

Myndlistardeild

On Meaning in Art

*The Philosophy of Conceptual Art in Relation to Joseph
Kosuth and My Own Work*

Lokaritgerð til BA-gráðu í myndlist

Starkaður Sigurðarson

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This essay pitches the thoughts and work of 'conceptual' art practices starting in the mid 1960s, against the works of the author, taking the artist Joseph Kosuth as main focal point and backdrop to explore the philosophy and literature that Kosuth used and studied. The essay introduces the analytical philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, from which Kosuth constructed many of the ideas presented in his writing *Art After Philosophy*; but as Kosuth's thought changes in nature in the early 1970s the essay comes to discuss the more "continental" tradition of philosophical thought and describes the work of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and its relation to conceptual art. The author attempts to locate his artwork and thought in the discussion, as well as show how the study of this material has impacted his own work.

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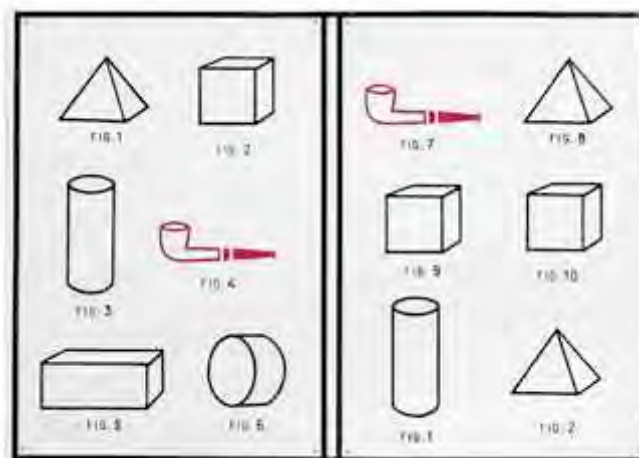
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Introduction

This essay examines the art practice that I have undertaken for the past few years from the viewpoint of conceptual art. I discuss four works that I have exhibited and discuss each of them in relation to the ideas of conceptual art, in particular, the art of Joseph Kosuth. I place my work alongside his work, and writing, from the mid 1960s onwards, in an attempt to shed light on my own thoughts about art and artwork. I introduce various ideas Kosuth has incorporated into his work, as well as different philosophers and theorists who relate to the ideas of conceptual art. The central inquiry of the essay surrounds the difference between the early work and writing by Kosuth and the later work, where he has revised his thoughts on an analytical type of art, and turned to a more continental, post-structuralist conception of meaning in art. I present the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, among others. This is an area of study that has heavily influenced my artwork. I eventually seek to illustrate my own thoughts on Kosuth, the philosophy surrounding conceptual art, and ultimately my own work, all in relation to the direct convergence of art and philosophical study since the advent of concept art.

This essay attempts to explore the way in which art straddles the divide between a philosophy of art and philosophy in general. The discussion of art often takes on a discussion of being, and the problems conceptual art encounters in this essay are fundamental dialogues of philosophy. These discussions have become the primary material in the making of my own artwork.

First chapter: Art Should Raise Questions¹



Marcel Broodthaers, *Pipe et formes académiques*, plastic and enamel, 1969-1970.

The above image by Marcel Broodthaers is quite interesting. It is visually appealing; it is a traditional, painterly, two-dimensional presentation, although made from more un-traditional material, plastic and enamel. It is a good example of the transition that artistic practice came to undergo in the middle of the 1960s. This image presents both past and present art history; it seems to say that the traditional forms of art were no longer so simple as geometric experiments, but rather, now, extend into another, more ambiguous, area. The geometric forms of painting and sculpture now have to contend with whatever it is that this 'pipe' stands for. That was the crux of the problem at the time. What does that pipe stand for? Of course it is an homage, or a dialogue, with the also Belgian artist, René Magritte, a mentor to Broodthaers; it is a direct quotation to his 1928-29 work *La Trahison des Images* (fig. 2). But it can be said to be more than that, it can almost be an explanation of the older work. Broodthaers' image contains a less ambiguous text; his images, the cube, the pyramid, the cylinder, the pipe, are accompanied by the text: fig. 1, fig. 2, fig. 3, etc. This tells us plainly that these images are just that, not cubes or pyramids, but figures, images. This would possibly serve to clear up the ambiguity, or contradiction of Magritte's work, but then what does this work of Broodthaers say beyond *La Trahison des Images*? After all, this image is also an image; as Foucault states in his book on the

¹ Kosuth, Joseph. "Information 2", in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writing, 1966-1990*. Edited by Gabriele Guericco. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Pr, 1991, 57.

Magritte painting, "Nowhere is there a pipe."² We never encounter, what we might call, "reality," there are only signs. Broodthaers takes us directly into a conversation about art, how it creates meaning, how seemingly simple it is, and yet complicated, he suggests to us what we should be thinking when we see, and think about, art.

I have sought to create simple art works as well. The underlying thread in most of what I have created or sought to create in the last years has been to create work that brings me closer to the kernel of art in artistic practice. This has inevitably led me to the work of the so-called 'Conceptual artists.' One could trace the origins of conceptual art back to the nineteenth century but I have mainly looked at two obvious examples of precursors, Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte. Duchamp, in his artistic practice, sought to lead the spectator away from purely 'retinal' (pleasing to the eye) art and towards a more 'intellectual' (in service of the mind) art.³ This is what the conceptual artists sought to establish through their work, building on the work of the "minimalists" before them. The conceptualists attempted to take the next, proclaimed logical, step into an idea based art.

"Not only does it [concept art] remove morphological significance as art, but it isolates "the art" from the form of presentation altogether."⁴

These artists wished for art to move away from the importance of the 'art object' and towards an art that concerned itself with ideas. This meant that the artist did not *merely* create an object for the viewer to look at, but an *idea* for them to see and think about; this idea being the whole work, not its form, or presentation. Artistic practice had to look outside of the "inward" looking art object, such as painting or sculpture, and begin to see the wide world around it.⁵ This came to be seen, following the so-called Minimalists, as a *dematerialization* of art, an idea based art.⁶ A split from the traditional, synthetic or sensuous, vision of art as a search for beauty or emotional

² Foucault, Michel. *This Is Not a Pipe*. Edited and translated by James Harkness. First Edition. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2008, 29.

