

SEAN KELLY

Meade, Fionn. "Joseph Kosuth," *Artforum*, February 2009.

ARTFORUM

Joseph Kosuth



Joseph Kosuth,
Information Room
(*Special Investigation*),
1970/2008,
mixed media,
dimensions variable.

"Don't Just Stand There—Read!" declares the headline of a 1970 review in the *New York Times* bemoaning "the cultural nihilism of Conceptual Art" in spite of its ability to keep "scoring points . . . [in] an art scene poisoned by the market mentality." Penned by then-staff writer Peter Schjeldahl, the ambivalent article regarding "a movement which demands so much from its audience in return

for so little" was writ large in a light box as part of Joseph Kosuth's *Information Room* (Special Investigation), a 1970 installation re-created within this exhibition. The reading room is made up of two long wooden tables piled high with paperbacks from Kosuth's library at the time—texts dealing with linguistic philosophy, structural anthropology, and psychoanalytic theory—along with stacks of New York newspapers with such hard-hitting headlines as "US Deaths 165 in Week as Enemy Takes Post Near Phnom Penh, Then is Repulsed," and "World Inflation Spreads Despite Steps to Curb It." Though ostentatious in its heavy intimations of reading prowess (keep in mind Walter Benjamin's salvo when unpacking his library that even the most erudite collections include large swaths that go unread), *Information Room* is significant as a prototype for discursive installation formats that have since become customary.

That Schjeldahl's review is of two concurrent group exhibitions from that summer—"Information" at the Museum of Modern Art and "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects" at the New York Cultural Center—and singles out Kosuth, featured in both, as the "most didactic practitioner and passionate theoretician" of "Conceptual Art," was made all the more conspicuous by a vitrine of archival documents revealing that the artist ghost-curated the latter show. Such proteanism was common for Kosuth at the time: He cofounded, with Christine Kozlov, and organized significant exhibitions for the East Village's Lannis Gallery (renamed the Museum of Normal Art soon after its 1967 founding) and adopted the pseudonym Arthur R. Rose, under which he wrote reviews and interviewed artists, including himself. Kosuth's burgeoning impresario status is difficult to miss here. Two photographs underscore his Warholesque posturing: In one, he wears sunglasses and reads at one of the "information" tables; in the other, he sits cross-legged on perhaps his most well-known work, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965.

The engrossing installation preceded a concise selection of early works evincing Kosuth's contention that "a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art." Kosuth had spun a working definition of art as "Idea as Idea" off of Ad Reinhardt's notorious tautological quip, "Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else," and his early efforts (many of them conceived in 1965 at the age of twenty) are austere in appearance, clever in reference, and audacious in positioning. *One and Three Shovels* [Ety.-Hist.], 1965, for example, espouses a deconstruction of aesthetic signification through a sequential, triptych format for presenting representation—a photograph of the object, the object itself, and a photographic reproduction of the definition of the object—while also directly referring to the first work Duchamp declared a readymade (though he later designated earlier pieces as such): *En avance du bras cassé* (In Advance of the Broken Arm), 1915, a snow shovel inscribed with a poetic fragment. *Three Adjectives Described*, 1965, further illustrated Kosuth's intention to replace the critical

notion of commodity-as-artwork with that of text-as-artwork, the piece spelling out the word adjective in red, blue, and green neon lights. An irony, however, is that Kosuth's ultimate signature reduction, reproducing dictionary definitions—a strategy represented here by Titled (Art as Idea as Idea), 1966, a work in which Kosuth quotes etymological entries for the words red, blue, yellow, orange, and purple in white on black photostats—proved the least interesting maneuver in an otherwise alluring show.