

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH KOSUTH

By Beral Madra

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Calligraphy is the most important traditional art in Turkey's historical background; therefore it will not be difficult for the ordinary viewer to understand what you are doing. Your work looks as ornamental as the calligraphic texts installed on the walls of the religious buildings. Do you see a kind of resemblance or relation between your typographic work and these calligraphic works?

Joseph Kosuth

While I am very interested, I can even say delighted, to have a parallel seen between my installation and traditional modes of presentation in Turkey, it is only the modernist influence of formalism which could lead one to use the term 'ornamental' in relation to either one. Indeed, even in the historic religious buildings they weren't put there for 'ornamental' reasons either, they were deeply meaningful within the religious context. We can say that part of the legacy of modernism is a kind of deadening of meaning. That arch modernist Clement Greenberg made the formalist prejudice of modernism very clear toward its end, and it is no accident at all that he and the artists he promoted thought that art was apolitical, on one hand, and on the other was hostile toward Duchamp and all those activities begun in the sixties which began a post-modernist practice.

BM

There is a difference between your early work and the recent work. In your early works there was the exploration and disclosure of the relationship between the image and the text. We can see your intention in the re-produced work of "door" in Borusan Art Gallery. In your recent works there is the combination or coordination of the texts into space specific and merged into a whole images. Can you tell us more about this development?

JK

I certainly hope that there is a difference! One aspect of the earlier work was the attempt to actualize a Wittgensteinian insight: by drawing out the relation of art to language, could one begin the production of a cultural language whose very function it was to show, rather than say? Such artworks might function in a way which circumvents significantly much of what limits language. Art, some have argued, describes reality. But, unlike language, artworks, it can also be argued, simultaneously describe how they describe it. Granted, art can be seen here as self referential, but importantly, not meaninglessly self-referential. What art shows in such a manifestation is, indeed, how it functions. This is revealed in works which feign to say, but do so as an art proposition and reveal the difference (while showing their similarity) with language. This was, of course, the role of language in my work beginning in 1965. It seemed to me that if language itself could be used to function as an artwork, then that difference would bare the device of art's language game. An artwork then, as such a double mask, provided the possibility of not just a reflection

on itself, but an indirect double reflection on the nature of language, through art, to culture itself. Seeing the artwork, in such a context, forced a scrutiny of its conventions and historical baggage, such as painting and sculpture itself as an activity. First inside the frame of art's conventions and then outside. This was, of course, the beginning of an institutional critique of artistic practice. That had to begin with the institution which had been naturalized the most: the modernist conception of art as painting and sculpture. So the early work we've selected to show upstairs is representative work of this period. That this work is in The Museum of Modern Art, Tate Gallery, Centre Pompidou and so on either represents its own institutionalization, or it means that these are Trojan horses have helped make changes. One could argue that it's both. Also, please appreciate that I did this work between the ages of twenty and twenty-three. I didn't expect them to end up in museums, I was just working out my problems with current art as a young artist. This work raises some complex questions and the work that followed, in trying to answer those questions, raised more questions. The questions seem to keep coming. But once one leaves the institutionalized frame of painting and sculpture, as a working context, the next locale is architecture, which is part of the lived world. That is a base from which one can approach an infinite number of other contexts not limited to physical space.

BM

You are not using your own text for your installations but the texts of world intellectuals, theoreticians, philosophers; you are like a transmitter of world literature and world philosophy. Are these texts your ready-mades? Is this a post-modern expansion of Marcel Duchamp's ready-made concept or is this the post-structuralist intertextuality? Is this a mission to disseminate knowledge in order to undermine the power/knowledge complex?

JK

I would say that my practice is not incompatible with some of the ideas of intertextuality, obviously, but it doesn't have many of the limits one finds there. As for Marcel Duchamp, if the first half of the 20th century was a two-line struggle (to use a term from Chinese politics) it was between Duchamp and Picasso. It is obvious to everyone that Duchamp won that battle in the second half of the century. My work may be seen as part of that victory, but when I wrote on Duchamp in the sixties my interpretation of him (which actually stuck) left a lot out which no longer seemed relevant to someone artistically formed in the midst of pop and minimalism. I think your calling it a post-modern expansion is probably accurate. Yes, I think that breaking authority is a big part of the creative process. My arguments against painting/sculpture began with the realization that it was an authority of form. (It doesn't really matter what you paint on a stretched canvas, it is art a priori. And it is precisely this which cuts it off from the world.) Creativity to me didn't consist of being a well-behaved producer of expected goods for the market within a form of art which everyone agreed with. Creativity was questioning the nature of art. That's not inconsistent with modernism, itself, of course even if what followed was not. In any case, Modernism, to this twenty-year-old, was a bankrupt and bloated, self-absorbed old man, and I mean man, that had severed its connections to the world. That said, we could then chart the kind of navigations and negotiations

