

Of playing and cheating

from chair as chair as chair to a system

There's "chair as chair as chair" and then there's "art as idea as idea". But how? What happened in between those two titles, two phrases, two slogans? How did Kosuth go from one to the other? It's that space in between those two phrases that I'm interested in.

Joseph Kosuth (1945) made "One and three chairs" in 1965 (fig. 1) and it has been considered a work of conceptual art ever since: one actual chair in the middle of a photo of a chair and the dictionary definition of a chair.



fig.1 - "One and three chairs" © Adagp, Paris 2007

He said that it was chair as chair as chair and then he moved on, due to different reasons, to work only with words; and he became famous with those works.

One of his best known works is the "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)" series (fig. 2) where he exposed different dictionary definitions of words (like 'language', 'image', 'water', 'nothing', 'meaning', 'paint-less' and, of course, 'art') painted in white letters on black canvases hanging from the walls inside art galleries and museums.

Although in some ways a weak work because of reasons I'll explain later on, this series is also interesting to me because of my fascination with words. And also

because, to me, there are many things not told about this work and Kosuth's way of thinking that led him to its making. And because it occupies an important place in a branch of art which is all about concept and ideas (and, of course, because of the title the work carries) I think it deserves a thoughtful analysis.

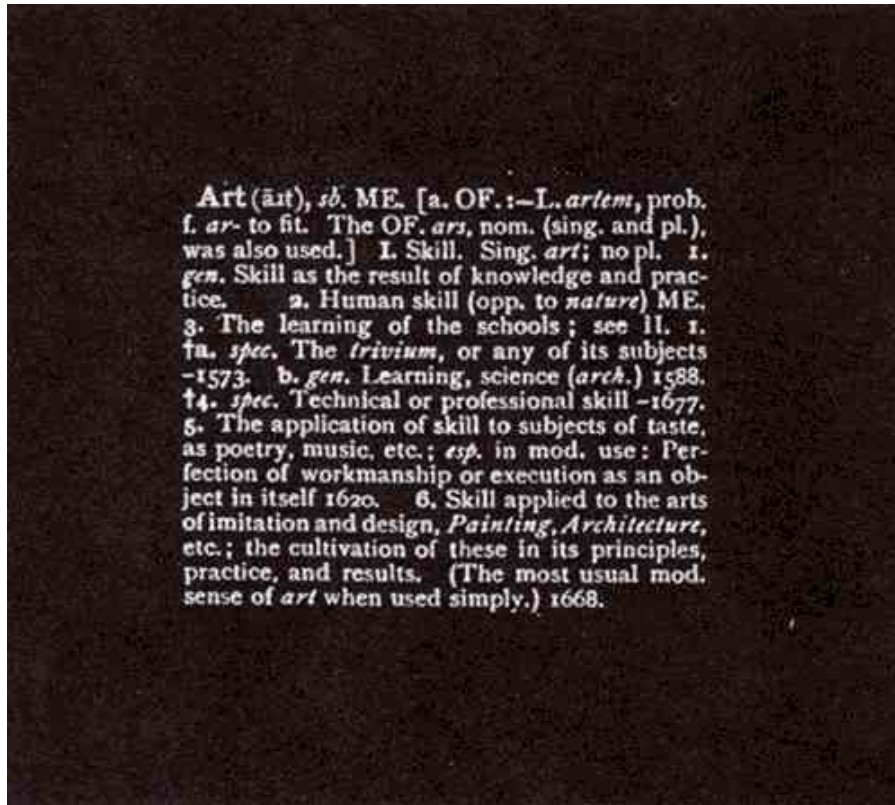


fig. 2 - "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)"

Critics, artists and Kosuth himself have said much about this series, thus that's not where I'd like to focus my attention. As I said before, I want to focus it in the space between "chair as chair as chair" and "art as idea as idea"; or, actually, "Art as Idea as Idea", with capital letters; because, as I would discover while reading about this work and conceptual art in general, every single detail of a conceptual artwork is incredibly important, even vital to its outcome and analysis.

In my own search for conceptualization and how to present things in space, I went from this:

Art as Idea as Idea

Art is Idea as Idea

Art as Idea is Idea

to this:

art	is	art	is	art
art	is	art	as	art
art	as	art	as	art
art	as	art	is	art
art	is	art	is	idea
art	is	art	as	idea
art	as	art	as	idea
art	as	art	is	idea
art	is	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	is	idea
art	is	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	is	idea
idea	is	art	is	art
idea	is	art	as	art
idea	as	art	as	art
idea	as	art	is	art
idea	is	art	is	idea
idea	is	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	is	idea
idea	is	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	is	idea
idea	is	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	is	idea

(fig. 3 - first table)

but how did I do that?

