

# SEAN KELLY

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### Joseph Kosuth's Art of Bright Ideas



Artist Joseph Kosuth at Sean Kelly Gallery for his show 'Agnosia, an Illuminated Ontology.' PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

For artist Joseph Kosuth, neon isn't a means for glitzy spectacle; for him, it is a serious instrument for conveying deep philosophical ideas. He can't help it, however, if spectacular sights arise from a long career's worth of rigorous thinking.

One such sight is the luminous exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea, where 40 neon works spanning five decades glow with thoughts about art and the nature of thought itself.

Some spell out quotations from Sigmund Freud and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, while others play brainy games with words and numbers. Still others nod to an unlikely intellectual source: the comic-strip characters Calvin and Hobbes.

All reflect the probing and playful work of Mr. Kosuth, who helped pioneer the movement known as conceptual art beginning in the mid-1960s. Some of his early touchstone works are on view in the big retrospective, which closes after Saturday, while others can be seen in a smaller show uptown at Castelli Gallery, running until Feb. 19. Those works charted a course that led Mr. Kosuth to the conclusion that, in art, ideas are more important than objects.

"If you begin with the presumption that artists work with meaning, not with forms and colors, you get a whole other approach for seeing art," said Mr. Kosuth, 70 years old. "The idea was to get rid of the aura around the work of art. It's a burden, and we don't need it."

The concept that an artist's ideas are more important than his or her capacity for creating physical objects is largely attributed to artist Marcel Duchamp, who famously "signed" a urinal in 1917 and submitted it for an exhibit, one of many "readymade" offerings that he deemed works of art. Mr. Kosuth, an ardent follower, also has an installation on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which mixes his work with several by Duchamp.

Mr. Kosuth, who splits his time between New York and London, has worked with many physical materials—photographs, repurposed items such as chairs, large panes of glass and simple declarative statements on Xeroxed paper. But neon became the medium for which he is best known.

His initial goal was to subvert neon's luminescent effect. "I wanted something that was experienced as public signage, as advertising," Mr. Kosuth said, "and to transform it with another use." So he used it to convey concepts then new to art, culled from fields such as philosophy and linguistics.

Some works play slyly with language, such as "Neon Electrical Light English Glass Letters Pink Eight," a self-reflexive work on view at Castelli with eight words spelling out the title in pink neon.

Another piece, in the Sean Kelly show, spells out Wittgenstein's dictum "In mathematics process and result are equivalent"—reflecting the kind of endless questioning and answering Mr. Kosuth thinks art should engage in.

One of his most famous non-neon works, "One and Three Chairs" from 1965, asks the question of what constitutes a chair by displaying a chair, a photo of the chair and a printout of the definition of the word "chair" together.

Since the artist considers ideas his ultimate art product—he cares more about the essence of a chair than any specific chair—a typical piece of his is sold as a certificate that, more than the material object, counts as the artwork itself. Mr. Kosuth, who splits his time between New York and London, has worked with many physical materials—photographs, repurposed items such as chairs, large panes of glass and simple declarative statements on Xeroxed paper. But neon became the medium for which he is best known.

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"I've been trying to explain this to people for 20 years," said Sean Kelly, whose gallery is selling the ideas in Mr. Kosuth's show for prices ranging between \$40,000 and \$500,000. "It was very hard to get across to people who felt they were spending a lot of money and not getting something for it. That's not the case."

The owner can make copies for display, normally with the aid of the artist's studio, but the value of the work is in the paper authorizing it.

"The form of presentation is never signed," Mr. Kosuth said. "You can't sign a neon."

Walking through the Chelsea show, the artist paused to consider several works, including one that combined a "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoon with a thought by Martin Heidegger. "It's brilliant—it gets close to philosophy," he said of the comic strip.

Mr. Kosuth also remarked on a surprise byproduct of his art: the symphony of neon tubes buzzing and whirring all around.

“It’s a little like going to an aquarium,” he said. “It’s the sound of thinking.”



Joseph Kosuth in front of his piece '1,2,3,4' at Sean Kelly Gallery. PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Joseph Kosuth's art on display at Sean Kelly Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. PHOTO: ANDREW LAMBERSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL