

## The material of meaning: Illuminating the art of Joseph Kosuth

Natalie King



**Joseph Kosuth is candid, astute and erudite.** At the time of our meeting in Sydney, I was reading Pierre Cabanne's dialogue with Marcel Duchamp and the latter's views on the elastic definition of the word 'intelligence': 'There is something like an explosion in the meaning of certain words: they have a greater value than their meaning in the dictionary.' Kosuth relishes linguistic philosophy as I discovered in our interview on the occasion of his exhibition "'An Interpretation of This Title" Nietzsche, Darwin and the Paradox of Content' at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney.

**Natalie King:** Can you discuss the conceptual underpinnings of your early work?

**Joseph Kosuth:** I wanted to show that one could make a work that had a life in the culture as art which didn't constitute art simply by *a priori* established ideas of the authority of the form or the medium. Then, as art, it could be free to ask questions because its meaning wasn't constructed by citing its own authority as a form, like painting for instance. As an example, your aunt or uncle living just outside of Alice Springs doesn't know anything about art. But if they walk into someone's living room and they see a painting hanging on the wall, they know immediately that it's art. That baggage of prior meaning, that inherited valise of presumptions based on media and tradition eclipses the meaning that *you* want to assert as an individual artist.

**NK:** Is this why you chose to work in neon?

**JK:** In 1965 I wanted to make works which were tautological and self-referential that would bare the device of the system of art. Works like *One and three chairs* were one way I did it, but also neon was very useful for this because it references popular culture. One is familiar with it as signage, but it was not a fine-art material. There were also a lot of qualities I could separate and articulate as components – glass, electrical, letters, English – and I needed

qualities, aspects, to unpack. An early example, *One and eight – a description*, 1965, is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, purchased from Leo Castelli in 1974.

But it's necessary to get rid of this idea that I'm some sort of neon artist if you want to understand any of my work. Modernism taught us to see art as the limits of the medium, that being an artist was being a painter, a sculptor or even a photographer. Conceptual art introduced the idea that we were simply artists, and how you made work was at the service of *why* you made work. Our real material was meaning. In the 1960s I saw that these modernist issues alienated us from the world we lived in, that it led to formalism and formalism led to empty, meaningless decoration. Modernism suggests you work with a medium and the medium defines you. I've done a lot of neon work in the past decade or two because I began to be interested in public projects, and neon functions well in large-scale works, but half of my work isn't neon.

**NK:** Have you exhibited before in Australia?

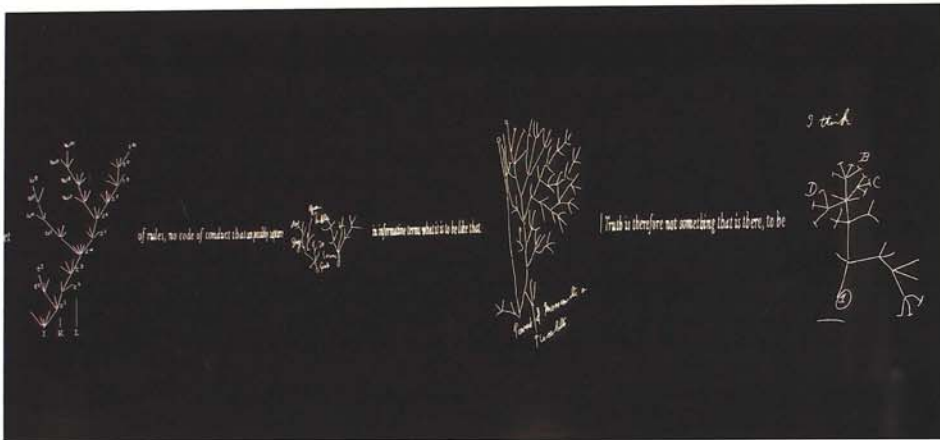
**JK:** Apart from my current exhibition at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney, the only other show was in 1970 at Bruce Pollard's Pinacotheca Gallery, Melbourne. This was one of fifteen shows I did around the world in many locations, including Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, Oxford University, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Kunsthalle Bern. Beginning in 1968, 'The Second Investigation' consisted of ads employing the Synopsis of Categories by Roget for his *Thesaurus*. In effect the work was essentially a description of the world which I put back into the world as fragments of its own description. In the Melbourne gallery, for example, there were labels installed which showed the local Australian project (using fourteen newspapers around the country) plus fourteen other labels with the information of the other museum locations around the world and the projects they supported in that country.

