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THE LINGUISTIC TURN IN CONCEPTUALISM AND AFTER

Abstract: One of the most spectacular turns in the art of the 20th century was based on the linguistic reorientation of philosophy, whose extreme manifestation was Wittgenstein's non-denotational conception of meaning. It inspired the so-called analytical conceptualism that was trying in vain to overcome the heterogeneous nature of conceptism, from which it derived. This is reflected especially in Joseph Kosuth's confusion concerning the neo-positivist inspiration and one of the guiding themes of natural language philosophy which emphasizes the significance of metaphor and the fundamental role of the functor as in human thinking. The following article presents this process of inconsistent reduction of art to language, showing some of its consequences and its replacement by contextualism.

Keywords: conceptism, conceptualism, contextualism, extension, intension, linguistic turn

Attempts to compare or reduce art to language were set off by the high position of literature, especially by the special status of poetry, which, since antiquity, played a leading role in the *paragone* (competition) between the arts of word and image. At least since Mannerism, poetic conceptism also had an impact on the visual arts and integrated the divided fields of art in general. This tendency – to perceive an artwork as a sign continued in the Enlightenment's allegorization and the Romantic symbolization, although it was halted by the formalist tradition of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), further reinforced by the post-Kantian formalism of Konrad Fiedler in the late 19th century. He understood the experience of art as a kind of knowledge or production of reality. According to Benedetto Croce, nobody revealed the nature of artistic activity better than Fiedler, who compared it to the function of language. This

influenced the Italian aesthete's understanding of artistic expression.¹ However, the radical formalism of the 20th century avant-garde – for example the *laocoonism* of Władysław Strzemiński or Clement Greenberg – often broke these links between the fine arts and language and became – like the more fundamental conceptism – one of the victims of the linguistic turn in Conceptualism. Conceptual artists, by an extreme radicalization of concept art, at the same time – paradoxically – tried to reduce this tradition to the unique concept of art as *idea as idea*, after the implosion of the linguistic or semiological reorientation of culture. Many articles, such as “The Role of Language” (1969, published only in 1974²) by Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden became the basis for the concept of artwork as text.

The rejection of conceptual heterogeneity

Conceptism is a broader category than conceptual art or Conceptualism.³ For Henry Flynt concept art is a type of art whose material is language and concepts. Although a “concept” is a trace of the Platonic “idea” and it means an intension of a name, today – taking into account the current state of knowledge – it is wrong to assume that the relationship between a name and its intension is objective.⁴ Flynt rightly pointed out the tension between the tendency to preserve the subjectivity characteristic for conceptism (and for Fluxus, which he had joined) and the inclination towards art modeled by the objective (e.g. mathematical, as in Minimalism, or logical as in the analytical conceptualism) rules of language. According to Daniel Buren, “concept” can be understood not only lexicographically as a general and abstract mental representation of an object. This word is overdetermined because it has several senses: 1. concept as project; 2. mannerism; 2a. verbiage, and 3. concept as idea and art.⁵ Buren has rightly emphasized that this last – artistic – perspective allows us to transfer the

¹ B. Croce, *Ästhetik als Wissenschaft des Ausdrucks und allgemeine Linguistik. Theorie und Geschichte*, E.A. Seemann, Leipzig 1905.

² I. Burn, M. Ramsden, “The Role of Language”, in: Ch. Harrison, P. Wood, ed., *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge - Massachusetts, USA 1993, pp. 879-881.

³ K. Piotrowski, „Konceptualizm jako koncepcyzm”, *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 2012, no. 6, pp. 109-117.

⁴ H. Flynt, Henry “Concept Art” (1961) in: K. Stiles, P. Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Ltd., Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996, pp. 820-822.

⁵ D. Buren, “Beware!” (1969/70) in: K. Stiles, P. Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, op. cit., pp. 140-141.

concept from mental reality to the sphere of objecthood, and to speak about a concept-object. So a concept in this wider sense is not – as a categorematic expression – a whole which is expressible in language as a name (idea). In other words – to use Husserl's terminology – a concept appears to be a quasi-syncategorematic expression (as a functor mapping one category onto another and imitating its morphisms). A concept is inherently heterogeneous because it is a mental and sensory whole at the same time; it unifies the *signifié* and *signifiant* as well as exposes the conditions of this differential whole. A concept is dialectical, to recall Roland Barthes' thesis popular in the 1960s from his *Elements of Semiology*: “there is no language without speech, and no speech outside language”.⁶

