

[from Joseph Kosuth to Mark Harris]

JOSEPH KOSUTH, GENT STUDIO

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To: MARK HARRIS

Mark,

Thanks for taking the time to explain a bit your project. It was more to do with my curiosity than it was that my approval was needed. Still, one is always more comfortable knowing how one's work is used, particularly when it is willingly.

Your brief comments were edifying, and I thought I might pass your way two fragments of a larger text of mine, from a lecture tour I just gave in Australia, which seems to the point concerning this work:

I.

As a concrete and early example I would cite my own work from 1965, the Protoinvestigations, of which works such as 'One and Three Chairs' would be a representative example. This work, using deadpan 'scientific style' photographs which were always taken by others, employed also common objects and enlarged texts from dictionary definitions. The physical elements were never signed, with the concept of the work being that this 'form of presentation' would be made and re-made. The reason for this was an important part of my intention: eliminate the aura of traditional art and force another basis for this activity to be approached as art, that is: conceptually. Ownership of the work has been established by the production instructions which second as a certificate. It is signed, but as a deed of ownership, not as a work of art. Thus, I've made it clear that these certificates are never to be exhibited, since they are not art, and they rarely are. The art itself, which is neither the props with which the idea is communicated, nor the signed certificate, is only the idea in and of the work. As it was for other artists at that time, the issues of modernism were rapidly becoming opaque. One effect of this work was to 'sum up' modernism for me, and once that was visible I was able to use that view to get past it, as the work which followed shows. Thus, for me, this work was both a 'summation' of modernism and the way out of it.

II.

A case in point to cite, would be my use of tautology in the mid-1960's. Its use in the Protoinvestigations has generated a variety of confused responses. One aspect of this work was the attempt to actualize a Wittgensteinian insight: by drawing out the relation of art to language, could one begin the production of a cultural language whose very function it was to show, rather than say? Such artworks might function in a way which circumvents

significantly much of what limits language. Art, some have argued, describes reality. But, unlike language, artworks, it can also be argued, simultaneously describe how they describe it. Granted, art can be seen here as self-referential, but importantly, not meaninglessly self-referential. What art shows in such a manifestation is, indeed, how it functions. This is revealed in works which feign to say, but do so as an art proposition and reveal the difference (while showing their similarity) with language. This was, of course, the role of language in my work beginning in 1965. It seemed to me that if language itself could be used to function as an artwork, then that difference would bare the device of art's language game. An artwork then, as such a double mask, provided the possibility of not just a reflection on itself, but an indirect double reflection on the nature of language, through art, to culture itself. "Do not forget," writes Wittgenstein, "that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information is not used in the language-game of giving information". Whatever insights this early work of mine had to share, it did, and it initiated within the practice an essential questioning process which is now basic to it. It should be obvious that the 'barring of the device' of the institutions of art would begin at the most elemental level: the point of production itself, the artwork. Seeing the artwork, in such a context, forced a scrutiny of its conventions and historical baggage, such as painting and sculpture itself as an activity. First inside the frame and then outside. One goal, at the time, of work like *The Second Investigation*, was to question the institutional forms of art. If the work that preceded this confronted the institutionalized form of authority of traditional art, this work pressed the point out of the gallery and museum into the world, using public media.

I will have to cut this off here, since we are moving home and studio (in Europe) to Rome in less than a month and I have six deadlines to finish before we begin to pack this studio away. Please keep me updated on this project as well as your others-

With my best regards,

JOSEPH KOSUTH