**NK:** Was this project connected to your activities with Art & Language?

**JK:** No, it preceded it, but I was smart enough not to limit myself to Art & Language. I had very strong points of view which, frankly, would often get diluted or mutated in the group dynamic. I enjoyed much of it intellectually, but when it came to actual work in the end you still have a work being made by a committee. Some of the stronger personalities, like Michael Baldwin, had no real practice of their own, and basically wanted a viral-like relationship with those who had one, such as Terry Atkinson or myself. I had my own practice before I ever met them and the larger group evolved out of art school as a collaborative activity. I had both a theory *and* a practice (my article 'Art after Philosophy' was pre-Art & Language), and I quickly came to wonder why I needed Michael on my back. Terry came to the same conclusion even before I did. He was always the artist of the British team and had been Michael's teacher at Coventry College of Art. Even though we came to a joint agreement to end Art & Language in 1975, Michael, with the support of a couple of others, picked the name up again with the return to painting in the early 1980s and did these embarrassing and disastrous group paintings under the name of Art & Language contrary to that history. I think one can safely say they have more in common with Julian Schnabel than previous Art & Language work.

**NK:** Did you have a connection with Ian Burn who has been an important figure in Australian conceptual art?

**JK:** Ian should be seen as significant because he did a lot of important things. So certainly his high reputation here in Australia is well deserved, considering what he did when he did it. But I wouldn't be honest if I didn't confess that he and I were always at odds. Ian and Mel Ramsden sought me out when they came to New York and I took them under my wing. Aspects of their work was for

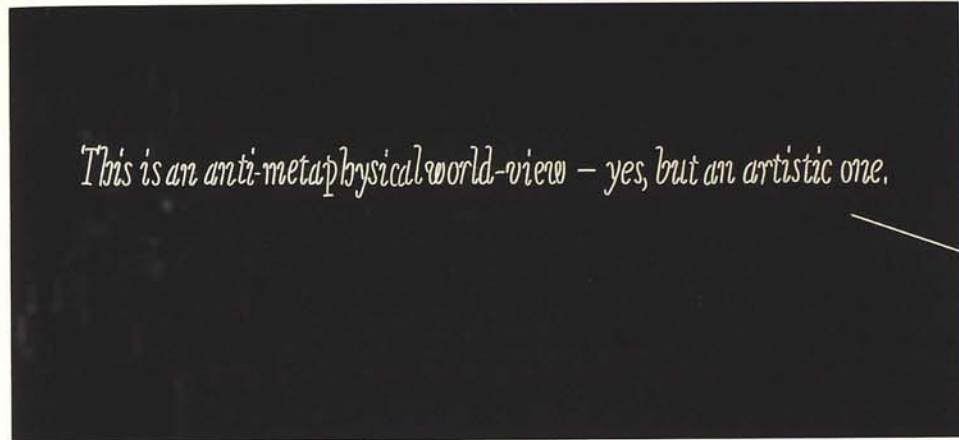


me interestingly parallel to what I had done some years before and we shared a discourse, something rare in the New York art world at that time. I ghost-curated the first conceptual art exhibition at the New York Cultural Center in 1970 called 'Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects' and they helped me do that. The idea of an artist actually curating a show at that time was unheard of, and Donald Karshan, the curator of the New York Cultural Center, let me do the show under his name. This was the first institutional show of conceptual art, and it preceded 'Information' at the Museum of Modern Art and 'Software' at the Jewish Museum. I developed a mentoring relationship with Ian and Mel but later on they apparently felt as though their souls were slightly stolen by their association with me and then, of course, patricide set in!

