

Joseph Kosuth

'(Waiting for –) Texts for Nothing'

Samuel Beckett, in play

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20 Dec – 26 Feb

This education resource has been developed to support both secondary and primary students and teachers with background information on this new survey exhibition by American contemporary artist Joseph Kosuth at ACCA.

A show for the hungry of mind, this education kit can be used prior to, or following, a visit to ACCA. Kosuth's exhibition is the perfect food for thought for students studying any method including literature, philosophy and art and is the perfect show to create a dialogue with students about the nature of art and language and their relationship to each other.



Seeing isn't as simple as looking

Joseph Kosuth

Artist background

Joseph Kosuth, a pioneer of American conceptual and installation art, was born in Toledo Ohio in 1945 and currently resides between New York and Rome. As a student he attended Toledo Museum School of Design from 1955-62 before enrolling at the Cleveland Art Institute in 1963. Since the 1960's Joseph's artwork has focused on the connections between language and representation and is considered one of the originators of the conceptual art movement.

Renowned for his groundbreaking work *One and Three Chairs* (1965), featuring a chair, a photograph of that chair, and a text of a dictionary definition of the word 'chair', Kosuth's art practice came to prominence in the 1960's creating works that explored the very nature of art itself. Kosuth's practice has continued a dialogue with the ideas of many leading artists, writers and philosophers including: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka and Ludwig Wittgenstein and, although minimal in character his art is intensely rich in subject matter.

Kosuth held his first solo exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York in 1969 and in the same year became American editor of the journal *Art and Language*. Also influencing his art practice has been his formal study into anthropology and philosophy and his teaching career includes professorships at distinguished Universities in New York, Hamburg and Munich. He is currently a professor at Instituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia.

Kosuth... 'considers art to be the production of meaning and thus the idea or concept becomes the defining component of a work of art, often eliminating the materiality of the art object altogether'

Kosuth has since exhibited major projects throughout the world and has been included in Documenta V, VI, VII and IX and the Venice Biennale three times, once representing Hungary. His array of art awards include the Brandeis Award (1990), the Menzione d'Onore at the 1993 Venice Biennale; and the Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French government in 1993. He received the Laurea Honoris Causa, doctorate in Philosophy and Letters from the University of Bologna in 2001. In 2003, he was awarded the Decoration of Honour in Gold, the Austrian Republic's highest honour for accomplishments in science and culture.

Curatorial Approach

Being an artist now, means to question the nature of art

Joseph Kosuth

Kosuth's exhibition at ACCA, ('Waiting for -) *Texts for Nothing*' Samuel Beckett, in play, encapsulates his practice from the very beginning until the present featuring several key past works that explore the concept of nothingness', and a new commission made specifically for ACCA.

Gallery 1 'Waiting for-) *Texts for Nothing*' Samuel Beckett, in play this new commission will feature a grand pitch black room devoted entirely to Samuel Beckett and more specifically his theatrical masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*. Lighting the space will be neon text (taken from play), which will run the length of the room creating a halo effect. This will sit alongside a framed and lit photographic reproduction of Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*, which is believed by many to have been the source of inspiration for Beckett's play.

The title of the exhibition itself is a play on *Waiting for Godot* - a play on nothingness. This play's sense of nothingness is pivotal as this creates a space where meaning can be created. Kosuth has made the space physically reminiscent of the play as it literally looks like a void – darkness with potential for illumination.



Two Men Contemplating the Moon, ca. 1825–30
Caspar David Friedrich (German, 1774–1840)
Oil on canvas



'An Interpretation of This Title' Nietzsche, Darwin and the Paradox of Content 2009, Neon installation Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh. Part of the Enlightenments, curated by Juliana Engberg for the 2009 Edinburgh International Festival.

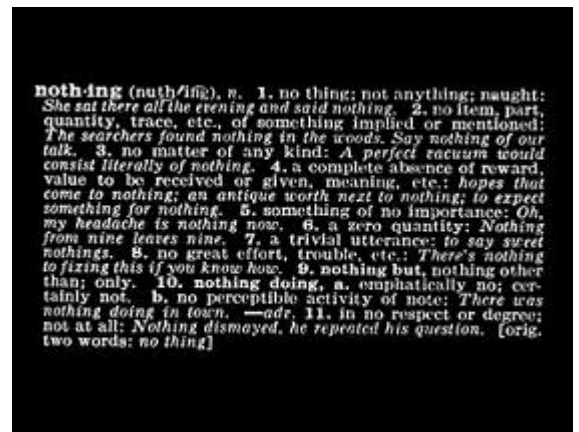


London production of *Waiting for Godot*.