³ H. H. Arnason and Marla F. Prather, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography*. 4th ed. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998, 274.

⁴ Burn, Ian, "Conceptual Art as Art", in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alberro, Alexander, and Blake Stimson, eds. Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2000, 189.

⁵ Kosuth, "Painting Versus Art Versus Culture (or why you can paint if you want to, but it probably won't matter)", in *Art After Philosophy and After*, 90.

⁶ Lippard, Lucy R, *Six Years: Dematerialization of the Art Object*. 1ST edition, London: Studio Vista, 1973, 5.

content to which the conceptualists gave no heed, toward an artistic practice that emphasized the meaning of the art work and the intellectual responsibility of the artist, what Kosuth called creation of meaning; as well as objecting to the capitalist ways of the domineering art market, by minimizing the importance of the objet d'art itself. The responsibility of the artist was to engage in a dialogue on the very nature of art.

"Being an artist now means to question the nature of art."⁷

Analytical Art

In my piece *Institution* (2013) (fig. 3), I sought to create an artwork that was direct and simple, but still had potency as art. This work consists of a piece of A4 paper on which is typed:

"For this work I wanted to make a piece that existed outside of any institution. However, seeing as this work was commissioned by the Fine Arts Academy of Iceland, this was impossible. So this work points out that this work can only ever exist within an institution."

It was my aim to put forward an idea, clearly and efficiently, which concerned itself with itself as art. This artwork tells you what it is and what it wants you to think about it. This is in line with a "conceptual" notion of art. There is no emphasis on aesthetic presentation and rather than align myself with any one "style" of art I chose to present my work, consisting of text, in the tradition of writing, literature, and, now, conceptual art. The idea presented in the work is, on the surface, twofold. One is the fact that, as it states, this particular work cannot exist outside of any institution; the other is that this work actively creates itself as art, or in minimum artwork. This work *tells* you that it is art and that while looking at it you should think about how art exists within institutions; as well as considering how art is presented, within or without, an institution. The idea behind this work was, in essence, exploring the boundaries of art; how art creates meaning, examining where exactly might the "art" exist in the "artwork." These are the fundamental, eternal, questions one can pose of art and have influenced all of my work for the past few years.

⁷ Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy", in *Art After Philosophy and After*, 18.

Joseph Kosuth worked, and still works, extensively with this meaning-making process. He works with ideas, most often using language as his medium. One of the main criticisms Kosuth had was for artists working in a "traditional" way, was that they were working in a purely formalist, aesthetic, way; that is: painting, sculpture (everything that came before conceptual art) was simply decorative⁸, and these artists did not create the meaning of their work themselves, they allowed critics to decide it for them.⁹ One of the most important points of focus for Kosuth was this "intent" that the artist had in making his art; this intent had to appear in the artwork as concept or idea, and often along with the work the artist expanded on, explicated, his work in writing. Kosuth wanted to control meaning.¹⁰ This meant that many of the conceptual artists spent as much time creating artworks as they did writing, and reading, about their practice and engaging with thought from outside of the artistic sphere. Kosuth was, and is, influenced by many different sources; one of the most quoted is the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein worked in logic, among other things, and language; he is one of the defining philosophers of the twentieth century and his thought has come to influence a wide range of activity. Wittgenstein and his school of thought rejected metaphysics in favor of a study of ordinary language and the reality of what is presented to us.¹¹ He stated that all problems of philosophy were problems of language;¹² he postulates that there are things that can be said and others that cannot. The philosopher must realize what he *can* consider and engage with. In his early writings he intriguingly states: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."¹³ Suggesting that philosophy stands on more fragile ground than many realized, and that this ground should be examined closely before any conclusion can be reached. This is an area of study that interested Kosuth and this "silence" would come to influence his thinking.

Wittgenstein studied how language functions as medium to knowledge and communication. What Kosuth did, as well as other conceptualists, was to see the parallel problems that Wittgenstein dealt with in his writings and what the

⁸ Ibid., 17

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Pears, David Francis, *Wittgenstein*. 5th edition. London: Fontana, 1971.

¹² Ibid., 56–57.

¹³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and Bertrand Russell. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by Brian McGuinness and David Pears. 2nd edition. London: New York: Routledge, 2001, 89.

conceptualists were aiming for in their art. Kosuth wanted to study the "language of art", the way in which artworks present art and how they create meaning, in the same way that Wittgenstein studied language. This is not without problems; the philosophy of Wittgenstein is complicated and changes in essence from his early work to his posthumously published writings, *Philosophical Investigations*, which make up the greater part of his thought. Kosuth varies in his strict dedication to Wittgenstein's principles, but in one of his earliest, and most famous, works, *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (fig. 4), the connection to Wittgenstein is strong. This work seeks to present the ways in which we understand the world around us, through our physical being and through language. Wittgenstein writes:

"Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us."¹⁴

In *One and Three Chairs*, Kosuth "simply" puts everything before us; he engages in a study of the very act of seeing the world around us. The work presents the ways in which an idea, such as a chair, can be understood, or comprehended. There is the real chair, physically in front of us; there is a definition of a chair as it is understood in language; and there is an image, a photograph, of a chair representing how the chair appears to us in our thought; an artwork that presents *how* we see an artwork, how our reality is constructed. Kosuth attempts to break the boundaries of form in art and bring the viewer into a space, an almost Platonic space, where the idea exists, as Sol Lewitt insists, as something preconceptualized.¹⁵ In this work it "...is not the meaning of the word 'chair' which is at stake, it is the meaning of the concept of art itself."¹⁶

Kosuth writes:

"One of the lessons for art which we can derive from the *Philosophical Investigations* is that I believe the later Wittgenstein attempted with his

¹⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* / *Transl. by G.E.M. Anscombe*. 3rd ed. Oxford, 1974, no. 126.