My basic problem with Ian was that he was, by nature, somewhat of a Stalinist – everything tended to be a little too right angle, appropriate or not, and the issues were always reduced to black and white. I was very convinced about my own body of ideas that I was fighting for, but it was obvious to me anyway that the important aspects were, in fact, the areas of grey. This is where the questions were, where the work had to be done. The 'black-and-white' approach rather eliminated them before you started. Finally, in the last years of Art & Language there was a central committee mentality of rules and procedures and forced company statements and in that environment Ian thrived. Ultimately, Ian left and began to work with unions, which many of us took as a fairly logical consequence of where he had been heading. Part of the romanticism which fuelled much of Art & Language was Rimbaud-like, with the implication that leaving art, or not having a practice to begin with, was the greatest of artistic gestures. To my mind such romanticism was already old by the 1970s and rather used up. But Ian had made his contribution by that time in any case.

There was a point at which I was fed up with the direction of Art & Language and Michael's attempts at rather heavy-handed control over an allegedly 'collaborative' enterprise. They were all in England and we were in New York. So I began a magazine in New York called *The Fox*. Named in reference to Isaiah Berlin's *The Hedgehog and The Fox*, I put up the money, designed it and invited people in – not all, being from Art & Language. Michael was very threatened by it, for good reason, and worked feverishly to sabotage it, ultimately with success unfortunately. Besides the embarrassment of a group of middle-class kids in SoHo and Oxfordshire discovering Marx a bit late, the behaviour that this discovery seemed to justify remains their worst legacy. There were only three issues of *The Fox* and then the magazine, as well as Art & Language, had to break up.

But still, one can safely say that not very much accurate art history has been done on this, unfortunately. Most of the writing so far has been a *parti pris* – texts generated by Michael, et al. through Charles Harrison or others. I can imagine his discomfort at the possibility that the actual history would come out. Terry has written about Art & Language well; he's quite straight about it. Few probably know that Harald Szeemann invited me into documenta V in 1972 and I found out that Art & Language was not invited to participate. So I said: 'Harry, do you mind if I invite them into my room?' And he replied: 'Joseph, it's your room. If that's what you want to do with it it's completely up to you.' So I invited them in. Not long before I had begun a project with Michael in New York that we called 'The Index Work'. One sees in retrospect how much this work was related to my own 'Investigations' I was doing at the time. I guess they understood the gift that it was as they later made this work important, and, of course, to do that they had to play down my role in relation to it once I left Art & Language. It was basically a project that Michael and I did together in New York at my studio, with me having the role of



the artist on this one instead of Terry, and the rest of Art & Language coming in later to flesh it out.

Another story involved a historical conceptual art show at Musée d'Art Contemporain (CAPC) in Bordeaux with a large drawing from 'The Index Work' exhibited. And, although you could see my handwriting all over it, Art & Language had left my name off the label, and the curators at CAPC simply didn't know. I once told Charles: 'If you were a doctor of anything else they'd take away your licence to practise.' This was because, while an otherwise accomplished art historian, he permitted himself to become what amounted to the Goebbels of Art & Language, and it was a pity to see him do that. I had brought him into Art & Language, which I always regretted.

Probably the main downside of this chaotic story is that the confusion risks colouring the historical value of *all* of Art & Language activity, since obviously many people don't know the difference between the authentic earlier group and the paintings made later under the same name. You asked about Art & Language because of Ian, but I haven't had contact with them for years, or thought about them much either, fortunately. But one doesn't easily forget such an experience. I don't think one can doubt the importance of Art & Language even if some of the practitioners were quite nasty guys.