However, in Buren's text one can see the tendency, characteristic for Conceptualism, to reduce the importance of the term “concept”. Even in Sol LeWitt's *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (1967) and *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969), the term functions as an alternative to “idea” which can be simple and does not have to be as complex as “concept”. According to LeWitt, “concept” implies a general direction, and ideas are its components. This dialectic heterogeneity of “concept” and the homogeneity of “idea” are present even in Mel Ramsden's famous *Secret Painting* (1967-68), in which, beside a black – probably Suprematist – square, painted on the canvas in acrylic, he placed the comment: “The content of this painting is invisible: the character and dimension of the content are to be permanently secret, known only to the artist”. Similarly, a concept is responsible for the condensation of the content in the most reductive works of Conceptual art, in the linguistic theory-practice of the British fraction of Art & Language (Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell). For example in *Index 001* (1972), shown at Documenta V, we can observe the surprising economy of conceptism, which Freud wrote about in his study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). The valorization of ideas has taken place here – paradoxically – through filing and enclosing the theoretical texts of the group members in gray boxes. But the question emerges here from Ramsden's parody and Art & Language's conceptual rejection of the myth of subjectivity: is a concept the *raison d'être* of these works, or is it only a means of exposing of their *secret* (and therefore *prior* or *central*) idea? Is Conceptualism the most extreme manifestation of conceptism in the 20th century, or should Conceptual art be rather understood as a linguistic reduction of conceptism's heterogeneity?

⁶ R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. by A. Lavers & C. Smith, Hill & Wang, New York 1968, p. 15.

Linguistic reductionism – anti-essentialism

The linguistic reduction of the heterogeneity of concepts culminates in the theoretical reflection of the group Art & Language – especially in Terry Atkinson's and Michael Baldwin's article "On the Material Character / Physical-Object Paradigm of Art" (1972).⁷ However, this tendency to disambiguate art by the elevation of the idea (in Joseph Kosuth's formula "idea as idea") is not continued in the theory of Conceptualism, which smuggles in conceptism's subjectivity, and where the essence of art disappears or falls into anomie.

The Art & Language members – e.g. Ian Burn – argued that it makes no sense to analyze the nature of art because we can only say something about the nature of its concepts. Therefore, the main proposals of the group converge with the views promoted by the Anglo-Saxon analytical aesthetics (e.g. with Morris Weitz's anti-essentialism). The word "art" has only predicative – propositional or hypothetical status. Ian Burn, Roger Cutforth and Mel Ramsden have suggested in *Art-Language* magazine (June 1970) in their text "Proceedings of the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses" that "art" does not have the status of a substantial expression (prior context) in language, and therefore it is not a subject about which we can say that it is something or not.⁸ The expressions "art is" or "art exists" are grammatical illusions, because syntactically the word "art" cannot be a subject of a sentence (despite the linguistic illusion) but only a predicative expression (second context) which is predicated on the subject of a proposition. Therefore saying "art" we mean "of art", which means that an object gains the status (the function) of art – it becomes art. Using such expressions as "an object of art" or "a concept of art", we have to keep in mind this second – assertive, predicative – status of art. Art does not have a substantial context in language such that we can say that we have to do with art. The expressions "object" and "art" exclude one another because these words belong to different syntactic contexts and can be combined in a sentence only in its propositional function. Art is not determined by the temporal and spatial properties of the object (as in conceptism, and especially in the poetics of Fluxus or in Situationist aesthetics), but the basis of art is a grammatical format (with a predominance of some semantic applications of the word "art", as in "art community"). An artist states a new rule of artistry, namely that something can appear as art because it is syntactically acceptable as a new component

⁷ T. Atkinson, M. Baldwin, "On the Material Character / Physical-Object Paradigm of Art", *Art-Language* 1972, no 1, pp. 51-55.

⁸ I. Burn, R. Cutforth, M. Ramsden, "Proceedings, the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses", *Art-Language* 1970 (VI), pp. 1ff, in: P. Osborne, ed., *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon Press Inc., London - New York 2002, pp. 236-237.

of art. It is undeniable that certain components – according to the existing genealogy and the dominant rules of use of the expression “art” – seem more appropriate here, while other elements require more justification in order to fulfill the nominative and paradigmatic function of something being art. Hence the importance of the functor “as” which allows us to predicate on any objects the attribute of artistry (“as art”) and thereby to inspire further evaluation. It is easy to see that this anti-essentialist theory, despite its inclination towards relativism and anomie, suggests the existence of an original order (a regulative principle?) of art. Thus, the views of the Art & Language group were not so revolutionary, though they are coherent with the methodology of Thomas Kuhn negating cumulative development of science. This deficiency can be seen in the conceptualism of Joseph Kosuth.

