgotten language. To color them would be to treat them as visible things, to ornament them, and to waste them.

Words are a medium for speech as colors are for vision or sound is for hearing. They rebel against being mastered because they already "speak" by themselves, and we no longer know what they are saying. Senior citizens of meaning, they are also children ready to give voice to historical events and to an endless tradition. In this way they wait coldly for the visitor when he enters a room set up by Kosuth.

Such is the paradox: to plunge the written in the perceptible without offering it to be perceived, on the one hand, or read, on the other, but only for it to be scrutinized according to its specific depth, the enigma of the tacit.

Kosuth can write "theoretical" texts because he knows that this sort of writing, in spite of its cognitive and referential claim, also conceals some gesture and remainder—that it is no more transparent than a picture. He has annulled, with Wittgenstein, the mad right that modern logic has presumptuously claimed—that of reflecting correctly the referent of the discourse in the clean mirror of its propositions. What are we doing, what is he doing, in commenting on his work? Are we hoping to reflect it clearly? We are making gestures of language that try to decipher, translate, and interpret his gestures of exposing writing. Why should Kosuth not do the same? Certainly he has no special privilege to comment on what he signs, but he is not forbidden to sign his comments. For commenting—that is, thinking and writing—is again and already an art.

After philosophy is before it. A man takes his finger, a stick, or a paintbrush, plunges it into an oxide paste or an ink, and draws some strokes on a support. Is he writing or painting? Neither one nor the other; this distinction will come later. He appeals by means of the visible-readable to a "presence" that is more than the calm acts of sight and reading. Today a man remakes this gesture with the typographic characters of our informationalized world. He calls us to this other, near and far, that is the only motif of art.

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These writings appeared mainly in art periodicals, catalogues, and as announcements for gallery exhibitions. After some speculation as to whether to render the format of the texts more homogeneous, the author and I concluded that, apart from occasional clarifications required by the context of their new appearance, the texts should be left untouched.

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G.G.

INTRODUCTION

Gabriele Guercio

I see the reason, Ion. . . . The gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not an art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Eraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings; and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain: and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration.

Plato, Ion.

Thus Socrates, characterizing the artistic process, incidentally but no less definitively jeopardizes the artist's claims to a consciousness of art. But what of all those artists who have attempted to confute Socrates' dictum? Joseph Kosuth is certainly among them. Although, as he argues throughout the following pages, interpretation may always form quite a long chain linking the user and the maker of art, and although there will always be more or less competent interpreters, artists should nevertheless consider for themselves *why* rather than merely *how* art functions. It would be wrong to think of the writings collected here as literature "about" art. Kosuth the artist is as present in his writings as he is in the works he exhibits in galleries and museums. His commitment is to a practice that aims to grasp and unravel the conceptual web of art as a whole. For him, artists deal with content rather than with forms alone; only by taking responsibility for the meaning of their art can they hope to bridge the gap that severs the work of art from the social fabrication of its content. Accordingly, throughout his own career (which began publicly in 1967),

he has chosen not simply to be an art maker but to create and promote a critical understanding of art making. Insofar as he considers art as the whole rather than the sum of its parts, both his writings and his visual installations stem from the assumption that conceptual art's goal is to show that art begins where mere physicality ends.[1]

Growing up in a context created by, among others, Marcel Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt, and Donald Judd, Kosuth has continued to challenge the tradition of the authority of form, beginning with that tradition's dichotomy between painting and sculpture. At the same time, he has superseded the limitations implied by the modern system of the "arts" as isolated objects originating with and intended for isolated subjects (namely, the gap between art and art criticism). In seeking to identify the notion of artistic work with the conceptual activity of the artist, Kosuth has not only aligned art with language and culture but has helped to reduce its status as an isolated, independent discipline. This view has enabled him to draw new relations among previously unconnected cultural activities and, in turn, encourages the reader-viewer to perceive art as a global process that makes these relations possible. In fact, articulating an increasingly wide range of interests (philosophy of language, anthropology, Marxism, and Freudian psychoanalysis are a few), Kosuth seems interested less in linking specialized fields than in discovering the common principles that inform them within a practice that always moves to and from art. This book, then, extends the range of a singular *modus operandi*. What fascinates Kosuth and dominates this book is the possibility that the riddle of the creative process itself may be eventually solved by the artist. Here, as in galleries and museums, Kosuth vindicates not only artists' right to self-reflection, but also their freedom to investigate the *nature* of art without waiting for the mediation of critics.[2]