Taking as starting point that, to me, the title “Art as Idea as Idea” is arbitrary, I started looking for other options related to it. And that’s how I came with the other two possibilities: “Art is Idea as Idea” and “Art as Idea is Idea”.

At the same time, I was asking myself what would be the best way to present art in an exhibition space, and I was trying to figure out a way of presenting my own two titles in that space. What I came up with was to show those two titles on walls opposite to each other. In the first case (Art is Idea as Idea) my idea was to present six white canvases of the same size one next to the other on a white wall, with the title next to the last one. Opposite to this, my idea for the second title (Art as Idea is Idea) was to leave the wall empty and to put the title in a position diagonally opposite to the first one.

This way I would be able to say that in the case of Art is Idea as Idea, the idea of an empty-canvas-based work of art (with painting seen as the most traditional representation of what most people call “art” when they think of the word “art”) would trigger the idea of a painting even though there is nothing painted, but there are canvases. And in the case of Art as Idea is Idea, the absence of object but the presence of a title would suggest the “idea of art”.

My search being that the idea of art is more important than the art piece itself, this seemed like a good starting point of my research. But, of course, at the moment it wasn’t a starting point, it was an end point; but, again, of course, it wasn’t an end but just a starting point.

After leaving this idea bouncing in my mind for some time, I discovered that I was cheating because I could see all the randomness I saw in Kosuth gap (between chair as chair as chair and art as idea as idea) in my own choice (the gap from art as idea as idea to my two titles). I had chosen those two possibilities but I had left a lot of possibilities out of it. Even some I hadn’t even thought about. Why did I do that? What had happened with all the other possibilities and all the roads they could lead to? And, in the end, which are those other possibilities? After some hours of looking into this problem I came up with the first table (fig. 3): there were 32 possibilities. 29 more than Kosuth’s and mine together. What about them?

I thought, as I’ve been doing lately, that I should play a bit with that table to see where it would and could take me.

This way I came up, in order, with two other tables: a numerical one (fig. 4) and a tight one (fig. 5)

In the case of the numerical table, my fascination for numbers took over. Based on the system I used to replace all the letters for numbers in a story I’ve written some time ago, I switched the letters of the table for the corresponding number of each letter. This way I added a new layer of content (or, at the very least, form) on top of it. But in the end I realized that it would be impossible for the viewer to translate this information into words unless that person knew that I had also written a story completely in numbers and that the story has a code behind it. Thus I realized that I was asking that viewer to know this work, know its author, know that the same author had edited a book with a story written mostly in numbers, know that that story was written using a code so it could be decoded, and to know that that exact code was applicable to this work too. If not impossible, I presented the audience an extremely difficult task. But most importantly, I wasn’t presenting the original idea I was trying to present in the first place. I was playing. And I was cheating.

192	91	192	91	192
192	91	192	11	192
192	11	192	11	192
192	11	192	91	192
192	91	192	91	9451
192	91	192	11	9451
192	11	192	11	9451
192	11	192	91	9451
192	91	9451	91	192
192	91	9451	11	192
192	11	9451	11	192
192	11	9451	91	192
192	91	9451	91	9451
192	91	9451	11	9451
192	11	9451	11	9451
192	11	9451	91	9451
9451	91	192	91	192
9451	91	192	11	192
9451	11	192	11	192
9451	11	192	91	192
9451	91	192	91	9451
9451	91	192	11	9451
9451	11	192	11	9451
9451	11	192	91	9451
9451	91	9451	91	192
9451	91	9451	91	192
9451	11	9451	11	192
9451	11	9451	91	192
9451	91	9451	91	9451
9451	91	9451	11	9451
9451	11	9451	11	9451
9451	11	9451	91	9451

fig. 4 - numerical table

art	is	art	is	art
art	is	art	as	art
art	as	art	as	art
art	as	art	is	art
art	is	art	is	idea
art	is	art	as	idea
art	as	art	as	idea
art	as	art	is	idea
art	is	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	is	idea
art	is	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	is	idea
idea	is	art	is	art
idea	is	art	as	art
idea	as	art	as	art
idea	as	art	is	art
idea	is	art	is	idea
idea	is	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	is	idea
idea	is	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	is	idea
idea	is	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	is	idea

fig. 5 - tight table

With the tight table (fig. 5) I was trying to approach the table from the its form aspect: how to present it in space in the “best” way, the “most beautiful” way. I also realized that the table doesn’t work that way because, to begin with, the “table” aspect of it fades to the point of almost invisibility. Not because it stops being a table (it still looks very much like one) but because I could see that what I considered a vital aspect of the work was almost gone: showing the system.

