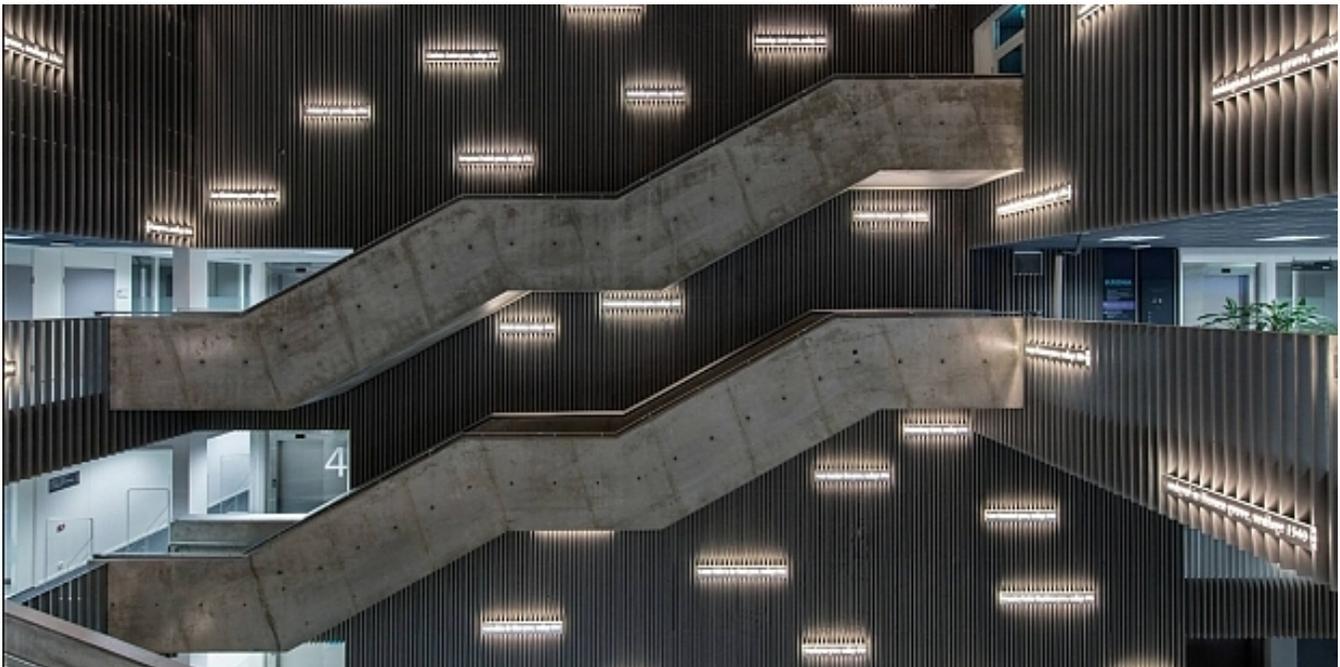


# SEANKELLY

“Joseph Kosuth in Conversation,” *3<sup>rd</sup> Dimension Magazine*, February 20, 2017



## Joseph Kosuth in Conversation



*Monument/Man: Art-historian Ramsay Kolber discusses memory and the making of meaning with the artist.*

In 1964 Joseph Kosuth, a proclaimed patriarch of Conceptual Art, was a teenage student at the Cleveland Institute of Art in Ohio. The artist lived with three other male students in what had once been a 'luxe' building turned by time from splendid residential accommodation into college lodgings. In front of this building stood a large monument, which had remained unnoticed by the young artist for a term and a half. Many of us who live in the urban landscape, recognise this as familiar behaviour, because all too often monuments, which were intended to be highly visible, gradually merge into their surroundings as result of their permanence — consumed by the very space they were intended to lift out of the everyday.



**1. András Tóth, Memorial to Lajos Kossuth, bronze, erected 1902 at University Circle, Cleveland, Ohio. This a replica by Tóth of his Kossuth Memorial at Nagyszalonta, Hungary and was commissioned to commemorate the Hungarian patriot's visit to Cleveland, USA, 1851-52 (photo: courtesy of Ann Albano The Sculpture Center)**

One day when the young artist met up with his friend Charles in front of his lodgings they noticed spray-painted gold laurels strewn around the monument. Looking up the two boys read the inscription on the plinth, which identified the statue as Lajos (Louis) Kossuth, the national hero of Hungary, and Joseph Kosuth's great-great uncle (fig.1).

