

title: Kosuth on his work

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case: Joseph Kosuth, *Glass (one and three)*, 1965

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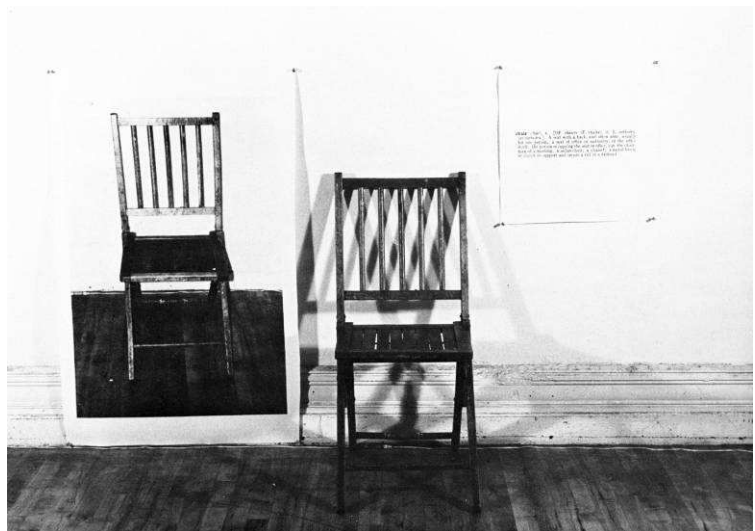
By Sanneke Stigter

Interviews with Joseph Kosuth and his own writings provide interesting information on the artist's thoughts and his intention with his art, which makes us understand better how he thought his work should be understood. These documents carry essential information that should be studied in order to understand the meaning of an artwork by Kosuth. Only then one is able to manage an installation like 'Glass (one and three)' in good practice.

It is important to study the art historical sources and to differentiate between what and when the artist has stated in relation to the period in which the artworks were first realized. Kosuth dates his 'object definitions' like 'Glass (one and three)' all 1965. This is the moment dated when the idea originated and probably coupled to when this was first materialized in 'One and three chair', now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The relation of the artist's sayings to the origin of the actual artwork is important in order to validate what is said for the sake of art history.

Then again, think about the idea that what is said or done first is considered original and therefore supposedly more authentic. The original materialized form is the highest good in Western culture. It may bear traces from initial spontaneity, a personal touch and eventually something we call 'aura'. This can be perceived in the appearance of the material of the artwork, which may even wear traces of 'patina'. This whole idea surrounding 'high art' with the unique artwork on a platform as an icon between the stars, was exactly what Kosuth was reacting upon with his 'object definitions'.

What makes this case study so interesting is that the historic value is cherished by of conservators, because it is exactly them that are closest to the actual objects - or cultural goods? It is exactly this balance that should be taken care of. The philosophical value derived of possible progression or change in the artists mind when he talks about his work, as opposed to the historical truth, can be just as interesting or valid – and a cultural good in itself. The question is, how the conservator will be weighing the different values that will eventually determine the conservator's choice of action.



Joseph Kosuth,
One and three chair, 1965
Collection Museum of Modern Art
Photograph taken in Joseph Kosuth's
Grand Street Studio in New York

Quotations by Joseph Kosuth

Compiled by Annick Kleizen in chronological order, starting with the most recent.

The following quotations by Joseph Kosuth relate to his 'object definitions' such as 'Glass (one and three)' sometimes referred to as 'One and three glass'.

1987

'I had seen earlier works of mine, such as the works in the 'One and Three Objects/Subjects' series or the negative definitions, become quickly conventionalized into the generally conflated history of painting – even though I saw these works as a rupture of that history.'

"Qua-qua-qua"

Implosion: Ett Postmodern Perspektiv [ex. cat.], Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1987, pp.70-3

1985

'My earliest work used photography (work like One and Three Chairs from 1965, for example) and I used it then as a non-art device as an alternative to painting within the art context;

[...]

I'm not involved with the craft of photography, I never take my own photographs even – it's not the photograph itself which is 'expressive', it is its function within a device as that concept of art as posited in the work.'

"Fort! Da!"