Art and the end of philosophy

Kosuth slowly grew to complement these efforts of Conceptualism with the application of Wittgenstein's non-denotational conception of meaning, in order to come forward with the tautological model of art in his famous and widely discussed text “Art after Philosophy”, published in the London magazine *Studio International* (October, November, and December 1969).⁹ His proposal was a breakthrough in the development of modern art, as its culmination and a consequence of the linguistic turn which had taken place in Western philosophy. The intellectual climate inspiring these considerations on art led to the rejection of not only philosophical aesthetics, but also philosophy.

Kosuth begins by taking note of the crisis in the empirical sciences, citing Sir Alfred Jules Ayer, according to whom physicists today fall into dogmatism, coming close in their speculations to religion. This might be because they wish to correct their earlier scientific attitude, characterized by anti-religious dogmatism. Kosuth tries to convince us with the help of Ayer that physics has fallen into stagnation and has perhaps ended up like philosophy half a century before, recalling the opinion of another British philosopher James Opie Urmson, who referred to Wittgenstein. The latter's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1921) opened the eyes of many philosophers believing in the wisdom of philosophy. Kosuth is committed to the Wittgensteinian claim that philosophy is neither empirical like science nor tautological like mathematics. Wittgenstein had already stated his embarrassment with traditional philosophy in 1918,

⁹ J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. by G. Guercio, foreword by J.-F. Lyotard, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts - London, England 2002, pp. 13-32.

when he abandoned it. These theoretical affiliations – the neo-Positivist narrowing of the scope of sense and the pedantry of the Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy – turned the young artist against classical philosophy and the modern followers of the metaphysical tradition; especially against Hegel's thesis about the logical death of art. Hegel – in his absolutist ambitions – destroyed the achievements of the critical philosophy of the Enlightenment, arriving at the conclusion that “there is nothing more to be said”. Thus philosophy had ended with Hegel, and Kosuth takes a belated revenge on him for the artists. He tries to free them from the hegemony of this kind of umbrella philosophy, aesthetics, or even theory constructed on the basis of some external, non-artistic context, absolutizing the context of art as the autonomous and self-sufficient one in the self-consciousness of the artist. Kosuth's aversion to Hegel turns him against the whole traditional philosophy focused on expressing what is unspeakable – “the unsaid”. He takes the side of analytical philosophy, according to which something is unspeakable simply because it is impossible to express, i.e. is *unsayable*. The linguistically oriented Anglo-Saxon philosophy, opposed to the continental one, becomes for him an ally in this struggle for the emancipation of art that examines philosophical discourse and enquires about the “unreality” of philosophy in general. As Sir James Jeans has pointed out, with the progress of science, especially the advancement of the natural sciences based on mathematics that increasingly transcend an anthropomorphic worldview – philosophy is now stagnating. It simply dwells at the earlier misconceptions which resulted from the philosophers' focusing on the figurative aspects of scientific theories. And the better the scientific discourse overcomes these anthropomorphic, figurative limitations, and approximates the real, non-doxal knowledge of nature, the more philosophy becomes anachronistic in its problems, and its theses are difficult to defend.

From this vantage point, Kosuth sees the beginning of the 20th century as the time of “the end of philosophy and the beginning of art”. He himself – in case philosophy is not quite dead yet – tries to speed up its demise. But he does not definitively specify the causal link between the end of philosophy and the beginning of art. However, he makes the suggestion that this relationship is not coincidental, and it may be treated as a crucial point in his reflection on conceptual art. He sees current art – as practiced by other artists – as a consequence of this situation and a ground for the survival of art after the end of philosophy. The religious, metaphysical, and aesthetic sources of art have not dried out, but were simply always dry and completely illusory, a mirage. Today's art – after the end of religion and philosophy – is fighting for its authority over souls. Through its sophisticated concepts, art serves what we call “man's spiritual needs”. Art focuses its attention – like once philosophy (metaphysics) – on the non-physical.