The immediate irony of this encounter would only augment when Kosuth recounted this story to me in his London studio, some 50 years after the fact. Walking with Charles and messing about as teenage boys do, they saw a parade marching towards them up Euclid Avenue. Upon seeing the horse-play between the two boys, the group began yelling racial insults in response to this obvious friendship — Charles was black. This immediate racist barrage, a testament of the time as well as having chillingly contemporary parallels, was further compounded as Kosuth looked into the angry crowd: 'It was the Kosuth Day parade,' he explained, 'they were there honouring him [and] I'm a direct descendant of the fucker.'

And so we remember, and so we forget. What is the meaning of a monument when its reality is shifted? What becomes of the monument's content when its context evolves? I met with Kosuth last April to discuss his interest in monuments, a concept he has been working with specifically since the 1990s. As I sat quite comfortably on an aged, leather sofa in the artist's study, which divides his working studio from his private apartment, Kosuth reiterated part of his 'Public Texts, Stolen Texts' talk: 'At present, my approach to public art aspires to integrate several aspects that are important to the location. The work attempts to provide a "monumental" view for the experience of members of a particular community, of their own historical presence, and manages to do so without the normal sentimental and institutionalized aspect of city monuments.'



**2. Joseph Kosuth, *A Monument of Monuments*, 1996, installation view, 'Urban Evidence: Contemporary Artists Reveal Cleveland', Cleveland Museum of Art, USA** (photo: The Progressive Corporation, © 2017 Joseph Kosuth)

In reference to these permanent works, Kosuth explained that the Cleveland anecdote had served as his private impulse for *A Monument of Monuments*, a temporary work installed *in situ* at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1996 (fig.2). Perhaps the artist's first self-proclaimed monument, *A Monument of Monuments* was part of a three-site, bicentennial exhibition entitled, 'Urban Evidence: Contemporary Artists Reveal Cleveland.' The show was meant as a form of civic exploration, outlined by the exhibition's curator Gary Sangster as 'an exhibition bringing to light hidden or overlooked aspects of the city, its neighbourhoods and environment.'



**3. Joseph Kosuth, *A Monument of Monuments*, 1996, installation detail, 'Urban Evidence: Contemporary Artists Reveal Cleveland', Cleveland Museum of Art, USA** (photo: © 2016 Joseph Kosuth)

Kosuth's installation included some 143 stone plaques listing the names of public monuments erected in Cleveland over the past century (fig.3). Acting almost as cultural historian, Kosuth uncovered these names through diligent research in Cleveland's public libraries and archives. Placed at random on the grey, cement walls of the museum space, these sandblasted markers recalled the traditional look and function of public plaques. Yet divorced from their original context these labels appeared as neutral information, the focus on individual engagement rather than collective experience.

Influenced by his earlier investigations into the role and function of language, Kosuth transformed these forgotten markers of memory into unbiased data. The act is one of both revealing and concealing: an action to call attention to these now invisible cultural remnants, while asserting their possible irrelevance within the present community. While these monuments might have proved commonplace in their everyday surroundings, Kosuth changed the nature of their meaning by recontextualising them within an affirmed art environment. It is this specific uncovering or perhaps rediscovery of monuments that Kosuth finds particularly interesting: 'If you think of the type of works we have – precious works in the museums or [those] hoping to get the status thereof – I mean the different kinds of ways you have art in the world and the ways in which that so greatly alters and

affects your experience of them and the meaning of them – the monument is its own category. Maybe it doesn't want to be discarded, it wants to be transformed.'

To some this connection between Kosuth's conceptualism and something as permanent as a monument might come as a surprise. Art-historians often think of the artist in terms of his 'tautologies', works that he began in the mid-1960s by which time he had moved to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts. These works were, and remain, an engagement with language, a purely logical enquiry into the very nature of art and experience (fig.4). Although often consisting of material ranging from photostats to neon, these works are characterized by their focus on the 'idea' of art over its physical presence. Kosuth's best-known manifesto for this practice is his 'Art After Philosophy', a two-part text originally published in three successive issues of *Studio International* in 1969. The essay, which could now be considered a monument in itself, is one of the most commonly cited texts in relation to the 'birth' of Conceptual Art.



**4. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA** (photo: courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, Larry Aldrich Fund)

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Conceptual Art is particularly difficult to pin down, firstly because it is not a 'movement' in the traditional sense and secondly because it lacks a true 'centre' of activity. While global in scope and often immaterial in presentation, what joins conceptual practice is its focus on the artist's idea over its physical realization — critical thought over the art object. In 'Art After Philosophy', Kosuth cites that the appreciation of a past 'masterwork' in the present is conceptually nonsensical, since the initial idea present at the time of the work's production becomes lost upon the contemporary viewer, whose reality differs significantly from the time of its construction. As such, 'Art "lives" through influencing other art, not by existing as the physical residue of an artist's ideas.'