In 1965, having attended the Toledo School of Design and the Cleveland Art Institute and traveled for a year in Europe, the twenty-year-old Kosuth moved to New York. A student at the School of Visual Arts upon his arrival, he was invited to become a member of the faculty in 1968, where he is still teaching. During his early years in New York, the young artist fully immersed himself in the cultural life of the city. While meeting and exchanging ideas with other artists such as On Kawara, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg, as well as joining Donald Judd in regularly writing reviews for *Arts* magazine, Kosuth also organized discussions with various artists about their work—including Judd, Reinhardt, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Smithson—holding these sessions in the basement of the School of Visual Arts. In 1967, with the aid of Christine Kozlov and Michael Rinaldi, he founded an alternative space, the Lannis Gallery, which soon had its name changed to The Museum of Normal Art. Here, revealing his affinities at the time, the artist organized the *Opening Exhibition of Normal*

Art, which included works by Carl Andre, Mel Bochner, Hanne Darboven, Walter De Maria, On Kawara, Christine Kozlov, Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, and Kosuth himself. In a significant tribute to the recently deceased Reinhardt, Kosuth began to subtitle his work "Art as Idea as Idea," while a label quoting Reinhardt's well-known dictum "Art as Art" was affixed to the entrance wall of the gallery.[3] The following year, presenting what the artist sees as his first "secret" solo exhibition in New York, the Lannis Gallery featured *15 People Present Their Favorite Book.* The show delivered precisely what its title promised: Kosuth simply asked other artists to contribute their favorite books to a presentation in the gallery. It was in late 1968 that Kosuth began to gain public recognition as a leading—and highly controversial—figure in the emerging movement of conceptual art. It was around this time that Seth Siegelaub, later to become the pioneering dealer in conceptual art, took an interest in the work of Kosuth, eventually showing it, along with projects by Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, and Lawrence Weiner, in a series of group exhibitions that included the now legendary show-catalogue *5–31 January, 1969.* By the end of this crucial year in his career, Kosuth not only had his first solo exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery but also published his first major text, an article entitled "Art after Philosophy," in the widely read *Studio International.* Since 1969, Kosuth has been exhibiting, publishing, teaching, and lecturing in America and Europe. In marked contrast to the steady appreciation of his work in Europe, however, his reputation in America has undergone several fluctuations. During the past twenty years, the artist has been a target for critics keen on maintaining the value of painting and sculpture and, secondly but no less importantly, the status of their own discipline, which seems to be threatened by an art that includes self-reflection and criticism.[4] In 1970, Peter Schjeldahl was already rallying against the "moral crusade" of conceptualism, characterizing Kosuth in the *New York Times* as its "Savonarola"; yet, more recently, Roberta Smith, clearly receptive to the current reevaluation of conceptual art begun by younger artists and critics, would not hesitate to define Kosuth (also for the readers of the *New York Times*) as "the *eminence grise* of conceptual art while remaining its *enfant terrible.*"[5]

Although an exhaustive study of Kosuth's activities as art maker, writer, curator, and teacher is obviously needed at this point, I will refrain from providing one, limiting myself to a consideration of his writings. Throughout these, there is a constant and almost obsessive purpose that renders them particularly suggestive. Kosuth's questioning of the nature of art, his call for clarity and understanding in the artistic practice, together with his increasing preoccupation with contemporary art's loss of credibility (concurrent with its increased market value), are all clues pointing to a number of recurrent questions in his work. Is it possible to assign to the