through the obvious contradictions which would by necessity follow. It was not easy at all to propose this activity as art in the sixties, even with the presence of minimalism. That, at least, looked like sculpture. Conceptual art necessitated a real sea-change in everyone's presumptions about art. Much of what my work initiated at that time, be it the use of language, utilization of photography, installations, or appropriation, for example, I came up with mostly to avoid, not simply the form of it looking like what art looked like then, but its cultural agenda as well. The point was that I needed a tabula rasa to say other things, I wasn't trying to invent new forms.

BM

What are the dimensions and the scope of the political commitment in your work? Did you have an intention to influence people in their political engagement or awareness? Do you think that today art which has political references or implications can have a possibility of real force?

JK

The conventional view of the relationship of art to politics is that art is a kind of truck that delivers the political message. This is why Soviet style art and Fascist period art looked so much the same. The presumption with this view is that there are two things, the delivery system of art—which internalized the formalist view that art is a simply a question of style—and then the political 'content'. The problem with this belief is that it makes art into a transcendent category. But it isn't like that, art comes very concretely from the lived reality within the cultural space of society. The fact is that art, as a producer of consciousness, itself constitutes a political space and a political practice. We need to understand how such meaning is produced, and our struggle to know that is an ongoing process. In other words, as Wittgenstein put it in another context, "In mathematics and logic, process and result are equivalent." I can't see how, however, given the nature of art, we can reasonably expect much in the way of results by being prescriptive. In recent years 'politics' in the contemporary art context, with journals such as October particularly, has mostly been the moralizing justification for career networking and promotion. Who could think of a better mask for ambition in a market-fueled arena than such sanctimony? In any case, to return to the last part of your question, we make a mistake to see "real force" in terms inappropriate to the kind of power, one which in the long term may be greater, which art can have. If art can only be 'political' by being propaganda, then we will be put in the position of having to compete with Walt Disney, and probable failure. We might consider for a moment the value of the activity itself to society as well as the value of its production. In our society the power is in the hands of those committed to what are short term goals: businessmen and politicians. One wants only to see a profit and the other only wants to remain in power. An important element in the construction of our social whole are individuals such as artists that have a different kind of motivation, represent a different value system, and provide cultural weight to a social perspective which constitutes long-term goals. Individuals primarily concerned with the accumulation of money and power do not necessarily make the best decisions for the good of society.

BM

Looking back to 20th century art and culture - which we are supposed to do in order to look forward to the next century - what do you see? Do you see what I see? I see that there is a continuous flow from East to West throughout the century; at the beginning the elements of art and culture, at the end the people. All this accumulation has been processed in a number of sequences of procuring – transforming – integrating - reproducing. On the other side, since four decades the East have imported /appropriated this fusion and is now in the advent of investing – converting – finishing and propagating. If this is true, then we have to consider Modernism as a confrontation between East and West and not as a phenomenon of the West, as we are used to do.

JK

I think I also see what you see. I know that in the west the greatest rare commodity evolving is not a physical material but a psychological one: authenticity. I don't mean to suggest that the actually authentic doesn't exist, on the contrary, but I call it psychological because it is a function of desire. In this context, as the a global market culture wears down cultural difference in the west at an accelerated rate (wait for the same cheese in Denmark, France and Italy) the west will unavoidably look to more 'exotic' locales. Of course, the same westerners—the selling crowd—will be just ahead of the buying crowd, themselves buying up all the exotic locations, tearing them down, and rebuilding them in a washable plastic with replaceable parts. Eventually the whole world will look like a Disney theme park. I remember everyone clicking their tongues moralistically at the destruction of many of the monuments and buildings in, then, Peking, by the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. That was nothing by comparison, and it was based on belief, not profit. The on-going destruction of our architectural patrimony under the name of 'renovation' and 'development' is a world-wide scandal. It is history-erasing taking place on a global scale. It's parallel to the ecological destruction going on but it's culture, not nature.