While it has been a long time since 'Art After Philosophy', the key element that carries into Kosuth's later monuments is one of context. Considering the formal qualities of a past 'masterwork' in the present becomes a corruption of the artist's initial impulse, by mistaking art's material persistence for its meaning. Also ignoring the present site surrounding a past monument obscures the changed nature of the monument itself. It is this lack of fixed meaning that Kosuth stressed in our meeting: 'If the monument was positioned there [on a specific site] because it was the community center of the rich and powerful, then a century later it's a ghetto, [...its meaning] changes, even though it's reframed in a radical way.' It is the individual's place to rediscover these public markers, as the physical residues of history, to reinvigorate them with new meaning within the multifaceted dimension of their present condition. And this public memory is also not stable, as Kosuth mused: 'I mean how could it be? Human history is not fixed.'



**5. Braco Dimitrijević, *Casual Passer-by I met at 2.04 p.m., Munich, 1970*, Collection Gerhard Richter, Cologne, Germany (photo: © 2017 Braco Dimitrijević)**

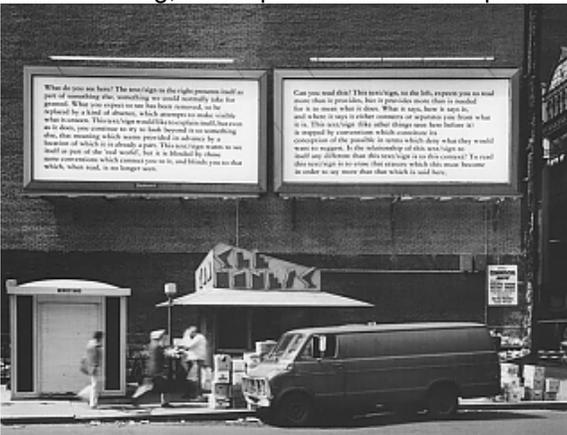
It is this use of a specific site as a surrogate for mutable meaning that connects Kosuth's monuments to his earlier more ephemeral works with language. Recalling public works like that of his famous great uncle in Cleveland, Kosuth clarified that 'these things are not experienced by any artist I know as art.' He pointed to Dan Flavin, the American artist known for his Minimalist neons, as the first person to really 'loosen up our idea of monuments'. These similarly named art objects were not so much monuments in the literal sense, but were evocative of the type of heroic sentiment that accompanies such structures. According to Kosuth, before Flavin 'monuments were thought of as very retro, but there is something very powerful about their role and the residue of that meaning and how that can be re-employed in different ways.' In support of this, Kosuth also cited his contemporary Braco Dimitrijević, a Conceptual artist born in Sarajevo, best known for his early 1970s *Casual passers-by* series (figs.5&6). Consisting of large-scale, black-and-white photo portraits of strangers he passed in the street, Dimitrijević made monuments of these everyday individuals by enlarging their likenesses and displaying them prominently on building façades and signboards. In Kosuth's words 'He was able to use it as a context for art because people didn't see it as art.' By disturbing the viewer's expectations, Dimitrijević's passers-by served to politicize, glorify and call attention to the imposed hierarchies of power underlying an increasingly alienated world community.



6. Braco Dimitrijević, *Casual Passer-by I met at 6.24 p.m.*, Düsseldorf, 1972, Städtisches Museum, Abteiberg, Mönchen-gladbach, Germany (photo: © 2017 Braco Dimitrijević)

Kosuth similarly subverts the unintentional invisibility of a monument by reframing its context, yet he shirks from any sort of sentimentality. From the very beginning of his career, the artist's primary concern has been an enquiry into the true nature of art through analytical enquiry. Avoiding the highly emotional, subjective experience called for by Abstract Expressionist works of the 1950s — which were also by *chance* highly lucrative and culturally elitist — Minimal and Conceptual artists of the following decade sought a kind of cold criticality. The intention was to democratize art by making it *information*, and while this openness was ultimately limited in the end, it did shift art out of the institutions and into the streets.