**NK:** It's interesting for me to hear the intensity of your recollections of interpersonal relationships.

**JK:** Do you really think so? I'm basically suspicious. My generation inherited a legacy of making art that was based on expressionist monographs and, at heart, essentially biography that was not useful, at least to me, for the kind of approach to art I felt was needed. But what I'm speaking of is the history of a certain kind of practice, the history of which deserves to be told more accurately than we have seen. Frankly, I think the biographical road to approaching art is really for a general audience that isn't all that interested in art to begin with.

As a young artist, people that I respected such as Ad Reinhardt and Donald Judd admonished this false populism, where personal history matters more than ideas. One speaks of the *life* of Van Gogh; there's not a lot one can say about those paintings even with a publishing industry busy nonetheless. Ad, who had befriended me while I was still a student, would tell me some incredible stories. Journalists were always trying to get pictures of him shaving or walking his dog to show he was human!

**NK:** I wanted to ask you about the work that you first showed at Anna Schwartz Gallery in Sydney, *Clear words, clear sight*, 2007. I am interested in the economy of words in relationship to the complexity of your philosophical enterprise.

**JK:** As a constructive device it was about putting together two quotations from two writers, both being representative of diverse locations within a certain body of thinking. The third meaning, that surplus one which comes from the juxtaposition of the two, is my construction. For me, the idea of getting to the very extreme with two short statements and juxtaposing them was interesting. I haven't been able to do that many works in this series because obviously they're hard to find. So this series continues, but slowly. My new work at the Louvre – *Ni apparence ni illusion*, 2009 – was quite a different approach, utilising my own comments about approaching the context and implications of the work itself, whereas my latest installation at Anna Schwartz Gallery in Sydney draws on Darwin and Nietzsche. This work, originally a commission by Juliana Engberg for the Edinburgh International Festival, was installed at the University of Edinburgh, where Darwin began his studies and his work. Nietzsche was both attracted to Darwin and highly critical of what he saw as Darwin's compromises in the name of science and polite society. The work, however, ultimately reflects on the role of the artist in society, from Nietzsche contrasting it with science – as represented by Darwin – and the role of art.



pages 592-3 and opposite  
 Joseph Kosuth, 'An Interpretation of this Title' Nietzsche, Darwin and the paradox of content, installation detail, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney, 2010, courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery. Photograph Paul Green.

My philosophical interests began many years ago with Wittgenstein and language philosophy. It has remained an interest which I draw on. Following from the later 'anthropological' Wittgenstein of the 'Investigations', I studied cultural anthropology at The New School for Social Research in New York with Stanley Diamond, who was involved with a group called Reinventing Anthropology with a focus on Marx the philosopher rather than Marx the agent of political change. That is, a philosophical line which goes from Vico to Rousseau to Marx. I think now one can fairly say that Marx was a political disaster, even having the most honourable of good intentions. His 'positive' program provided little understanding of culture and the importance of its formative political role and that is what unravelling the rest of his social and political goals. The value of Marxism remains in its critique of capitalism. This is all far too glib, of course. So, anyway, after I studied cultural anthropology I proceeded with my own organised 'fieldwork' as it were. The truth is that I found myself to be a white, male, Eurocentric artist and I wanted to know and experience another cultural view. I never imagined that I could ever enter into another world view, but I could make more opaque the edge of my own. I lived with the Yagua Indians in the Peruvian Amazon. I went on a trip around the world by myself and that's when I first came to Australia, in the early 1970s. I went to Alice Springs and I met a cab driver whose father had been a trader with the Aboriginal people and he grew up with them. We camped with Aboriginal people who had only known the existence of white people for six years. It was an amazing experience I will never forget.

**NK:** How did these experiences impact on your work?

**JK:** Honestly, in many ways, much of it is far too complex to cover in an interview. I certainly began to see how science eclipsed other religions as philosophy became a historicised academic subject, resulting in a crisis of meaning that became basic to modern life.

