

JOSEPH KOSUTH

on the art market

interview by ALEXIS DAHAN

ALEXIS DAHAN — In 1965 you were in your 20s, making work that is now widely recognized as the beginning of Conceptual art. Today, the term is everywhere, and the practice seems to be generalized. What was your motivation from the start?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — My initial work, among other things, was a critique of the institutionalized status of art as only painting and sculpture. I think it had its effect on the practice of art, opening it up to questioning and then accepting such questioning as an important part of the art-making process. To a degree it means that Conceptual art itself has become institutionalized, yes, but as that is nonprescriptive and creatively open, it has had a very positive effect and moved us beyond the cage that late Modernism, à la Greenberg, had envisioned for us.

ALEXIS DAHAN — How were you so enlightened on art history at such a young age?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — In 1965, I was only 20, as you point out, and this level of seriousness was a result of the fact that I began my work and my engagement with art when I was very young. I went to museum schools and had a private tutor, all of this starting from the age of nine. So, by the time I reached 20, I had been quite serious about it for a while. This, along with the fact that I had an early, and probably advanced for my age, interest in both philosophy and literature, also formed me as an artist. Altogether, at that early age, I simply felt I didn't believe in painting anymore, but I still believed in art. What this meant, of course, was that I didn't believe in what was the Modernist conception of art. This led me a couple of years later to put a notice on the wall at my second show at Leo Castelli, in 1971, that my work was "post-Modern," probably the first use of that term, although I meant it in a literal sense, I knew of no activity going on under that name. I simply had to find another way to work besides making paintings. The result was that I used whatever cultural influences I had from outside of art, such as literature, in the sense that it was outside of the history of the visual arts.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Why call it "Conceptual" art?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — The nature of my work as well as the ideas behind it meant I had a struggle to make it be understood and accepted as art. This is part of that dialectical process between the artist and the world that every artist, if they're doing new work, must do, I would imagine. And I somehow managed, but I had to give it a special name.

ALEXIS DAHAN — But the term already existed?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Of course, the term had been around. They applied the term "conceptual painting" to some painters in the early '60s, like Larry Poons, but my work made such a term oxymoronic. Even Sol Lewitt used the term, and he meant something else by it, too, although he was far closer.

ALEXIS DAHAN — And he was talking about it two years later.

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Yes. Still, that hasn't stopped the confusion that sometimes credits him for some sort of leadership in the history of Conceptual art. Sol was a great artist in all the right ways, but what he did was something else. I think his work was an important step that made my work's acceptance possible, as well as the work of some others. But Sol was a Modernist. He was more of a bridge than a break.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Was there an actual Conceptual art movement?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — I think it is clear that it was because of my work and writing and my organizing of such work by others in exhibitions that this perception of something like a movement came about. But that term is itself Modernist, so it's probably misapplied. But, anyway, that's the historical record, however you look at it. This will all get cleared up later, I presume, and clearly not by me right now!

ALEXIS DAHAN — What has become of Conceptual art today?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — It's interesting, I had the realization at some point much later, decades later, that now young artists could still make Conceptual art, by which I speak of idea-based work that is not media-defined, but no longer needs a special term for it; they could just call it art. And that was when I more fully realized the effect of what I had started — that it had an impact.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Has the ambition of your early discoveries — “art as idea as idea,” work as language and pure concept — been fulfilled or is it still in progress?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Well, first Conceptual art is an approach, an attitude, which makes it a different way toward how art itself is conceived at its basis. This was what I felt was needed. I felt the risk was that the abstract color painting of late Modernism was essentially just decorative and would never be able to resist the market; it was devoid of having any critical component. This, for me, would lead art in the direction of being just expensive neckties for over the sofa. So, as I was saying, the difference with Conceptual art begins at the beginning of the making process itself. One thinks of these things as being fulfilled by going in a linear direction, but that isn't the nature of how culture works. It's much more spiral. And so the architectonic model of one brick after the other doesn't really apply itself to culture. It must be a spiral, because it must see itself as it proceeds. There has to be an element of self-reflexivity to it.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Why is that?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Because the work we're doing, no matter how rigorous it is as an intellectual project, still must be completed in the world and made of elements from the world. It gets transformed, and it must locate itself by taking from popular culture, insofar as popular culture forms all of our consciousness. There must be a connection there. And so it's never as simple as what you like to imagine, particularly when you're young and you're beginning to work.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Do you think your work has changed?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — I feel my work transforms itself. But it's also consistent. I've always felt my work is still building on things I began 45 years ago, in terms of looking at how we make meaning. But the world changes, and my work responds to those changes, so now it manages to be about far more than what I was thinking about then. This an important strength that Conceptual art has, which painting or other kinds of more formalist and media-defined works do not. Such work can really be seen as rather stuck and dated. And so the work I'm speaking of transforms itself, but with consistency. But it's a consistency that is not defined in terms of formal elements, but in terms of ideas that reflect the world we make it in.