¹⁵ Goldie, Peter, and Elisabeth Schellekens, "Matter and Meaning in the Work of Art", in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*. Clarendon Press, 2007, 129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

parables and language-games to construct theoretical *object-texts* which could make recognizable (*show*) aspects of language that, philosophically, he could not assert explicitly. This aspect of philosophy, *as a process to be shown*, resist the reification of the direct philosophical assertion."¹⁷

This is where artistic practice, as Kosuth postulated, met with philosophy and is the area where artwork was to create its meaning. Kosuth focused on this area between what Wittgenstein called *unsayable*, and what art was able to present; he saw art as being able to articulate this problem Wittgenstein proposes. Wittgenstein writes that philosophy should say "nothing except what can be said,"¹⁸ Kosuth saw artistic practice in the same way, as a language where each artwork can only be understood through its language as art, it can only say what it can as art.¹⁹ Kosuth's early works were based in such logic as Wittgenstein applied in his thought, and the early artworks bore sign of that. Just as Wittgenstein proposed meaning in language to reside in the use of the language, so does Kosuth claim art to make meaning, through its use of the language of art. This idea can be complicated and along with it comes the rigorous challenge of creating a "non-object" art proposition.

This "analytic" art, questioning the nature of art with analytical means, can take on the form of an art which exists only for other artists, a self-referential, paradoxical, art which commented, not on the process of perception nor on the physical aura of an artwork, but on the concept of art itself (for Kosuth, art was indeed for other artists, just as complicated science is for other scientists²⁰). "...What art has in common with logic and mathematics is that it is a tautology; i.e., the 'art idea' (of 'work') and art are the same and can be appreciated as art without going outside the context of art for verification."²¹

This analytical process eventually faced the complexities that analytical philosophy has had to deal with, the rigorous problems of logic, objectivity, and truth. Just as Wittgenstein reconsidered his early writings, Kosuth found that this process of making art could not conform to the logical standards of philosophical proposition and enquiry. The "meaning creation" in art is much too ambiguous and, ultimately,

¹⁷ Kosuth, "The Play of the Unsayable: A Preface and Ten Remarks on Art and Wittgenstein", in *Art After Philosophy and After*, 249.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein and Russell, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 89.

¹⁹ Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy", in *Art After Philosophy and After*, 20.

²⁰ Lippard, *Six Years*, 148.

²¹ Kosuth, "Context Text", in *Art After Philosophy and After*, 84–85.

always subjective in nature. For example in the work *One and Three Chairs*, Kosuth means for the photograph to represent an image and the Photostat text to represent text and language, but ultimately all of these representations represented are objects themselves and their intended meaning does not stand under the full force of an analytical study. Their presentation can even be considered aesthetic in essence, a subjective presentation (and for all the promise of an art uncorrupted by the "art world," the market was quick to integrate this type of art into the mainstream as a sort of "style."²² But even though Kosuth's ideas were flawed they held enormous weight as experiments of a sort which had not been proposed before the coming of this conceptual practice.

Kosuth's insistence on the intention of the artist to be shown in the work can come under questioning in this sense. The writing accompanying his works, or about his works, often served as the only proper indicator of the artist's intent. According to Kosuth, and other conceptualists at the time, the meaning of the work had to manifest itself within the work²³, yet the radical purpose in which Kosuth presents his art is only clearly evident if we read his writings.²⁴ Kosuth even comes across as having misunderstood Wittgenstein himself, although Kosuth never purported to follow Wittgenstein, or any other philosopher exactly²⁵, he always presented his own version. He, for example, ignores Wittgenstein's insistence that language does not function in only one way. Wittgenstein writes: "The paradox (about the reference of the 'pain') disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts – which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please"²⁶, such as chairs.²⁷ The pure analytical conceptualism, of objectivity in the meaning and presentation of an art work, and in the decisiveness of language, Kosuth saw could not be satisfied. Kosuth writes in *A notice to the Public*, a flyer accompanying an exhibition, in 1975: "...it has become extremely difficult for me to support the epistemological implications and cultural ramifications of the uncritical analytic

²² Mooney, Kempton. *The Evolution of Conceptual Art in America*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013, 109.

²³ Goldie and Schellekens, "Matter and Meaning in the Work of Art", in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, 132.

²⁴ Ibid., 132.

²⁵ Kosuth, "Context Text", in *Art After Philosophy and After*.

²⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations / Transl. by G.E.M. Anscombe*, no. 304.

²⁷ Goldie and Schellekens, "Matter and Meaning in the Work of Art", in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, 135.

scientific paradigm which the structure of this work (regardless of my own attempts to subvert it) inescapably implies."²⁸ This is what drew me to study Kosuth; his influential misstep and subsequent reevaluation. The process of studying Kosuth's art, and problems, brings one into the heart of artistic practice as it stands today, art as a philosophical problem.

In 1969 he had written a seminal essay on art in *Art After Philosophy*, but in 1975 he restructured his whole conception of art in the essay *The Artist as Anthropologist*. In a relatively short time, Kosuth reconstructed the basis for his art practice; he did not entirely discard conceptualism but turned toward a more humanized art practice.

Chapter Two: Ambiguity

This brings me to the second of my own artworks that I will discuss, titled *Eldhús/Sanctuary* (2014) (fig. 5). It is based in a process and on a simple idea. In a course we were prescribed two words uttered by our classmates, randomly assigned to us by our professors. We were to create work based in some form on these two words. I cut a sentence documenting the event into a rectangular piece of sheet metal and hung it on a wall within sight of the place where the assignment was conceived. The text is as follows:

"YLVA SAGÐI ELDHÚS,
SARA SAGÐI SANCTUARY."

Translated into English:

"YLVA SAID KITCHEN,
SARA SAID SANCTUARY."

I had remembered who said "Sanctuary" but did not remember exactly who had said the word "Kitchen". It turned out that Ylva did not say it. This work presents an event or a document of an event, spoken words, made into an object. It is a very

²⁸ Kosuth, "A Notice to the Public", *Art After Philosophy and After*, 104.

physical object, heavy, crude, some might say ugly, others not, in an industrial material that is not usually used in this way.

This work satisfies the conceptual idea of artworks commenting on or questioning the nature of art, but does not follow the analytical mode of Kosuth's early work. This work is about itself; it comments on its own creation, its history is inherent in its form, it is *merely* a document, but suggesting something more via its material form, which, as it is an aesthetic object, allows the viewer to engage with it aesthetically. The work does not present a picture, necessarily, but language that was spoken, then misremembered, described, and then placed away from its conception. It is not an attempt at objective record, but rather an inquiry into the ambiguity of our understanding and control of language. It is paradoxical, tautological. For the viewer who has, for example, not read the accompanying literature, and only sees the text and the sheet metal this work is puzzling; it could be seen as a poem, or a memorial, but the text is difficult to decipher and understand, it is a play, not on logic necessarily, but on the emotional, sensuous, engagement the viewer (who is also reader) puts into it.