To this end art became a non-speculative alternative to philosophy. But I've learned from many things; I never let go of anything. When I was a student, my school in New York would invite a student to have lunch with the visiting speaker and I had lunch with Jorge Luis Borges when I was nineteen. It was very important to me as I had just finished reading *Labyrinths*, which had finally been published in English in 1962 – it was very profound for me and very useful for me as an artist. I also spent a year in Paris at this time of my life and had the fortune to have dinner with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

**NK:** You were awarded a prize from the Cassandra Foundation by Duchamp a week before he passed away in 1968. Can you discuss the legacy of Duchamp in your work?

**JK:** Yes, Duchamp was on the board that voted to give me the grant. Cassandra Foundation was the foundation of Bill Copley, so important to the history of Duchamp. I was very interested in the readymade, but there was a lot that I left behind that was part of the dada historical framework which, although very interesting, simply was not of my time and has been used by more traditionalists within modernism to limit our understanding and use of the implications of Duchamp's contribution. It has been written that when I separated the readymade from the rest of Duchamp in the 1960s, in my theory and my practice, it led to a reassessment of him which led to the postmodern Duchamp we now speak of, making him relevant for another generation in a new way. These kinds of questions, the ontological issues brought up by the readymade, ultimately evolved into what we now call appropriation. Works like my *One and three chairs* were possible because of this questioning process that came out of Duchamp.

I had only one personal contact with Duchamp. In the mid-1960s I was working in a studio space in Paris at the Centre American des Artistes on Boulevard Raspail. Jean-Jacques Lebel, who did the



Festival of Free Expression there, organised a happening with a Volkswagen covered in spaghetti with Lawrence Ferlinghetti standing in the middle of it reading one of his poems. The crowd had to stand around this scene in a circle and after a while I started making ironic comments. There was this old guy, to me anyway, standing next to me who started responding to my comments. Many assembled there found our interchange more entertaining than the poet. At the end of the event, he turned to me, shook my hand and said: 'That was a pleasure.' And I replied: 'Yes, a pleasure.' We smiled and he walked off, but I thought he looked vaguely familiar. The person next to me said: 'Wow, do you know who that was? That was Marcel Duchamp.' So, I had contact with him without knowing it was him, which is perfect of course.

At some point a few years ago Centre Pompidou invited me to work with some Duchamp acquisitions which had recently come into their collection. They invited me to install 'Postmodern Duchamp' in one room and Richard Hamilton was invited to do the modernist Duchamp in another. I know museum politics and policy, and I really didn't want to use up my museum ticket, so to speak, in Paris, on a smallish acquisition show of another artist, even *that* artist. So I refused for the sake of a larger project I was then in discussion about at another museum. Later I was given the facade of Centre Pompidou for the twentieth-anniversary show. I was going to take the title of every work that was ever shown there and put them on the facade in neon. We were three-quarters through the research and a new director came in and cancelled everything.

**NK:** Let's talk more closely about the current body of work originally commissioned for the Edinburgh International Festival. Can you elaborate on the role of the Enlightenment, the use of light and diagrams?

**JK:** This work was first presented in a Georgian library at the University of Edinburgh, but as my work uses architecture syntactically,

I really had to transform it into another installation for Anna Schwartz's magnificent space in Sydney. The architecture of her space couldn't be more different. To begin with I use diagrams to set up a network of relations. My researcher at Cambridge University found Darwin's diagrams but, interestingly and useful for me, nobody knows what they mean; they remain an enigma. So they were perfect for this work where I wanted to deal with the 'belief' of science, science reduced to a religion of its own process. Who personifies that more than Darwin? The Nietzsche text comes from different sources so there is a play between different moments in Nietzschean thinking. As I have always said, I work with the relations between relations.

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, Dia Capo Press, New York, 1979, p. 16.