

SEAN KELLY

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Joseph Kosuth Show at Sean Kelly Gallery



"Agnosia, an Illuminated Ontology," an installation by Joseph Kosuth, gathers works from 1965 to 2015 at the Sean Kelly Gallery. Credit 2015 Joseph Kosuth/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Jason Wyche, via Sean Kelly, New York

The 1950s and '60s were peak years for "the linguistic turn," a philosophical movement that looked to the analysis of language for solutions to traditional puzzles about consciousness and reality. Few artists were more profoundly affected by that trend than Joseph Kosuth, a pioneer of '60s-style Conceptualism. "Agnosia, an Illuminated Ontology," a visually exciting and conceptually bookish installation designed by Mr. Kosuth, gathers together more than 40 works from 1965 to 2015 that feature electrically illuminated words, phrases and sentences. (Agnosia is an inability to make sense of sensory information, a condition usually caused by brain damage.)

One of the earliest pieces, produced by Mr. Kosuth in 1965 at the tender age of 20, "Five Fives (to Donald Judd)," consists of the words for the numbers 1 through 25 spelled in blue neon lights in five rows, five words a row. Some later works present quotations, rendered in mechanical fonts, by luminaries like the Marquis de Sade, Freud and Wittgenstein. In others, neon tubing imitates the scrawl of handwritten notes. Branching diagrams represent etymologies of words like "water" and "light."

A piece quoting Heidegger perhaps best sums up Mr. Kosuth's perspective: "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home." Those who favor nonverbal imagery in art may demur, but you don't have to take sides to enjoy Mr. Kosuth's philosophically provocative erudition and his inventive ways with lights.