This work could imply that as language comes into the world it is "made", as the work of J. L. Austin postulates, it is an act, a making, as well as a meaning.²⁹ But the work also implies, with the misremembered or ambiguous written statement, that at that point of creation it is not a strict truth but a function of our imperfect human activity; i.e. a 'real' thing, perceived and comprehended, but ultimately false and narrowly understood, if at all, in the context of language and human activity. Context creates this work, either how it is presented to the viewer, or how the viewer, with his/her history understands it; it is not limited to an art context per se, the viewer determines that context, and how the work is received. A text could follow the work, a sort of Lewittian proposal of an aesthetically presented idea or dialogue.³⁰ This work enters into a conversation with Kosuth's work, for example with his simple but interesting 1991 work *Words Are Deeds* (fig. 6), where that sentence is presented in neon lighting. In contrast to his earlier neon work from the late sixties, this work is firmly entrenched in both the conceptual idea of artwork commenting on the nature of art, while also admitting a human subjectivity and ambiguity of language, while not

²⁹ Austin, J. L., *How to Do Things with Words: Second Edition*, Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2 edition, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

³⁰ Mooney, *The Evolution of Conceptual Art in America*, 55.

needing but a minimal amount of accompanying literature. As an aside, Kosuth used neon in the beginning of his career because it had no history in art, and presented the words simply,³¹ but obviously the characteristics of neon, its light, its sound, its heat, all make the viewing of the work a subjective experience (in his more recent exhibitions Kosuth uses different colored neon tubing to emphasize this).

My work is then based not in analytics but in a "continental" tradition of thought, focused not on Wittgenstein's logic, but rather his language games, on a sort of deconstruction of a certain history newly passed. One could mention Roland Barthes in this relation. His writing: *From Work to Text*, 1971, discusses the differentiation, or duality, of a reading. He writes of what exists as "work", the physical representation of text, or any type of analogous reading (such as artworks), what is presented to a reader; and the "text" it can produce. That is: "The text can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign."³² The "text" is plural, its meaning can be multifold,³³ whereas the "work" is caught up in a process of filiation.³⁴ "...A *determination* of the work by the world (by race, then by history), a *consecution* of works amongst themselves, and a *conformity* of the work to the author."³⁵ This "work" is normally the object of consumption³⁶, the metal sheet being an art object, consumed, as well as the text, ambiguously, presented. The "text" is not truth, as Kosuth attempted to find, and failed, but in a sense *meaning*. "The difference is this: the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the text is a methodological field."³⁷ This is the basis from which my work can be interpreted, and the direction Kosuth heads towards in his post-Art as Philosophy practice.

Works such as *Four Colors Four Words* (1966) (fig. 7), where four words are presented in four different colored neon tubing, and *A Subject Self-Defined* (1967) (fig. 8), which presents the same sentence as the title in neon tubing as well, can be said to, retroactively, present a conception of meaning making that is not strictly analytical; considering that what the text displays is not essentially what the artwork

³¹ Murray Brown, Griselda, "Joseph Kosuth at Sprueth Magers", 5:56, December 5, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IspGesmq6xY&feature=youtube_gdata_player.s.

³² Barthes, Roland, "From Work to Text", *Image, Music, Text / Roland Barthes; Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 158.

³³ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 156–157.

presents. Kosuth did not change the material or medium he worked with but changed the *intention* he maintained for his works.

Kosuth was still in touch with Wittgenstein; his work was a sort of language game, in the way Wittgenstein defined it, a *play* within the language game. Kosuth's works attempt to be the *object-texts* meant to display the *unsayable* Wittgensteinian area in-between, what we can, in the language of Barthes, call the "work" and "text", which Kosuth intended the place of art to be.

If, as Kosuth found, art cannot be strictly analytical, objective, if it cannot exist outside of the human being, then it is a subjective, social construct, dependent on human beings and the cultural horizon, to borrow Kosuth's oft used term. The artwork, vitally, no longer is posed as one-sided static truth, but becomes multifold, an entity constantly in flux. Seeing Kosuth's work in this light presents a more complicated view of the practice. The common critique against conceptual art, their art not being art but philosophy, or that the conceptualists took a privileged, hallow, position above the public and attempted to exclude the subjectivity of the viewer,³⁸ dissipates to some extent. Now Kosuth questions the nature of art as part of the culture around it, the "cultural horizon." His work takes on an ambiguity, an ambiguity found also in Wittgenstein, with his *unsayable* thought, and multiple meanings, where, using the language as a medium, the works take on a different dialogue, by measuring his 'meaning creation' as part of the cultural horizon where art resides; an intellectual interest has been incorporated into the hierarchy of art, not reigning above but existing alongside the traditional modes of interpretation; "And intellectual interest, after all, is what conceptual art is aiming for."³⁹

After Kosuth's almost Copernican turn, it is interesting to look at his early work to examine how it might be seen. The work might be flawed scientism to Kosuth but one cannot dismiss this work; it is precisely their "flawed nature" that gives them both an art historical intrigue, and as seen from the post-anthropological era that Kosuth entered into, a validity as dialogue. The cultural horizon Kosuth speaks of now *includes* his earlier work; the work both comments on and constitutes the horizon. The earlier works are flawed from a critical, analytical, perspective, unworthy propositions, but the way in which it is seen now has fundamentally changed. The artworks are necessarily in the anthropological sphere Kosuth speaks of,

³⁸ Mooney, *The Evolution of Conceptual Art in America*, 106.

³⁹ Goldie and Schellekens, "Creativity and Conceptual art", in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, 236.

proving the unrealistic power of the artists' intent. They are flawed precisely because the language they use and the images they present, and represent, are now seen from this anthropological angle. Work like, for example, *Box, Cube, Empty, Clear, Glass – a Description* (1965) (fig. 9), is now not seen to present an analytical proposition (it could be argued that it never did), but a rather appropriate study on the multifold nature of sign, signifier, and signified, while also implying Wittgenstein's idea of the meaning of a word lies in its use. Kosuth's language games, his *play*, took on a greater area of meaning, his text no longer held a filial limitation to certain almost metaphysical notions and to the artist, but rather his language returned from whence it came, to context, to ambiguity.