BM

I met you in Cairo and now you are in Istanbul! Your work has influenced at least two generations of artists in non-Western countries and you are invited to the two major centers of the Middle East only after 30 years. How do you think that this gap will be covered? There are not many US artists living in Europe and there are thousands of artists who would love to live in New York. What makes you to live in Rome and how are you received there?

JK

Well, maybe I am the early warning system for what I was just discussing! I do like the idea of living in the world, which can only happen if you also work in the world. There are many places I would like to live but life is too short. I keep my studio in New York because that is still my home, a kind of psychological anchor. My studio has been at the same address for twenty-four years and I have been in the same neighborhood, now called Soho, for thirty-five years. It was much nicer when just artists lived there, I can promise you. Part of why I live in Rome is because I don't like what happened to my neighborhood in New York, but I don't know another one

in New York that I would live in. Another reason is that Italy is my favorite country in Europe (although I have a great affection for nearly all of them) and I must keep a studio in Europe because of all of the work I am doing there. I have had a farm in Tuscany since my twenties when I sold 23 works to the collector Panza di Biumo all at once. So, I live in Rome which is the nearest city to my farm, and the city I know best after New York. The studio in New York has my archive, and my staff there do research for my projects, which must begin in English even though many of them end up in other languages, and some production work which is suited to New York. But Rome has been very kind to me and my family. It is a great city to live in.

BM

Is there a boundary between art and non-art? In the 90's the viewer is having a difficulty to recognize the difference between the works which look like sociological archive/research or journalistic research and documentary films and artistic videos etc.

JK

Well, there must be or your question would be impossible to ask. How difference is distinguished is in the realm of signification. The process of that questioning process is manifested in the production of art, when the art is any good. But the social location of art is fascinating in its complexity. On one hand art production is a kind of specialized research, not unlike physics or philosophy, but on the other we inherited a social philosophy which brings with it the notion that art is somehow 'democratic', everyone's opinions are somehow equal, whether you are trained or not, did years of study and work or not. So where the physicists and philosophers get respect for the complexity of their area of specialization, the artists and their supporter often get ridicule and outrage because everybody, no matter how little they've tried, who doesn't 'get it', thinks their ignorance is. It is rather frustrating.

BM

What are the prospective influences of electronic technology and the media influx on art? More and more technological tools and mediums are being used in the production of artworks.

JK

One advantage to electronic technology is that means are seen as means and don't become a religion. Painting is just technology, an out-dated and sentimental one, but just technology. On the other hand, the danger of new technology is that the technology can be so interesting that it overpowers the art. Art, because it is essentially just a play of meaning, is quite fragile. It takes a very calculated and refined touch even at the best of times. There is a necessity for the carrier, as it were, of the work to be a bit banal. If you think of the fact that Lichtenstein used old cartoons not new ones, or Andy used the most common soup can, Flavin used the most common of lamps, not a hot new design. In the case of computer screens, they have become naturalized very quickly. I see, like everyone else, a whole new world there. I'm not very old because, as I mentioned before, I started so young.

Anyway, though, I sometimes I imagine that I feel like Manet must have felt at the end of the 19th century, thinking about what was to come.

BM

The paradox of Art as Business and Business as Art is still valid and we know that art market is influencing the policies of official art institutions and the careers of artists. How did you manage to be in the art market and at the same time to be out of it?

JK

The trick is always to have enough power to be heard but not have so much that you are a part of the problem. As for market support, I've had it easier than some artists, and not as easy as others. For a non-painter or sculptor, I am an enormous success. Maybe even the most successful. Other artists of my generation, however, who are seen as much less 'important' in art historical terms, earn much more money simply because they are painters. I spend most of my money on overhead studios, assistants, researchers, production technology, travel, and so on. Many of these are things that a painter never thinks has to think about. Compare the prices of Duchamp with those of Picasso and you can figure out easily the situation for conceptual artists. At least we have history on our side, if not the money! Most of my exhibitions that are installations have nothing to sell, since they are site specific. So a lot of my money goes into such works, like the one here in Istanbul, which are temporary and will disappear in six weeks. Other projects, such as permanent projects, or sales of earlier works to museums, bring in enough to make it possible to keep doing the work I want to do without thinking about money. I think that's all any artist really wants.