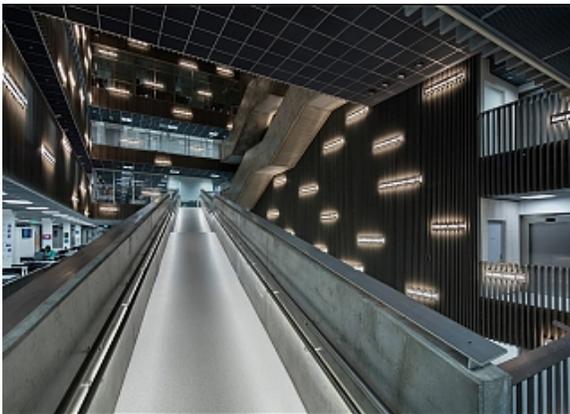
Kosuth was among the first artists to address this tension between personal contemplation and public recognition as framed by the institution. In an early interview with Jeanne Siegel broadcast on WBAI-FM New York Radio in 1970, the artist stated, 'one thing did bother me eventually, which was this *group* experience to works of art, which is necessary for the sort of heroics and monumentality that traditional art feeds on.' Framed by cultural institutions, this mob-mentality of seeing constructs meaning through the mass. Reiterated by Kosuth in our meeting, this imposed collective experience 'is a trope for authority, that is the problem.'



7. Joseph Kosuth, *Text/Context*, 1979, New York, USA (photo: Wikicommons, © 2017 Joseph Kosuth)

Kosuth sought to engage with this issue of authoritative control by co-opting and reframing traditional modes of experience. One early example of this kind of a public intervention is the artist's *Text/Context* series (1978-79). Featuring fragments of self-reflexive text, these billboard works appeared internationally translated into the mother tongue of their site across cities from Geneva to New York (fig.7). As monuments to language, Kosuth drew the public's attention not only to the true nature of the textual, but also to areas we often overlook or 'take for granted'. Kosuth's more recent public works invert this popular conceptual practice by drawing monuments into, or mapping them onto, cultural institutions. Therefore Kosuth turns this authority on its head, making individual enquiry the collective experience.

This said, works such as Kosuth's *A Monument of Monuments* did not so much offer a form of institutional critique per se, but rather used the museum to focus viewer attention towards that which would otherwise go unnoticed. This work only marked the beginning in a major series of institutionally engaged monuments or 'monumental-like' installations, both permanent and temporary, by the artist. During our meeting Kosuth stressed his recent commission for the 2017 Culture Capital of Europe, a language-based project set to wrap around the façade of a 200 year old prison in northern Denmark, which has only recently become disused. This is just one of the artist's 11 current projects worldwide, a number which like his 54 publications just keeps growing. While retaining his downtown Manhattan studio and staff, Kosuth has lived and worked outside of the United States since the late 1980s and his international projects span the globe many times over. One cannot help but feel that this global success is only matched by the confident charm of his demeanour, as an artist who knows where he stands, even if that is in several places at once. When asked whether working internationally has shifted his practice, Kosuth explained: 'I need a rich context because that is my material really, and the language and the culture.'



**8. Joseph Kosuth, *A Monument of Mines*, 2015, installation view, Krona Centre for Knowledge and Culture, Kongsberg, Norway**(photo: courtesy of the artist, Galleri Brandstrup, Oslo and the Krona Centre for Knowledge and Culture, Kongsberg, Norway, © 2017 Joseph Kosuth

One of Kosuth's most recent monuments, *A Monument of Mines*, was unveiled at the Krona Knowledge and Culture Centre in Kongsberg, Norway in November 2015 (main image, figs.8&9). Architecturally integrated, the project comprises 136 stencil-like glass rectangles covered in silver leaf and illuminated from behind by white neon, the latter being a material Kosuth has worked with since 1960s. Most literature describes these markers as 'neon elements': emphasising the medium of light over the material presence of its framing, which creates an internal temporal tension within each component. In speaking about his long-standing use of neon, Kosuth clarified 'neon [works] are different because they are not permanent at all, they burn out, they break easily, the idea is that it is a type of public writing that becomes replaced,...also they have a popular shadow to them, or popular culture...'



9. Joseph Kosuth, *A Monument of Mines*, 2015, detail, Krona Centre for Knowledge and Culture, Kongsberg, Norway (photo: Sigurd Fandango 2015)

Although culturally colloquial, Kosuth stressed that he ‘didn’t want them to seem slick and corporate looking’ and they don’t. Seeming to glow from within, or perhaps below, these markers bear the names and active dates of Kongsberg’s now defunct silver mines, once the core of Norway and Denmark’s economies. Recalling his earlier *A Monument of Monuments* in Cleveland, Kosuth’s *A Monument of Mines* differs in its permanent installation, but not in its response to the memory and identity of its specific site. As such, this latter installation reiterates Kosuth’s belief that ‘as a work of art [a monument’s] context becomes the content: again, it’s the architectural, the social, the psychological, the cultural — as well as the historical terrain, which binds them.’ Wholly integrated into the architectural construction of the Krona Centre, Kosuth’s installation illuminates not only the space, but also the memory of these once essential elements of Norway’s history. But one should not be misled: these enlightened markers are not intended as commemorative. Once again acting as cultural historian, Kosuth presents these artifacts without comment, although at the suggestion of this being a form of tribute he was not without personal opinion: ‘this money was given to the King of Denmark to wage war, do you want to pay tribute to anybody for that?’