Chapter three: Subjectivity

The third work that I present is *Signs & Symbols Signs & Symbols* (2013) (fig. 10). The work is a copying from memory of a short story titled "Signs and Symbols" by the Russian-born writer Vladimir Nabokov, written in 1948. The work brings together ideas and emphases Kosuth deals with, as well as the problems conceptual artwork has had to address.

The work is presented in book form to the viewer. It is an unadorned book with two chapters of equal length. The first chapter presents the original Nabokov text. The second chapter presents the re-creation. In executing my text I read the story numerous times and then transcribed it from memory as exactly alike the original as I could. The work can be said to lie in the actual act of transcribing; the text produced is coincidental. The main purpose of the text is to allow the viewer to perceive this act of re-creation or translation, to put before us, simply, the process and product of the idea. The story progression is rather direct and thus easy to recollect, but the stylistic rendering of the text and the exact words and language used in the story was impossible to copy exactly. The resulting text was a disordered, inexact rendering, resembling the original, and obviously reproduced from the Nabokov story, but a different text entirely.

The work begins as an idea, an experiment. It is still based in a philosophical mode of inquiry, in which a question, or a proposition, is put forth encouraging the viewer/reader to 'think' about the work, not simply see it, but consider it; this is not an analytical or logical inquiry, rather a process based in a "continental", more post-

structuralist tradition where a complex multifold meaning is created by the viewer/reader reacting and relating to the work.

This work has many precedents of course. One of the obvious themes can be seen as the act of creation – originality, influence and memory. One is never creating absolutely 'new' work, there are always influences and great work thrives on the influence of other engaging work. One can name many examples of this type of process, such as the reproductions Van Gogh produced from lithographs of Millet⁴⁰, the repetition of Picasso, or the ready-mades of Duchamp; one can mention Warhol or Sherrie Levine. Writers such as James Joyce, who wrote *Ulysses* from Homer's *Odyssey*, and modern writers like Michel Houellebecq who copied whole pages of technical information from Wikipedia and incorporated into his own novels. This idea of commenting on existing work, or working directly from another source is potent; using this, what Gérard Genette calls, hypotext,⁴¹ is an age-old function of creation. Particularly interesting, however, is the post-structuralist readings of works like these.

In executing the work *Signs & Symbols Signs & Symbols* I have attempted the experiment of Pierre Menard in the 1939 text by Borges, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*. In the story Borges writes of Pierre Menard, a twentieth-century writer, who attempts to re-create, in the original 17th century vernacular, Cervantes' famous work *Don Quixote*. Borges writes of Menard, he "did not want to compose another Quixote—which is easy— but the Quixote itself."⁴² In a similar way I set out to re-create Nabokov's *Signs and Symbols*, but it proved an unfeasible goal, as Menard states: "I should only have to be immortal to carry it out."⁴³ I could, theoretically, immerse myself in the life of Nabokov and in the story and recreate the original text, as Menard thought of doing, or I could commit it to memory and simply re-write it, but that would be an experiment of re-creating history "and, consequently, less interesting—than to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard."⁴⁴ What was accomplished in executing this work was a whole *new* work; not the same work as Nabokov, but an original text, a new story, translated through my memory and grasp of Nabokovian style. Even had I managed

⁴⁰ Harris, Nathaniel, *The Masterworks of Van Gogh*, Parragon, Bristol, 1996, p. 221.

⁴¹ Genette, Gérard, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Channa Newman & Claude Doubinsky translated, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1997.

⁴² Borges, Jorge Luis, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote", in *Collected Fictions*, Andrew Hurley translated, Penguin, London, 2000.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the impossible task of creating “the Quixote itself”, that is to say, if I managed to write the Nabokov text exactly as Nabokov did, it would still be *my* text. Just as if Pierre Menard had written “the Quixote,” the exact same text would be interpreted differently if the reader knows that Menard had written it in the twentieth century as opposed to Cervantes' in the seventeenth.

My work seems to suggest that each person who reads a particular text "creates" his or her own meaning. By reading, or viewing an artwork, the reader transfers his or her own history and thought into the text and thereby re-creates, as Pierre Menard sought to do, the work entirely. The intention of the author is always to be skewed; the truth the artist intends only exists within the particular artist. This is one of the problems Kosuth encountered with his analytical art. We have moved into a post-structuralist area of inquisition. Here Barthes is relevant. His writings in *From Work to Text* concern this dual nature of a text; here my "work" is presented quite clearly and is very simple in execution, whereas the "text" that can be read from this artwork contains multiple meanings. This work presents a discourse on filiation. There is no clear *author* of my text; if the reader were solely presented my text there would be no guarantee that none but the most astute Nabokov habitué would recognize the nature of the text. Another pertinent text from Barthes is his 1968 essay, *The Death of the Author*. Written around the same time as Kosuth started turning away from his "single 'theological' meaning."⁴⁵ Barthes postulates that the author, or writer, of a particular text, is not the sole owner of meaning, "the 'message' of the Author-God,"⁴⁶ but that a text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."⁴⁷ Even if the reader/viewer knows the author and his or her intent it has little say in what the reader/viewer will construe from the reading/viewing. This potent thought is poignant in relation to Kosuth's artistic practice, as well as my own.

Barthes writes that by refusing this "secret, ultimate meaning,"⁴⁸ the text liberates an "activity that is truly revolutionary" since to refuse to fix meaning is, "in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law."⁴⁹ This is ultimately what Kosuth and the early conceptualist artists came up against. This is the powerful,

⁴⁵ Barthes, "The Death of the Author", *Image, Music, Text / Roland Barthes ; Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, 146.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

political, thought that engenders the conflict that the artist must struggle with in his creation of meaning, the potency of the artwork. This interpretation of is also useful for Kosuth in the way it attacks critics whose vocation is to do this very thing, fix meaning. This opens the work to all and every reading. Nothing is hidden; nothing is lost in the texts' inscription on the reader.⁵⁰ The object of a writing is not 'literature' but *language*,⁵¹ a text is made into multiple writings of which the reader holds together.⁵² In each reading of *Don Quixote* the reader embodies Pierre Menard's "futile" experiment; in each viewing of an artwork it is re-created, again. This is a powerful thought, much more so than the positivist function of Kosuth's early work.