The criticism of aesthetics and formalism

The model of art proposed in *Art after Philosophy* was certainly an extreme consequence of one of the leading strategies of modernism – essentialism, but – paradoxically – it had anti-essentialist implications. The ready-mades of Duchamp, who did not ask about the *what* and *how* of art, permitted Kosuth to overcome the formalist versions of essentialism (such as that of Clement Greenberg), and thus argue for the separation of the idea of art from aesthetics. Duchamp had already done this in his concept of the ready-made as a manifestation of his disdain for the aesthetic value of unique works of art. Kosuth justified this separation, rightly asserting that aesthetics relies on the opinions related to the perception of the world in general, and not only to art, to which the aesthetic function was wrongly attributed. The realization of the aesthetic or decorative values, like the realization of religious or other socially useful goals – is external to art. Naturally, the objects appearing in the context of art can be perceived in an aesthetic way, but the functioning of art is not dependent on the requirements of taste or aesthetic judgments. While any item may be aesthetically perceived – this is independent of the conclusion that it appears in the context of art as a work of art. Thus the aesthetic background is neutral to the context of art. Kosuth primarily attacks painting as decoration and a purely aesthetic exercise, sarcastically calling Clement Greenberg “a critic of taste”. Greenberg ignored the earlier ideas of Ad Reinhardt, as well as the works of Frank Stella and others painters, because they were not to his taste. Contrary to Michael Fried’s assertions, the formalist critique – grounded in the morphology of traditional art – is not based on in-depth research. The analyses of the formalist critics are limited to the physical properties of objects, rejecting the concept of art as a mental, conceptual process, and ignoring temporal and material change, in favour of their language fixations, as also confirmed by Robert Smithson. Formalist criticism, as an unnecessary intermediary, does not add any knowledge (or facts) to the understanding of art and its functions. It trivializes art and reduces it to mindless and commercial visual music (Muzak), as pointed out by Lucy Lippard. This criticism – aspiring to be academic – is in fact journalism (the most senseless and counterproductive profession in America, as claimed by Dan Flavin).

However, Kosuth reinterprets the context of formal analysis in some cases – such as that of Cubism, locating it in the process of a priori ideation, and recognizes some examples of art understood as an idea in the morphological variants of historical reflection on art. The value of Cubism for art does not lie in the physical or visual qualities of its images, but in its concept – in the *linguistic* rather than the sensory impact of the Cubist canvases. The physical or aesthetic values of colors and shapes – which are only servicing the formal

(sensory) components of the language of art – should not be confused with meanings as constitutive elements for the development of art as such or as non-sensory conceptualism. The morphological recognition of art does not exhaust its essence but is an a priori concept located in the context of art. The formalists are not aware that their formal innovations are often developmental factors of the language of art and are not limited to its morphological aspect. Although some formalist concepts – such as the morphology of Manet, Cézanne and the Cubists – have revolutionized painting, in comparison with Duchamp's concepts they seem to be timid and ambiguous. These formalist problems do not have any ground-breaking strength to contest the nature or function of art. Meanwhile, questioning the nature of art is just a very important aspect of understanding its function (Kosuth seems to suggest here that the nature of art – considered in its internal context – is self-resistant, to use an expression of poststructuralists referring to language or to any economy-producing sense). After Duchamp, artists have moved their attention from the form of language to what is being said, without emphasizing the phenomenal domain (appearance) but accentuating the importance of the concept, which was the proper beginning of modernist and conceptual art. As Kosuth told Jeanne Siegel, if criticism wants to retain its validity, it needs to get closer to the intentions of the artists, instead of treating their works as ready-made for their interpretation.

Kosuth gets into trouble here because he is blinded by a dogmatic kind of historicism and by a new essentialism (resembling the post-Kantian formalism of Greenberg), i.e. by an orthodox vision of conceptual evolution. He proclaims the progress of counter-intuitive concepts or conceptions of art – without the possibility of return. Nevertheless, it is always possible that art is *alive* and that even ancient art has a potential to be re-used, and therefore to be subject to revitalization. For him works of art have their value and meaning in so far as it does not reduce them to sensory, physical residues of artistic ideas, but as far as those interact with other works, generating new ideas. After all, he claims, after Duchamp all art is conceptual because it exists only conceptually. The only reason for the existence of successive generations of artists is their contribution to the process of questioning the existing concepts of art. The decisive factor here is what these artists add to the previous concepts and what new ideas they propose. Art appears as a self-reference system constructed of propositional functions, where the term “art” is a constant, realized by different variables.