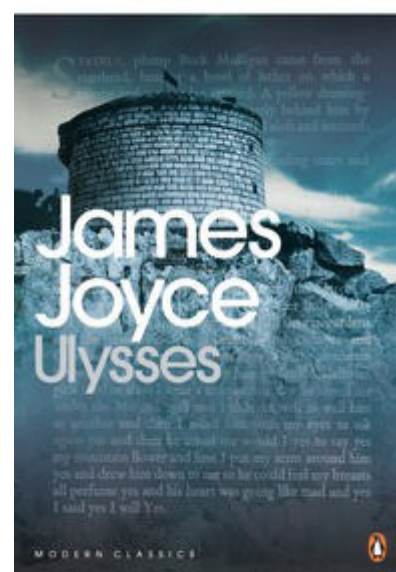
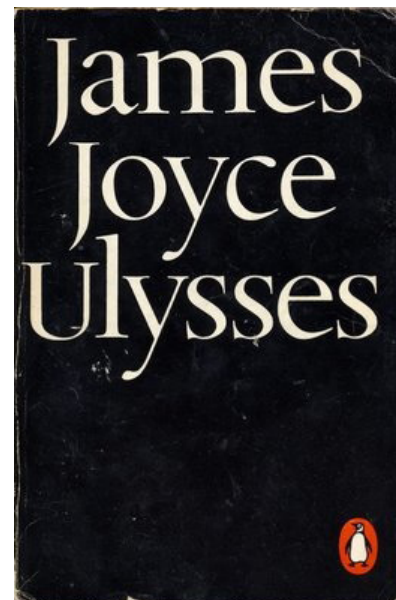
detail from 'An Interpretation of This Title' Nietzsche, Darwin and the Paradox of Content 2009,

Gallery 2 will feature the inclusion of one of the artist's earliest works *10 Definitions of Nothing*, exhibited for the first time since its original showing at Gallery 669 in LA in 1968. Ten photographic prints mounted on forex in Kosuth's characteristic monochromatic palette and using traditional standard dictionary typeface and formatting, will offer numerous possible definitions – varying from single entries to extended possible meanings and applications – of the word 'nothing'.



10 Definitions of Nothing, 1969 Joseph Kosuth

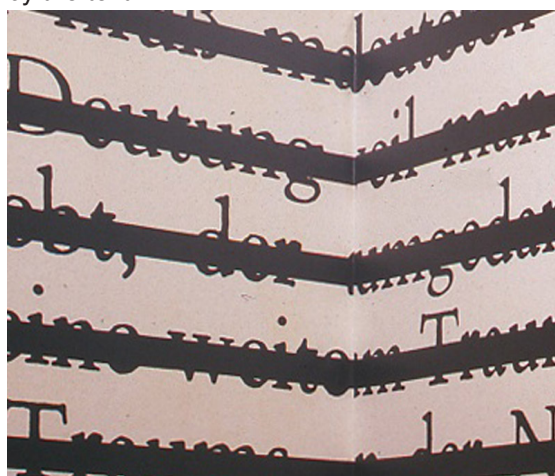
Gallery 3 'Ulysses, 18 scenes'. This piece was first shown in Zurich in 1998. This work is inspired the second Irish literary voice in the exhibition, that of James Joyce and his famed modernist novel *Ulysses*. Noted at the time of its publication, in 1922, for its experimental stream of consciousness technique. Dark toned walls the space will be lit solely by the artwork itself. The neons read as follows: The Newspaper, The Lunch, The House, The School, The Rocks, The Tower etc. There are 18 chapters in the novel, each of Kosuth's neons correspond to pivotal moments in the book's narrative.



Ulysses, 18 scenes
Wall installation
Neon
18 x 68 x 3 cm



Gallery 4 Zero & Not is installed as a floor to ceiling wallpaper. Here text is cited, repeated and then cancelled out. The sheer volume of text renders the possibly of reading everything unlikely, prompting the viewer to literally read between the lines, and therefore alternatively noticing the forms, shapes and patterns created by the text.



Zero & Not, 1985
Joseph Kosuth

Key ideas

Art is no longer a matter of formal problems but must deal with the structure of meaning and the processes of reception.

Ogea, Pia 2007, 'Joseph Kosuth '14 Locations of Meaning'', Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Book 2, p. 16.

Kosuth's installations often use text of a monumental size, quoting from literature, philosophy, anthropology and at times his own thought to form a forty-year enquiry into the relationship between language and art.