art	is	art	is	art
art	is	art	as	art
art	as	art	as	art
art	as	art	is	art
art	is	art	is	idea
art	is	art	as	idea
art	as	art	as	idea
art	as	art	is	idea
art	is	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	as	art
art	as	idea	is	art
art	is	idea	is	idea
art	is	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	as	idea
art	as	idea	is	idea
idea	is	art	is	art
idea	is	art	as	art
idea	as	art	as	art
idea	as	art	is	art
idea	is	art	is	idea
idea	is	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	as	idea
idea	as	art	is	idea
idea	is	idea	is	art
idea	is	idea	as	art
idea	as	idea	as	art
idea	is	idea	is	idea
idea	is	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	as	idea
idea	as	idea	is	idea

fig. 6 - "5"

I realized, then, that at that moment (not before, and only half the time afterwards) it wasn't the title/slogan I was really interested in; it was the system (fig. 6).

I consulted an engineer friend of mine to help me come up with a formula to be absolutely sure that the possibilities were "only" 32, but he told me that there were so many variables to be added to the equation that I should trust my several hours of thinking. He checked the table, I triple checked it too, and we agreed that it was definitely the total amount.

At this point, I started thinking about a title. The system was in place and I needed to have some time off it. To this day I would still like to have the actual mathematical formula behind my choices because it would make a good title for the piece, a good playing title to be precise. In the end I decided for “5” as title, and that is because of two reasons. The first one being that talking with a teacher of mine she told me that all five pages of the reasoning (the three original title lines and the four tables) could be a five-pages-long mini book and I really liked the idea. The second reason was that the table has five columns. But both reasons were lies. Both reasons were based on my assumptions of what the audience would think about the work and where did the title come from: the obvious choices. My own reason was that there were 32 options, and $3+2 = 5$ (I carry that operation of reducing numbers to its minimum every time I see a number with more than one digit). This way, the title works in different levels: there are different reasons to have such a title, both coming from the audience and from me, and there’s also my own meaning that is almost hidden... It was a great choice.

So, then, how can I show it? There were two possibilities: several of the five-page-long book on a pile on the floor up to the height of more or less 1,5 meters; or only “5” on a wall printed in an A4 size.

The first way reminds me a lot of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and it gives the possibility of attaching to the piece one of the big words in art nowadays: interactivity. Basically, and to try to strip it from any beautiful packaging, the pile allows the audience to take the piece with them if so wished. It seemed a good possibility but it was not what I was looking for and it was also completely out of my budget.

The second possibility was indeed much cheaper and it had more to do with my original idea of the canvases on the walls. It also carries some risks, like the context it is shown in, what other works are presented next to it (if any), the fact that it can be prized for sale and more.

But, still, playing and cheating:

- Playing with the audience regarding the title(s)
- Playing with Kosuth’s work from the very instant I decided to show that he is cheating by having a gap between his two pieces (my own arbitrary decision) and by being arbitrary and using notions from psychology and philosophy (among other) to add at least one extra layer of “vagueness” to his work.
- Playing with the system, because my own choices are arbitrary too. The only reason why my chosen system has “only” 32 options is because I decided to keep the structural order of Kosuth’s “Art as Idea as Idea”: I kept the words “as” and “is” in the second and fourth column, and the words “art” and “idea” in the first, third and fifth. But why? There is yet another gap in that decision I made. The actual amount of possible combinations of four words (art, idea, is, as) is 256, and the number for four words in five columns is much bigger because each one should be repeated several times for each combination. So, in the end, as much as I think that Kosuth cheated, I am cheating too. Playing and cheating. Always.

And what about the next steps? Adding new steps towards showing “5” in public adds new steps to the equation of cheating (and, of course, playing):

- With or without the author’s name
- With or without the title
 - (and/or a combination of both)
- Only one on the wall or a pile on the floor
- Marked as part of a series or not
- Put on the wall by the artist, the curator, the owner of the exhibition space or a person not related to the art world
- The amount printed
- The amount that should be printed
- Can this idea be sold (like, for example, Siegelaub did)?
- How to price it?
- Does this idea infringe copyright? (to ask something completely irrelevant)

Will all these elements make a difference? Yes. Then when does it all stop? Whenever I want? Whenever the public wants? What should be left in and/or out? Who decides that? How many elements are inside and outside the work of art? Choices.