First published as a flyer, "Statement (text for wall panel)", New York: Leo Castelli Gallery, 1985

1979

'My use of photography (in works from 1965 such as One and Three Chairs) came about through an attempt to make work which didn't signify that it was art a priori, because of its form. Since I saw the nature of art to be questioning the nature of art, I felt the form the work took shouldn't end the questioning process, but begin it. As I said at the time, a painting – which brings with it a media-defined tradition – says this is the nature of art, that magical aura and belief system of the painting and the fictive space that it constructs. So the photographs used were always clean, cool, factual, almost scientific – as uncomposed as I could manage, and always taken by someone else, in order to make clear that they were art in their use (in relation) not through the aesthetic choice, composition or craftsmanship.'

"1979"

Symposium über Fotografie (ex. cat.) Graz, 1979, pp. 37 - 44

1970

'Language began to be seen by me as a legitimate material to use. [...] So then I used photostats of dictionary definitions in a whole series of pieces. I used common, functional objects – such as a chair – and to the left of the object would be a full-scale photograph of it and to the right of the object would be a photostat of a definition of the object from the dictionary. Everything you saw when you looked at the object had to be the same that you saw in the photograph, so each time the work was exhibited the new installation necessitated a new photograph.'

'By changing the location, the object, the photograph and still having it remain the same work was very interesting. It meant you could have an art work which was that idea of an art work, and its formal components weren't important. I felt I had found a way to make art without formal components being confused for an expressionist composition. The expression was in the idea, not the form – the forms were only a device in the service of the idea.'

"Art as Idea as Idea: an interview with Jeanne Siegel"
Broadcast: WBAI-FM April 7, 1970

Published as: "Joseph Kosuth: Art as Idea as Idea" in Jeanne Siegel, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and the 70s* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985), pp. 221-231

1969

'My first use of the term 'proposition' for my work was when I began my Art as Idea as Idea series in 1966. The photostatic blow-ups weren't supposed to be considered paintings, or sculpture or even 'works' in the usual sense – with the point being that it was art as idea. So I referred to the physical material of the blow-up as the work's 'form of presentation', and referred to the art entity as a proposition- a term I borrowed from linguistic philosophy.'

"Context Text"
Introduction to *The Sixth Investigation 1969, Proposition 14* (Cologne: Gerd de Vries, 1971)

1969

'I have subtitled all of my work beginning with the first 'water' definition [1966], Art as Idea as Idea. I always considered the photostat the work's form of presentation (or media); but I never wanted anyone to think that I was presenting a photostat as a work of art – that's why I made that separation and subtitled them as I did. [...] In the beginning the photostats were obviously photostats, but as time went on they became confused for paintings, so the 'endless series' stopped. The idea with the photostat was that they could be thrown away and then re-made – if need be – as part of an irrelevant procedure connected with the form of presentation, but not with the 'art'.'

"Art after Philosophy part III"
Studio International 178 no. 917 (December 1969), pp. 212-3

Conclusion

By Sanneke Stigter

Although Kosuth dates all his 'object definitions' 1965, his choice of object for the realization of every other 'object definition' can not be made at this time. The idea that it can be materialized with any object could derive from this time, yes. But it becomes interesting when one considers the material appearance in relation to the idea of the 'object definition'. Glass is as transparent as can be. This adds to the whole idea of dematerialization of the object in art that Kosuth was aiming for with his 'object definitions'.

If this meaningful feature is taken into account as an additional value on top of the idea of the 'object definition' as in 'One and three chair', than a modernistic point of view is easily adaptable when validating the statements that date a few good years after 1965. The first document we found of 'Glass (one and three)' is a photograph of the work published in 1973 in the Luzern catalogue of Kosuths Proto Investigations. So the earliest statements of Kosuth can be definitely valid for 'Glass (one and three)' because they are contemporary to when the artwork was first realized. When one takes a good look at the work depicted in the catalogue from 1973 it becomes clear that the definition looks different graphically. This version turns out to be the Collection M.J.S. in Paris.¹ This is 'an English version' with a real dictionary definition in that sense of the word. The translation-version of 'Glass (one and three)' was conceived only in 1976 when the certificate was drawn and the work was sold to Geertjan Visser who lived in the Flemish part of Belgium. Interesting to note that the definition had taken on the form of a translation, in this case taken from an English – Dutch dictionary.

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¹ See also the case research into comparable work of 'Glass (one and three)' in a separate document from the Inside Installations research project.