Kosuth's work is considered to be groundbreaking in the demonstration of art, object and idea. Exploring the relationship between language and meaning, his earliest works are seen as the beginnings of the conceptual art movement. Key concepts to think about when approaching Kosuth's work revolve around context, significance, perception and consciousness.

Conceptual art

This change – one from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’ – was the beginning of ‘modern’ art and the beginning of ‘conceptual’ art.

Kosuth, Joseph 1969, “Art after Philosophy”, *Studio International*, part I, p. 135.

Fundamentally conceptual art values the idea more than the way it is represented. Conceptual art has its roots with the European Dadaists but emerged as a movement in New York in the 1960’s. French artist Marcel Duchamp paved the way for the 1960’s and 70’s conceptualists, with his iconic ‘Readymades’ such as *Fountain* (1917).



The original *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, 1917, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz at his 291 after the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit.

All I make are models. The actual works of art are ideas...All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.

Joseph Kosuth

The conceptual art movement borrowed elements from linguistics, sociology, history and philosophy wishing to stand apart from the ‘art market’ as well as separating itself from the current economic, political, social and cultural establishments of the time.

Along with fellow leading conceptual artist Sol Le Witt, Joseph Kosuth exemplified the conceptualist notion that genuine art is not a unique or valuable physical object created by the physical skill of the artist - like a drawing, painting or sculpture - but instead is a concept or an idea. Le Witt attached great importance to the primacy of ‘the idea’ stating, “all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.” His attitude can be illustrated by the fact that many of his works can be constructed by anyone who follows his written instructions.

The idea becomes the machine that makes the art.

LeWitt, Sol 1967, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum*.

The texts

The relationship between image and text and the authority of each in relation to each other has formed the basis of many of Kosuth’s works. His disciplined practice has focused on language rather than objects and he investigates histories and how concepts are inscribed in culture (eg his neon texts on ancient monuments interrogating history and archaeology). Luminous in neon, screenprinted, sign written or painted text usually forms the content of his works. His neon texts are instructive, its use is to literally illuminate. Kosuth explores the social, political, cultural and economic contexts through which art is defined and presented by utilising language itself to demonstrate the discursive nature of art. Kosuth developed a form of conceptual art where words replace images and objects to provoke intellectual thought and he demonstrates through his pieces that art is located in the idea/concept rather than the art object itself.

The meaning is the use.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Kosuth and the Art & Language group of the 1960’s strove to create conceptual artwork which combined art, art criticism, aesthetic theory and political philosophy.

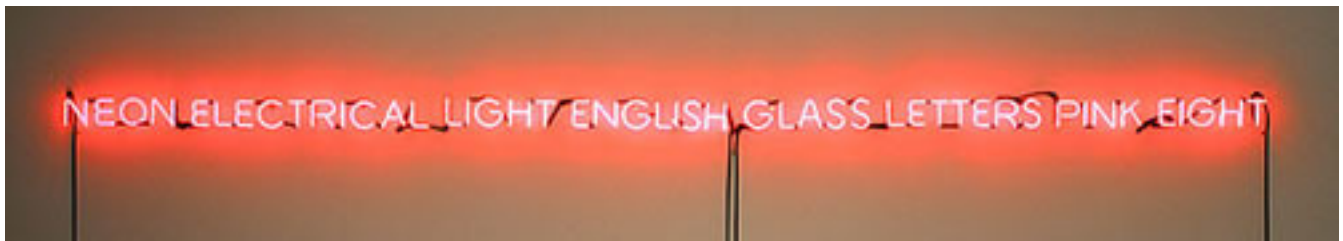
Tautologies

The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art as-art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art.

Ad Reinhardt

A Tautology is saying the same thing twice, using different words. Kosuth claimed that all artworks are tautologies. A tautology is a statement that declares the truth. Self-referential these pieces also raise questions about representation and language.

The foundation of all meaning systems in our culture is also integrated. Kosuth's tautological works of the mid 1960's are literally what they say are, attracting the viewer to seek enlightenment, such as the series, *One and Eight – A Description* (1965), includes eight works in neon that read; *Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Red Eight*.



Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Pink Eight, 1966
Joseph Kosuth

Kosuth states that 'only when ones draws out the relationship of art to language, can one begin the production of a cultural language whose very function it was to show not say...If artworks describe reality then they can also simultaneously describe how they describe it.'

Definitions

The propositions of art are not factual, but linguistic in character, that is, they do not describe the behavior of physical or even mental objects: they express definitions of art, or the formal consequences of definitions of art.