ALEXIS DAHAN — What transformation do you think the world is undergoing?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — One of the biggest changes that is happening is the pernicious aspect of corporate culture, in which everything is under pressure to be reduced to a digital component, which means that prices, being numbers, easily replace real value, and the works are thus under siege for their meaning to be the meaning found in the market. This is a meaning having little to do with all the reasons we thought, for centuries, we were making meaning in culture in those ways valuable to humans. It's all digitally distributed and reduced essentially to power relations, economic and otherwise. It's a continuing big problem. Generations of young artists and art historians are being formed in this culture.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Are you talking about the evolution of art history?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — We've always had art history, and it was a history of who did what, when, and what was influenced — part of the history of ideas. And then 10, 15 years ago, maybe more, but I think about 15 in its current exaggerated form, there came a new art history competing with the classic one, and this is the history of the art market.

ALEXIS DAHAN — How does this other art history differ from the previous one?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — In this history, value is not established by ideas, but by how expensive work is. It is as dumb as a kind of cultural lottery ticket. We know the names of those artists selling now for millions but really have no clue as to why. We know that it has nothing to do with art history as we have known it. These works are often derivative and don't in fact qualify as important according to the classic terms of art historical activity, and so you have a lot of new people with lots of money coming into the art world who don't bother to really be educated about art, and they only see what's expensive, and they can be seen as part of that limited circle who can afford to buy such work by having the right thing to have on their walls right now. And so what this has done is to really trash, to some degree, the moral authority that art historically has had. Cultural authority has been replaced by financial authority. It's

“worth” millions; what else do you need to know? It’s a kind of dangerous and unhealthy situation.

ALEXIS DAHAN — How does that affect the value of your own work?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Well, the two art histories are in competition, and yet they’re obviously happening simultaneously. This all began years ago. I was always fascinated about the prices of Duchamp, who was so clearly important, to both the Modernist part of the century as well as what followed, yet the prices of Picasso and the prices of Duchamp have never even been close. Once it became clearer that Duchamp was more and more important, and his effect on the practice of art in the last half of the 20th century was understood, we’ve assessed his work differently. And so by now we see he was a more important artist than Picasso. But the market has never reflected that for a moment.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Do you own work by these artists?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Duchamp. I was able to trade a work of mine from the ’60s for *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, the snow shovel by Duchamp, and I received two other smaller works of his along with it. This was in the ’80s.

ALEXIS DAHAN — How did that happen?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Basically because I was young and trendy, relatively, anyway more young and trendy than Duchamp was. At the time my work was selling for more than Duchamp, which I thought was terrible and unjust, frankly. Of course, in the end, I’m happy to have the work. And finally Duchamp’s prices are a little more correct, shall we say.

ALEXIS DAHAN — What about Picasso?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — A dealer of mine from Switzerland said, “Joseph, you don’t really understand, you know, if you or I wanted a Picasso, we’d want an early analytic Cubist painting, right? Because that’s what we think are the most important Picassos. Well, that isn’t what the art market thinks. Because the people with really lots of money, they want a Picasso, but they don’t know art. So they want it to look like art, so they want the Blue Period, they want to own figurative Picassos, they don’t want achromatic still lifes, they want the ones that they and their friends can recognize as art, so although they’re not historically more valuable, they ended up having a market value that’s far greater due to market desire.” So that idea of value in fact ends up educating and shaping perceptions over the years. That’s a little bit the problem.

ALEXIS DAHAN — When you go to art fairs around the world, all you see in the last few years is word-based art. It’s everywhere.

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Everywhere, but much of it is conservative. I also see neons everywhere. I honestly don’t know what this means for my work, but I still have to pay attention.

ALEXIS DAHAN — So do you think the art market wants art that looks like Conceptual art?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — It’s interesting, certainly they have it easier than I did, but derivative work is still derivative work. It means something quite different than mine did at the beginning. It’s all quite far from the origins of an art movement. But this makes my point really about how dumb, literally, the art market is. All that is necessary is to get in the hot zone of market desire, and then once there anything, whether art that is historically important or not, can go for millions. Is this what we want to think about? No. But the point is that we are forced to understand how the inflated price shapes experience, perceptions, and meanings. So I have to follow it and care about it to some degree.

ALEXIS DAHAN — How do you see the evolution of art as language today?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Well, past the surface, someone has to stop and ask what makes work important. By and large, the art critical establishment is either silent or making a living from the recent market melt-up. Part of the problem is that there has been a kind of morphing of the concept of style into the market reality of branding. And, so, as a result, there’s a lot of confusion about works. And a hot new brand, i.e., the work by a trendy young artist, for circles that have more money than education and intellectual engagement, is enough.

ALEXIS DAHAN — What kind of new contemporary art interests you?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — As I’ve often said, I don’t think that artists work with forms and colors; we work with meaning. So all these things that affect meaning are a legitimate concern of mine. I have to know about them, I have to think about them, I have to take them into account on some level and try to understand how it affects the experience of the work and our definition of art in general.