Like Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt was also a precursor here. In his text “Art as Art” (1962) he wrote that the result of the fifty years of development of abstract painting was to show “art-as-art and as nothing else”.¹⁰ Kosuth seemed

¹⁰ A. Reinhardt, “Art as Art”, *Art International* 1962, no 10, pp. 36-37.

to share the optimism of Reinhardt – of his main protagonist from the world of art, whose convictions he has often discussed with his students at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He especially liked Reinhardt's idea of “the last painting [that] anyone can make”, and his claim that “You can paint anything, and you can paint anything out. You can begin with anything and get rid of it. I already got rid of all that other stuff. Someone else doesn't have to do it”.¹¹ Kosuth has developed one of the most important ideas of Reinhardt – “art as art”, repeating this formula in his famous superposition “art as idea as idea”. In 1970 the artist gave an interview in which he answered Jeanne Siegel's question of why it is not enough to use the formula “art as idea”. According to him, the repetition manifests reflection on the process of creating a work of art as an idea, and therefore the reduplication had to appear as a result or effect of the rethinking of the acts of the earlier perception of art as an idea. This repetition is a break with the formalist recognition of Reinhardt's formula. Kosuth's tautological repetitions – such as the use of formless water, colorless glass, achromatic exposure, some functional and standard objects, and life-sized photographs of these objects, and since 1965 also words – for example, “glass” on glass, and then photocopies of complete dictionary definitions – are aimed as a counter-measure to the reduction of art to an idea as an object conceived on the ground of formalist ideology. He regards the use of language as fully legitimate material (while maintaining distrust towards the tradition of concrete poetry and poetry in general that – like the old philosophy – attempts unsuccessfully to express “the unsayable”).¹²

Relying on the authority of Donald Judd, Kosuth wrote that he questioned the previous understanding of the development of painting or art in general because progress is not always associated with formal advancement within the traditional artistic genres. Judd – as the originator of the concept of “specific objects” – had previously noted that half of the best works of the recent few years were neither paintings nor sculptures. According to Kosuth, all the materials and tools of an artist – paints, brushes, canvas, etc. – should be treated conventionally as ready-mades and as elements of some kind of formal language, whose status depends on local artistic value (the use). The basic and right idea of Duchamp and Judd was that if an artist called something art, it was art (Judd regarded the terms “non-art”, or “anti-art” as useless). If anyone argues otherwise, s/he is suggesting that the works themselves are art on the basis of their properties. But they are not.

In summary, it appeared that the formalism of the 1950s and 1960s was not based upon an empirical generalization, or common physical features of

¹¹ J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, op. cit., p. 191.

¹² Ibid. pp. 47-56.

art objects, but was merely an a priori definition of art. Formalism was an idea that had not originally resided in the material objects of art, because the intention of using a medium precedes the medium itself and determines its artistic status. Formalism was an idea that – as Sol LeWitt claimed in his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) – “becomes the machine that makes the art”.¹³

Art work as an extensional expression

The absolutization of formal and generic problems was found to be misleading, resulting in decorative art, so it was replaced by the question: “What is the function, or the nature of art?” The question about the function went beyond the “physical-object-paradigm of art” (a term used by Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin) and an answer, it was thought, could be given only by the non-denotative conception of meaning advanced by Wittgenstein, who claimed that “The meaning is the use”. According to his instrumental-functional theory, language is a kind of instrument, and the meaning expressed by language is the realization of the communicative needs of the user. The meaning of an expression depends upon the way in which it is used, so that meaning cannot be found in any field of non-linguistic reality; it is produced by the very sign-creating function, by the linguistic behaviour. Kosuth – in his mosaic of quotes – places the less well-known views of such authors as Irving Marmer Copie, Torgny Torgnysson Segerstedt, and Wittgenstein's trusted Finnish philosopher – Georg Henrik von Wright, whose thoughts supported him in his choice of the behavioral and functional orientation for his theory of meaning. Such a theory of meaning, neither associationist nor connotative, was perfectly suitable for the explanation of the fact that there can be various *private* codes and artistic languages. Art is simply the way in which the artist uses the term “art” or how he defines it. The nature and autonomy of art should not therefore be sought in the traditional synthetic function (mimetic, expressive, aesthetic-creative, formal), but in the work conceived as an analytical sentence e.g. as a tautology – “idea as idea”. Kosuth cites Kant's distinction between the analytic and synthetic sentences in the formulation of Ayer. A sentence is analytical when its value depends only on the definitions of the symbols it contains. In contrast, a sentence is synthetic when its value is determined by the experiential facts. At the time he chose the analytical interpretation of art (to reject it after several years). At this stage of reflection he says that although the sentences of art are factual, they are linguistic in nature. He knows that he is comparing the