Kosuth, Joseph 1969, "Art after Philosophy", *Studio International*, part I & II.

Kosuth borrowed definitions for the work nothing from 10 different dictionaries, printed throughout the 20th century, for example;

- Webster's Encyclopedia of Dictionaries – New American Edition – 1978
- The New century dictionary of the English Language, Volume Two leaver-stone-1936
- Webster's New practical Dictionary – 1951
- Webster's New Twentieth century Dictionary of the English Unfinished – 1956
- Thorndike-Barnhart comprehensive desk dictionary – 1962

All are subjective some are single meanings, others, multiples. Nothing demonstrates the power of pulling language from one context into another. These works redefine the relationship between image and text and encourage viewers to look beyond what is visible and question what is actually being represented by that word.

James Joyce

History, Stephen said, 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'.

James Joyce - Ulysses

Kosuth's works often borrows texts from literature and philosophy, thus he avoids traditional ideas of authorship and authenticity. His work both tests these texts at the same time as opening them up.

Regarded as one of the key works of Modern literature, 18 Scenes of Ulysses, references the 18 chapters of James Joyce's renowned novel Ulysses. Kosuth breaks down the complex stream of consciousness narrative into key locations/symbols from each of the novels movements such as; The Streets, The Graveyard and The House. Originally censored in the U.S the novel Ulysses had a thirteen-year ban as it provoked widespread outrage when it was first published.

Kosuth is interested in setting and where events take place, and as such he thinks very carefully about how he chooses to display his pieces. Drawing the viewer's attention to their surroundings, and the permanence/impermanence of the space makes the viewer become aware of the architecture around them.

Samuel Beckett

'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.'

Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett is the perfect point of reference for Kosuth, as his play Waiting for Godot, purposely inconclusive and open, leaves space for the reader to interpret it.

In 1975 Samuel Beckett stood before a canvas in Berlin and said: 'This was the source of Waiting for Godot, you know' - referring to Caspar David Friedrich's romantic masterpiece Two men contemplating The Moon (1824). There is some discussion on the true source of the play's inspiration. This corresponds with Kosuth's interest in revealing the process of meaning making and the history ideas and thought.

Zero & Not

The printed paragraph reads as follows:

'Vorräte erhalten, Einladung X. dringend.' [Provisions received, invitation X. urgent.] *The solution of the riddle starts from the name X. mentioned in it. X. was the author of a book to which I was to write an 'Einleitung [introduction]'. This 'Einleitung' was what had been turned into the 'Einladung [invitation]'. I was then able to recall that some days earlier I had sent my publishers a 'Vorrede [preface]' to another book; so this was the acknowledgement of its arrival. The true text had very probably run: 'Vorrede erhalten, Einleitung X. dringend.'* [Preface received, introduction X. urgent.]

This piece will be shown at the end point of ACCA. The wallpaper makes you aware of the constructs around you whilst also pointing to the editing process as the lines are negated. As your eyes look for meaning one is forced to follow the architecture of the space and the space between the text.

Kosuth states that

'The cluster of 'arbitrary orders has also a 'made' order which unifies it, beyond the unification given to it by the architecture of the room itself. It begins with a counting-off of the paragraphs, repeated until the walls are full, and that cancellation which constructs as it erases, suggesting 'one thing' (a field of language itself) present, while removed. Not just absence presented, it is language reduced to words, making the texture of reading itself an arrival at language, an arrival which constructs other orders, ones that blind as they make themselves visible'.
– A preliminary map for *Zero and Not*. First published in *Chambres d'amis* [ex. Cat] [Ghent: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, June 1986], pp. 102-107.

Possible questions and activities for key subject areas (VELS & VCE)

Art/Studio Art

Ask students to choose an object, and get them to collect an image of an artwork, a diagram, a dictionary definition, a photograph of the object, and the actual object. Following this, in groups, students are to think about the difference between to different forms of representation and come up with their own definition of what art is.

Look at several text based artists such as Ed Rucha, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Joseph Kosuth. Ask students to compare the content of these artists' work. What are the similarities and differences? Why have these artists chosen text over the image? Think about appropriation and recontextualisation... how and where is it evident? What sources are these artists using? After this, students could discuss the movements and genres these artists were part of. In what ways does each of these artists work relate to conceptual art?

How does Kosuth's work engage with post-modernity? How does he use pastiche, parody, irony, humor, or reference other sources (books, films, religion, historical events) in his artworks?

