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Art in America



Joseph Kosuth, Quoted Clocks #16, 2020, clock and vinyl, 15 3/4 by 1 3/4 inches; at Sean Kelly.

Joseph Kosuth's recent exhibition "Existential Time" (all works 2020), his first US solo in five years, was originally scheduled to open at **Sean Kelly** in late March 2020, but was postponed until September due to the pandemic. Ironically, the delay added another level of meaning to the show, which combined images and objects with the ruminations of various noted writers on the nature of time.

A pioneer of Conceptualism and installation art, Kosuth, who lives in New York and London, has explored the relationship between art and language for more than five decades. In this show, long lines of white neon lettering about seven inches high ran along one side of the room, illuminating the eerily darkened main gallery space, whose walls were painted slate gray. Each of the eight neon texts, positioned at a different height between floor and ceiling, was a quote from one of eight well-known literary figures identified by initials: Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Roberto Bolaño, Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, Virginia Woolf, Shirley Jackson, and Antonio Porchia.

Existential Time #14 reads, "I am the seasons, I think sometimes January, May, November, the mud, the midst, the dawn"—a snippet from the 1931 novel *The Waves*

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by Virginia Woolf. Accompanying each neon quote was a round industrial wall clock about sixteen inches in diameter. In a rather wry gesture, Kosuth set the motorized clock hands in these works spinning round the clockface at an accelerated pace, as if to speed up time, or at least to evoke the common sensation of its aggressive and relentless advance.



View of Joseph Kosuth's exhibition "Existential Time," at Sean Kelly.

Countering that nod to the relativity of time, twenty identical clocks, hung in an evenly spaced row high on the opposite wall, all told the current time of day. This series offers quotes from some of the same writers, plus William Shakespeare, Herman Melville, Paul Valéry, August Wilson, Toni Morrison, and others, in black vinyl press type applied to the convex glass covering each clock. One of the standouts for me, *Quoted Clocks #28*, features an observation by Søren Kierkegaard: "Language has time as its element; all other media have space as their element." This subtle pronouncement could be read as either an ominous warning or an inspiring mantra for speakers and writers.

Hung on the back wall and serving as the exhibition's denouement were two large sepia photo pieces, paired with text panels silkscreened on laminated glass and backlit with white neon. *Illumination (Existential Time) #3* comprises a vertical diptych showing two giraffes and a polar bear, all (it's hard to tell) either live in captivity or taxidermied in a diorama, along with a remark by Friedrich Nietzsche: "This has given me the greatest trouble and still does: to realize that what things are called is incomparably more important than what they are." It sounds almost like a summa of Kosuth's career.

The forlorn image in the other work, *Illumination (Existential Time) #2*, shows a lone owl standing on a deserted country road at night, seemingly illuminated by car headlights. The picture, referencing Hegel's owl of Minerva, is matched with a text panel that

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quotes poet Antonio Porchia: “A thing, until it is everything, is noise, and once it is everything it is silence.” The element of time embedded in the line, evokes a sense of evolving, of becoming, with time arrested just for a silent moment, like the owl frozen in headlights. With their exhilarating tension between image and text, these new works make their own temporal demand on the viewer—to stop and find connections. In the end, Kosuth’s musings on “existential time” wind up being philosophical, yes, but also engagingly lyrical and personal.

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