This is the focus of my work embodying Nabokov. This thought liberates meaning in the text-based work of Kosuth and brings forward a new, difficult, direction of interpretation in which validity and meaning are more difficult to determine precisely. Kosuth realizes his misinterpretation of Wittgenstein and his thoughts on language and moves forward in reaction to the culture around him; in a time where artist began to form their ideas from Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes,⁵³ with less input by the analytical philosophers. Instead of Kosuth being able to deny certain artworks or art forms, their position as art, as he did in his essay *Art After Philosophy*, declaring painting useless,⁵⁴ he is, seemingly, not able to exclude anything at all. The purpose of his art becomes a much more human activity, and also more ambiguous in relation to intent and meaning. His works that include quotations, from cartoon strips, ancient Greek philosophers, deconstructionist thinkers, writers, work such as "*Pretext*" project (1989) (fig. 11), with quotes from Nietzsche, or *Ulysses, 18 Titles and Hours* (1998) (fig. 12), where Kosuth works with, displays, text from James Joyce's masterwork *Ulysses*; or a more recent work, '*Texts (Waiting for-) for Nothing, Samuel Beckett, in play,*' (2011) (fig. 13), where he presents a reading of two of Beckett's works, who was himself presenting work in which the understanding of the reader was just as important, probably more so, than whatever ideas became the work at start. The art process becomes much more connected with history (just as how Borges, ingeniously, uses *Don Quixote*, a work which is heavily self-referential, as characters in the narrative come to read the book itself, among other things). These

⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁵¹ Ibid., 146.

⁵² Ibid., 148.

⁵³ Mooney, *The Evolution of Conceptual Art in America*, 91.

⁵⁴ Kosuth, "Painting Versus Art Versus Culture (or why you can paint if you want to, but it probably won't matter)", in *Art After Philosophy and After*.

works by Kosuth can be viewed as simply presenting a reading; presenting reading as art, in which Kosuth strives to present this *unsayable* area of, multidimensional, humanistic, meaning, created by the viewer; an examination of the processes of art.

These works become richer as one studies them, especially in contrast with Kosuth's early work. He moves away from his, retrospectively, misguided attempts at objective truth in art, to a process of, one can say, "arranging what we have always known."⁵⁵ A recognition of the history of the artist and viewer, while also showing that this history does not "fix" meaning either. Kosuth no longer tries to dictate meaning, rather he explores the *way* in which art can or does present or create meaning.

Chapter Four: Sovereignty in Interdependency

The last work I will present, which is of my own making, is called, *What is there, then*, (2014) (figs. 14a & 14b), and is an installation of mirrors in a space at the Fine Arts Academy of Iceland. The space is a small space, roughly 25m², with windows on half of the walls. From four separate mirrors I constructed a very large mirror of a size 2m x 350m and placed it outside in front of the space, some three meters from the windows, level with the floor that the gallery visitors would stand on as they looked out the window. There was nothing inside of the space itself except for the title of the work on a small card on the wall. One would walk into the gallery space and look out the window into the mirror and see oneself standing inside of the space. The mirror was angled so that that the viewer could see almost the whole of the gallery space in the mirror, from the ground and almost to the top of the structure. On the sides of the mirror you could see beyond the gallery space, a road, grass, part of a mountain, the sky, the sun setting, etc.

This work is very simple in presentation and in essence wants to *show* rather than dictate something definite. To a certain extent the title hints at this, ending with an open comma. You go into the space, meant to be the place where one encounters the artwork, but you must look outside to see it, that is, if that is the work. One cannot precisely locate the work itself; it includes the whole of the display, the space, the mirror, what the mirror presents, as well as the space between the mirror and the

⁵⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* / Transl. by G.E.M. Anscombe, no. 109.

viewer. Whatever the viewer comes to see in the work, it is not a singular meaning, nor easy to ascertain. The work is meant to be ambiguous and to present a certain paradox. The paradox, and tautology, being a useful function of mapping, or showing, the limits or boundaries of meaning in art; Kosuth being, of course familiar with this type of paradox and tautology. His work *Language Must Speak for Itself* (1991) (fig. 15), presents the title text in blue neon lettering. One can speak of Kosuth's *intent* here being easily discernible; he tells us that language must speak for itself – but language, supposedly, does do so, and it *is doing* so. Kosuth does not mean to simply tell us this, but means for us to wonder, after reading this sentence, what does it mean? Who is speaking? What is this language, this artwork, communicating? The viewer is confronted with a paradox, a tautology, in which the, seemingly only, way forward is a study of the language and being that produces this paradox. One can contrast this work with the, possibly less layered, but still bluntly paradoxical work, *Neon* (1965) (fig. 15), which presents the word "NEON" in white or grey neon lettering. In the more recent work Kosuth gives the viewer more to work with, not, simply, a paradox (if a paradox can indeed be considered simple), which could serve to close off further inquiry, but a layered "text", with a multiplicity of threads that "run (like the threads of a stocking),"⁵⁶ as Barthes writes, to any number of places through language and the reader. This is what this last work is meant to do. To show the process of meaning creation, of viewing, representing, to include an idea, which serves as the center of the work, but to let the viewer ultimately see what he or she will in the work. The mirror presents the viewer with himself, the creator of the work.

The title of this work is a part of a sentence found in Michel Foucault's text *Las Meninas*, written in 1966, as he asks: "What is there, then, we ask at last, in that place which is completely inaccessible because it is exterior to the picture, yet is prescribed by all the lines of its composition?"⁵⁷ He is studying the remarkable 1656 painting by Diego Velázquez (fig. 16) where the subjects painted by Velázquez all look out of the frame, directly at the viewer. Velázquez, and the whole composition, stand, seemingly, before a mirror. As Foucault states, "the question immediately becomes a double one...The entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is

⁵⁶ Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image, Music, Text / Roland Barthes ; Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, 147.

⁵⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 13.

itself a scene."⁵⁸ This painting can represent many of the elements previously discussed here. This area that Foucault tries to disseminate could be seen as Wittgenstein's *unsayable*, or the *process to be shown* that Kosuth wishes to present, for example, or the paradox of self-referentiality. What Velázquez paints is seemingly, in the mirror, but as we, the audience stand before it, he looks at us, and paints us. Velázquez turns his subject around, no position is certain; one cannot be sure what this object is showing.