Think about the relationship between text, images and meaning. Get your students to research conceptual art. Think about Marcel Duchamp and his work as a precursor to the work of artists like Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth. Get students to think about where some of Duchamp's influences can be found in work that they view in the show.

Philosophy

(Perfect for VCE and tertiary philosophy students)

Looking at Kosuth's 19 Definitions of Nothing, get students to think about the nature of language and how it is used. What is nothing? How do we define nothing? How do you describe nothing? How do you create an image of nothing? What color is nothing? Then get students to create what they think nothing would look like.

Research Kosuth's One and Three chairs and use it to help teach Plato's concept of the forms. This unit could be coupled with watching the film The Truman Show to aid students research and understanding of the allegory of the cave.

'The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.' – Sol LeWitt (1965)

Get students to discuss Sol LeWitt's understanding of conceptual art in a unit on beauty and aesthetics.

Use the exhibition as a lead in to a unit on language and meaning making, looking at semiotics and the ideas of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. After showing students Kosuth's work One and Three Chairs (1965) get students to investigate Saussure's sign, signifier and signified.

Research Nietzsche's view of the potential of humans to find their own capacity for self-creating. Think about the role of art and language in regards to Nietzsche's ideas and their possible implications in relation to Charles Darwin's theories about human evolution.

English/Literature

Kosuth's exhibition at ACCA is the perfect chance to think about the link between language/literature and art.

Discuss with your students the meaning of the word 'tautology'. Have your students create a series of their own tautologies in a discussion on representations and the meanings that representations and symbols hold.

James Joyce's novel Ulysses presents life as a journey. Compare this work to the play by Samuel Beckett Waiting for Godot. How do these two writers present the meaning of life?

Get students to study James Joyce's command of the English language and his use of stream of consciousness writing. Students can use stream of consciousness style to create their own piece of fiction.

Theatre Studies

(Waiting for Godot is one of the 2012 VCE texts so it is fitting for VCE theatre students to visit ACCA for inspiration)

What elements of Kosuth's piecevisually couples Beckett's play Waiting for Godot. What do you think Kosuth is trying to say about the play, why would he have chosen that as inspiration for a work of art?

Pre reading discussion questions for Beckett's Waiting for Godot include themes such as the meaning of life? What if life is meaningless? What if there is no point to life? Is there a universal meaning to life? What is memory and is it reliable?

Think about the role of perception and identity in Waiting for Godot in comparison to the work in ACCA's exhibition.

What do you think Beckett seems to be saying about communication and language. Do you think we can every really communicate with one another? Compare and contrast this to Kosuth's understanding of communication, language and text. What are the similarities and differences?

What accusations are both Kosuth and Becket making about the nature of time and memory?

How does this play link to conceptualism?

Research in detail the philosophy of one existentialist and relate the ideas to both Kosuth's piece and the play.

Think about the role that confusion plays in both the play and the two works featured at ACCA 'Zero and Not' and

'With all this darkness round me I feel less alone' - Samuel Becket.

How does this quote relate to Waiting for Godot and Kosuth's piece Both characters in the play are constantly referring to something off stage. What does this technique do?

Media

Ask students to consider the following quote:

'Language is one of the supports used by the mass media. Just as Pop Art had begun to do in the late 1950's, Conceptual art incorporated language as a way of materializing its works. Both Pop Art and Conceptual art tended to use new supports as a form of deconsecrating the work of art, and demystifying the process of creation and the creator. The work of art should be grounded in the very questioning of the work. However, in the case of Joseph Kosuth, the use of language will be carried out in a more systematic and complete way. Indeed, Kosuth uses the word as a formal alternative to painting, sculpture and photography, but that is just one of the arguments of this use of language.' Ogea, Pia 2007, 'Joseph Kosuth '14 Locations of Meaning'', Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Book 2, pp. 16-17

Use this to facilitate a discussion about the difference between art and advertising in our consumer culture. This could also facilitate a unit on symbols and semiotics and the role language vs the image plays in our contemporary lives.

Futher research

<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/Exhibitions.asp?gid=140199&cid=149995>

<http://www.annaschwartzgallery.com/works/exhibitions?artist=31&year=2010&work=12432&exhibition=336&page=1&ext=1&c=s>

<http://www.skny.com/artists/joseph-kosuth/>

http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/joseph_kosuth

http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/are_you_experienced/

http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/sight_reading/

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/32913914/Art-After-Philosophy-1969-Joseph-Kosuth?lid=12&emid=0iZliu9sdT0-37140404>

<http://artforum.com/archive/id=10584>