ALEXIS DAHAN — A lot of philosophers have identified our modern society as one of images. We are exposed to the spectacle of things as opposed to the things themselves. Has that overabundance of images affected your work in any way?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — I've worked with images, linguistically, and it was never simply a question for me of using words, it was a question of understanding the linguistic play in the construction of meaning in art, which is not the same thing. So there are artists, still staying in Conceptual art, who really use words like objects and as a result I think one can obviously see their work as very much Modernist. And the expectations implied by the work and the concerns of it are very much Modernist ones. So one artist's line of text on the wall does not have the same kind of meaning as an artwork that another artist's line of text on the wall has. So much of the Conceptual art of my generation is still stylistic branding in the Modernist mode. But these things are not simple. The more nuanced and complex we see them, the more we learn from them.

ALEXIS DAHAN — How do you think art can have an impact on society and politics?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Many ways. The question's a bit general.

ALEXIS DAHAN — One of your upcoming big projects is exhibiting a quote by Michel Foucault on top of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. What is the critical meaning of this?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — Foucault, I thought, was for me the right reference. And that text in particular is the right text. So it's a very simple work, but I think appropriate for the building, which was based on the idea of four open books. It's on the interior, you notice, not on the exterior, and I think that it's a reference to what happens in the building as a library, a reference to the interior experience of reading a book. Yet, of course, it's a public work. Each letter will be 2.6 meters high. It's been pointed out that the half of Paris that cannot see the Eiffel Tower will see this work. It will create some kind of play on the Paris skyline. We will see.

ALEXIS DAHAN — You also covered a building with the different origins of the word "water" in Venice. Is this a way to speak to a broader audience?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — No, it's just pulling people into an engagement and, in my case, the context always is part of the work. So the engagement is in relationship to art that is in the world, be it our inherited world or the present world — or a relationship between the two. I have always worked with the language of where the work is being shown. I try to have it have some level of meaning accessible to the local people who are not specialists. I speak of people who are seeing the work on their way to work. Accessible in different ways. Not all works do that, but I try to often and where I can, when the work goes in the direction that permits it. It was so in the case of the work in Venice. It was in three languages: Armenian because that was the island of the Armenian repository during their diaspora, and it was founded by an Armenian religious order. Also it was in Italian because we were on Italian soil and that was a necessary thing to do for the part of the Biennale audience that was Italian, and for the local people working and living in that area. And it was in English, because the artist is English-speaking, but also for the international community, so it would have access. So I worked with all three. The installation was about water, which was relevant to the context, being Venice, and it dealt with the etymology of the three languages, the connections between English, Armenian, and Italian in relation to the word "water." So there are lots of different levels on which it really was site-specific to the maximum degree possible. In the case of the Bibliothèque Nationale, it's Paris. And I think one of the great things about Paris is its cultural history. It's one of the last places where philosophy has had a real cultural life, shall we say.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Public work seems to be a privileged place for you.

JOSEPH KOSUTH — I don't know if that's true. All the kinds of work I do are important to me, providing different things. Filling the interiors of buildings really is one kind of activity. People have a habit of experiencing artworks in the interior space of architecture in ways that are too like our habituated experience of painting or sculpture — or shall we say, of things on the wall and things on the floor. I did my work with the Brooklyn Museum, working with the collection, and that sort of set the model. Many artists have done it since, based on that model, apparently, more or less.

ALEXIS DAHAN — Did you think of doing the same with the Louvre com-mission?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — So, of course, there were expectations that at the Louvre I would do the same thing, but I saw no reason to follow the people that followed me, so I wanted to deal with the accumulation of the world's cultural history that the Louvre represents. I was not invited to work on the façade of the Louvre, so the other thing was to go to the 12th-century walls of the original Louvre palace, which was a kind of interior highway of the city of the Louvre, which was almost never used for exhibitions, or very rarely, and not in a very significant way. So my curator said I

could work where I wanted, and I said I wanted to work there, because then I could respond to the totality of the Louvre. That, by the way, is going up in the next month or two, permanently.

ALEXIS DAHAN — In some ways, public work cannot fall in the category of that secondary art history you were talking about earlier. Maybe when a work is public, it is able to resist the market?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — It does because it can't float in the art market. It's very anchored to a place, committed and part of its context. That was part of my intention with my neon work from the '60s. I've always insisted that they must be drilled into the wall and mounted there. It's almost more symbolic than actual, but if you put it on a board and it floats around, it's much more like a traditional artwork, and I wanted to have commitment and engagement with the architecture. A lot of my work has had that, because I don't like the idea that it floats freely to acquire the meaning the market will give it.

ALEXIS DAHAN — What can artists do to resist the market-based secondary art history?

JOSEPH KOSUTH — I think that, for me, now that I'm an older presence in the art world, my role is to raise consciousness in the younger artists, to remind them that they have to watch out, that the market will dictate the meaning of their work if they don't fight for their meaning. This is what I learned from artists like Ad Reinhardt, who understood that art is not the spiritual side of business. However, it is becoming that. And I think that it's a great loss for culture if we let the market end up giving meaning to the work and allowing the most prominent artists to be misperceived as the world's greatest artists just because they command the highest prices, with no other criterion taken into account. That is a loss for everybody, as much, if not more, for the artist as for anyone else.

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