Foucault writes that "this spiral shell presents us with the entire cycle of representation: "the gaze, the palette and brush, the canvas innocent of signs (these are the material tools of representation), the paintings, the reflections, the real man (the completed representation, but as it were freed from its illusory or truthful contents which are juxtaposed to it)."⁵⁹ But as we study the work further, look at it longer "the representation dissolves again;"⁶⁰ we are unsure of our position. This is what I sought to replicate, this uncertainty of our position, where we stand in relation to the artwork, in relation to what the artwork does and how representation of an idea constitutes itself in art. Velázquez represents representation⁶¹ and this is ultimately what I would seek to represent in my homage to Velázquez, and Foucault. According to Foucault, Velázquez depicts the viewer as subject and sovereign of this realm⁶², which is in direct opposition to the early ideas of Kosuth, which inspired, in part, the work *Institution* mentioned earlier, but it is representative of the thought pervading the following three works I have presented and the ideas that Kosuth came to adhere to. The viewer has become subject and sovereign of the artwork; the crowned viewer creates the work which constitutes, at any given time, what we call art, *the meaning is in the use* as Wittgenstein writes, "and the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*."⁶³ The meaning lies within the viewer.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 16.

⁶² Ibid., 14.

⁶³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* / Transl. by G.E.M. Anscombe, no. 43.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored the ways in which conceptual art has sought to determine meaning in art and how this conception has changed in nature since the 1960s. Joseph Kosuth may have started out proposing a flawed conception of art, but the idea of art as idea has firmly implanted itself in art practice. Conceptual art finalized the process of the dematerialization of the art object that put the idea of art at the center of all artistic creation and inquiry. It was a very interesting time for art and its consequences, for good or for bad, can most likely be seen in the way the viewer of art approaches the act of perceiving an art work. The most pertinent question he or she asks is not *how* was it made? But *why* was it made? What is this thing that is presented to me? What does it mean? *Is it art?*⁶⁴ This shift of focus is what interests me in Kosuth and his art, and is what I seek to explore in my own artwork. The art practices of Kosuth also explore one of the fundamental disagreements that philosophy has had over the years between the analytical and the continental philosophers. The history of concept art efficiently exposes this rift. It interests me that, as Simon Critchley writes, one of the reasons for continental philosophy to be so actively concerned with matters related to non-philosophy is as a response to nihilism.⁶⁵ The continental philosophers portray the arts as a sort of meaning of life, which one can relate to, and which makes the question "what is art" both unimportant and tremendously powerful at the same time.

Ultimately the romance of the art student in me attracts me to conceptual art, to Kosuth, and the philosophy of art. The fundamental questions are always the most interesting and in the beginning one always just wants an education, to push up against the boundaries. What this essay concludes upon is that, today, there is no objectivity in art, no fixed truth, but possibly there exists a meaning, a subjective, ambiguous, language of art which is full of contradictions, and the search for this meaning does not have an end.

⁶⁴ Mooney, *The Evolution of Conceptual Art in America*, 118.

⁶⁵ Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 87.

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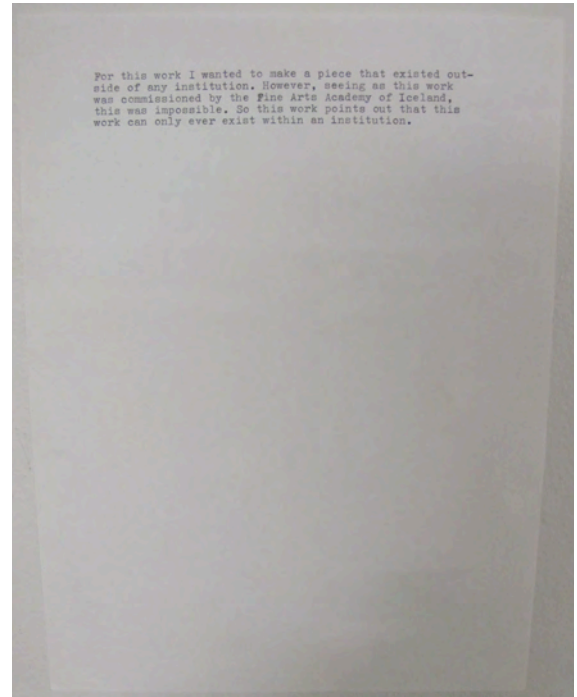
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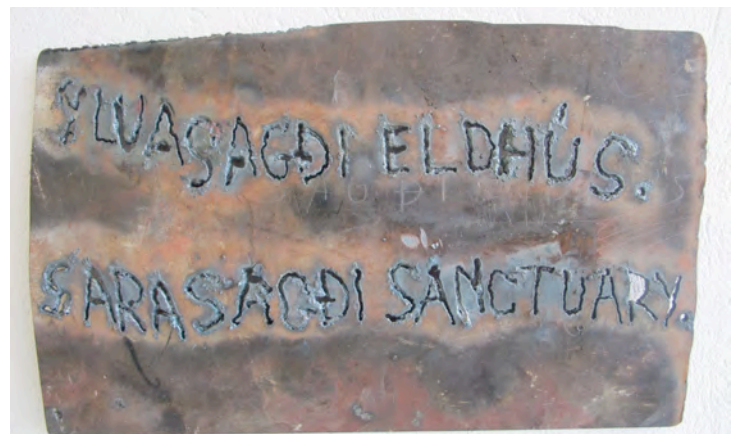
2. René Magritte,
La trahison des images
Oil on canvas
1928-29