While not sentimental, Kosuth’s choice of mines is also not without physiological symbolism. Essentially subterranean, mines physically evoke buried memory and significance. Now defunct, emptied of their original content, these mines function much like monuments in themselves. Once culturally and economically significant, their importance is now lost on the contemporary viewer through their present irrelevance. It is once again this tension between the visibility and the invisibility of a monument and its memory that surfaces. But it is not just historical memory and contemporary existence that Kosuth questions, but also the architecture of the mind — the very human quality of remembrance and experience.

Having worked with Freudian theory and psychology since the 1980s, Kosuth is no stranger to the psyche as a site. After being invited by the Sigmund Freud Gesellschaft in Vienna to do a large show in Freud’s original apartments in 1989, Kosuth soon started a foundation asking fellow artists to donate works to the museum related to the legacy of the great psychoanalyst. ‘Monuments to Freud!’— Kosuth chuckled as he recounted his now long-standing friendship and collaboration with the museum. A friendship that has included an annual lecture on the connection between art and psychology to a conference of psychoanalysts for the last 20 years. Seemingly elated by the prospect of repressed memory, Kosuth joked: ‘People ask, what is it like? And I say, well, they’re really good listeners!’



**10. Joseph Kosuth, *Ni apparence ni illusion*, 2009-10, installation view, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France** (photo: Seamus Farrell, © 2017 Joseph Kosuth)

While always concerned with this uncovering of private experience, the added weight of the monument provides Kosuth with a more tangible means to trace individual memory. In fact, Kosuth's *A Monument of Mines* at the Krona Centre bears a strong material and mental likeness to another of the artist's monumental projects entitled, *Neither Appearance nor Illusion (Ni apparence ni illusion)* at the Louvre, Paris (fig.10). Exhibited temporarily in 2009-10 and becoming a permanent work in 2012, the installation comprises 15 sentences in white neon strategically installed on the subterranean walls of the museum's medieval moat. While the title stems from a quotation by Friedrich Nietzsche, this installation was the first instance since the late 1970s that Kosuth appropriated a series of his own texts, rather than employing those of canonical writers and philosophers. The sentences, written in French, not only physically draw the viewer's attention to their surroundings, but also delve into the topography of the mind. 'They sort of mutter in your ear about where you are at,' Kosuth commented during our meeting. It is, as promised by the museum's press release, a quest which is 'both experiential and introspective.'

Earlier in January, I had seen Kosuth speak on a panel with fellow artist, Gavin Turk, at the Anna Freud House in London. In that conversation he had stated that the first thing people look for in a work of art is authenticity. Returning to *A Monument of Mines*, I asked if this expectation pertained to the experience of a monument as well as the work could allow for the fabrication of facts. Without pause, Kosuth countered: 'What is important is that the experience be authentic. That is the human power of experience of the work, because it is about validity.' And with that we circled back to the impulse of the idea and back to the viewer left to discern what individual experience becomes when monument or a masterwork persists.

With the artist before me, I couldn't help but pry into the permanent implications of his own material legacy. His response was reflective: 'I'm not sure what all this means, I could regret making these kinds of works possibly, but I have to do them to know if I regret them. There is no obvious direction, it has to be somewhat internally driven in regards to what your problematic is. So much of my early work was temporary, and it is long gone except for the photo of it, and so that in a way becomes worrying, because it could get into the hands of some people who will reframe it for their own purposes, so the way that the actual work gets left behind is of some value.'

As I was leaving, Kosuth pointed to a scrap of paper above the study doorway printed with the words: 'No one should drive a hard bargain with an artist.' 'It's a quote from Beethoven, I've taken it from studio to studio — it's a kind of maxim in a way.' Looking at the man, thinking of his monuments, I couldn't help but wonder how their meaning has and would continue to transform over time. As the nature of art and the artist isn't fixed, and I mean, how could they be?

*Main image:* Joseph Kosuth, *A Monument of Mines*, 2015, installation view, Krona Centre for Knowledge and Culture, Kongsberg, Norway (photo: courtesy of the artist, Galleri Brandstrup, Oslo and the Krona Centre for Knowledge and Culture, Kongsberg, Norway, © 2017 Joseph Kosuth)