3. Starkaður Sigurðarson
Institution
Typewriter on paper
2013



4. Joseph Kosuth
One and Three Chairs
Mixed Media
1965



5. Starkaður Sigurðarson
Eldhús/Sanctuary
Sheet metal
2014



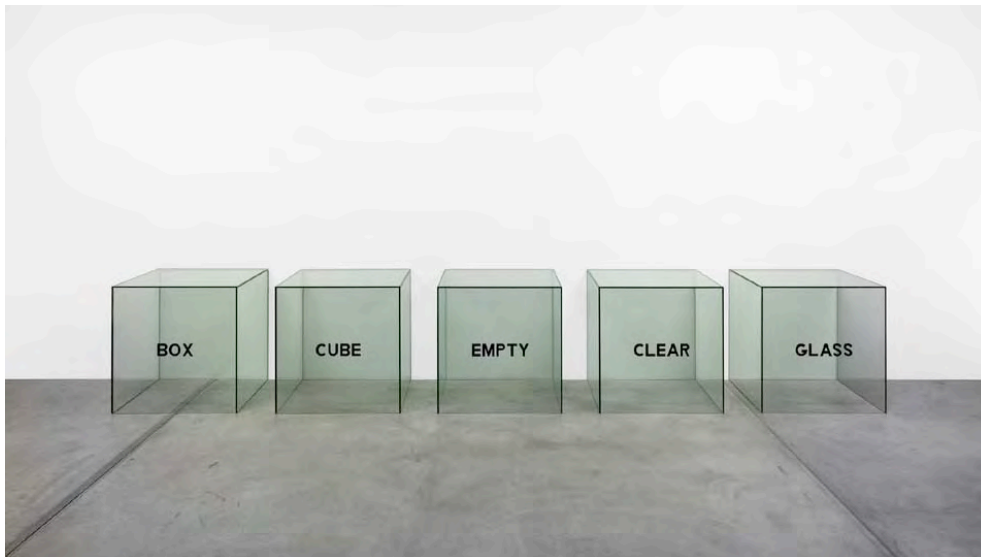
6. Joseph Kosuth
Words are deeds
Neon tubing
1991



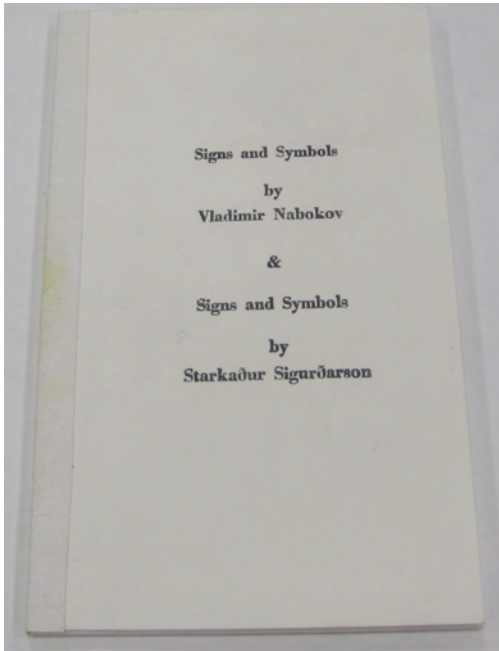
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Four Colors Four Words
Neon tubing
1966



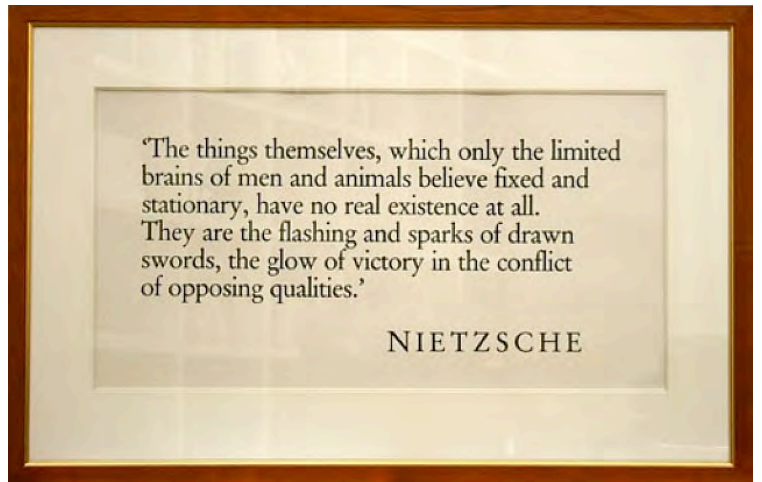
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A Subject Self Defined
Neon tubing
1967



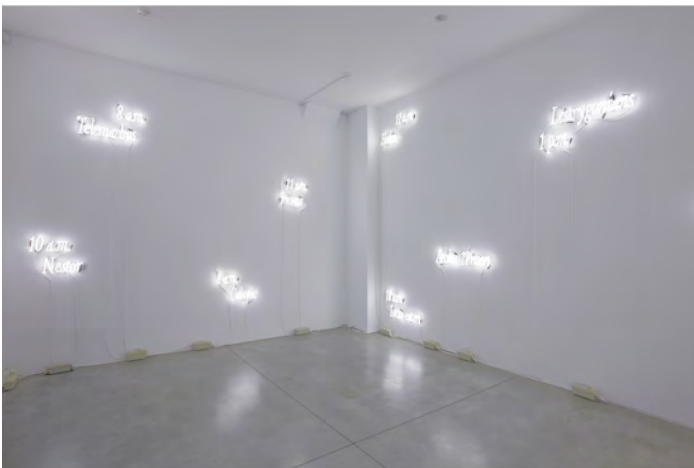
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Box, Cube, Empty, Clear, Glass – a Description
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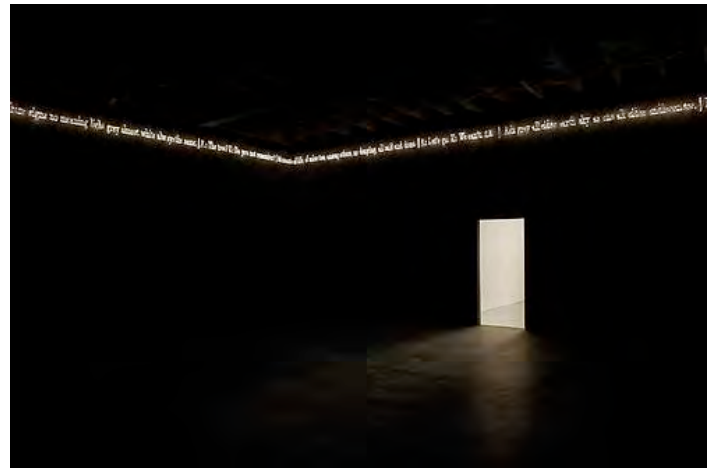
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13. Joseph Kosuth
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14a. Starkaður Sigurðarson
What is there, then,
Mixed media
2014



14b. Starkaður Sigurðarson
What is there, then,
Mixed media
2014



15. Joseph Kosuth
Neon
Neon tubing and generator
1965



16. Diego Velázquez
Las Meninas
Oil on canvas
1656