¹³ S. LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967), “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969), in: K. Stiles, P. Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, op. cit., pp. 822-827.

analyticity conditions of language and art which are not identical. Although he notes that there is an analogy here, his formulation ignores the obvious fact that in an analogy there is no univocal predication, and thus no ascertainment of identity as in the tautological formula "idea as idea". Kosuth too easily loses sight of the essential difference between analytical sentences and works of art. He ignores the possibility of establishing another analogy in the interpretation of art, because he believes that other options are usually irrelevant for works of art that are essentially tautologies: "Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed in their context - as art - they provide no information whatsoever on any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means is a definition of art. Thus, the fact that it is art is true a priori (which is what Judd means when he states that 'if someone calls it art, it is art')".¹⁴

Let us add that it may be held against Kosuth that - in describing the work of art as an analytical sentence - he sought support from I. A. Richards - British literary critic and philosopher of rhetoric - in whose opinion thinking is strictly metaphorical, and reasoning by analogy with the use of *as* is its essential part. Analogy is a causative link between thoughts because the meaning is formed only by the contexts constituting their causes, when - for example - they impart a generic status to a sign. To think of something is to view it as a genre (as such-and-such). An important role is played here by the functor *as*, enabling an act of comparing (analogizing, parallelizing, metaphorization), through which the mind can grasp something like an attractive trophy. Thus Kosuth's attitude does not seem consistent, but it is rather eclectic, or exploratory. It is difficult to speak about species or genres in the context of late Wittgenstein's language philosophy because such recognition is mediated by the denotational concept of meaning as a connotation of a name, denoting or designating some objects. Writing about an autonomous, a priori context of art, Kosuth - as a representative of the conceptual artists-analysts - modeled art on formal logic. Art is the self-definition of art and it may not go beyond its context for verification. Otherwise, if works of art were to be considered as synthetic propositions, and thus there would be a possibility of empirical verification of the truth or falsity of artistic statements, then art would get into serious difficulties in the future. Kosuth presents this argument basing on the reservations of Ayer. He identified the veracity of analytical statements - which compose a system a priori (e.g. geometry) - with consistency in a purely formal sense, while the truth of synthetic sentences - necessarily - with material consistency, since these sentences - or an empirical system made up of synthetic propositions - can be formally consistent

¹⁴ J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After*, op. cit, p. 20.

and at the same time false, because they do not meet the material criteria set out by experience. Thus, the criterion of truth of analytical sentences is not sufficient to estimate the veracity of synthetic sentences. The interpretation of realism as synthetic deprives this art movement of the opportunity to establish a dialogue with the work of such artists as Malevich, Mondrian, Pollock, Reinhardt, early Rauschenberg, Johns, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Andre, Judd, Flavin, LeWitt, and Morris, whose works Kosuth interprets as analytical (proto- or conceptual) ones. This inability excludes realism from the orbit of art. Kosuth's argument also excludes expressionism. He suggests, under the influence of Ayer, that a synthetically understood expression would be only an exclamation, because pure expressionism – as a statement containing demonstrative symbols – could not express the truth of the original sentence. Kosuth views abstract expressionism as something different than an expression of the artist's psyche, for example such artist as Pollock, whose conceptual contribution to the development of art was that – instead of painting on the canvas hung on the wall – he had the idea of dripping on canvas placed on the floor. His self-expression may be of interest only to someone who knew him personally, but it ceases to be valid in the *a priori* context of art.

This paradoxical game with art – in which the artist, such as the ambivalent Richard Serra, does not determine whether what he does is art – only confirms that the nominative function, performed by artists and art institutions is constitutive for art. Serra himself deprives art of its empirical grounding, and thus of its synthetic character. His conviction that art appears as an empirical phenomenon isn't sustainable in confrontation with Ayer's conviction that there are no empirical sentences which would be undoubted, because only such are tautologies. According to this philosopher, the sentences grounded in experience have only the status of hypotheses, and those cannot be finally verified since verification is possible only on the basis of other empirical statements, which are after all only premises for other hypotheses. Therefore, there are no definitive synthetic sentences. The non-conclusivity of synthetic discourse also undermines the dogmatic conclusivity of the non-conceptual theory of art, reinterpreting and re-evaluating the earlier endeavours and movements of art. And even Kosuth goes so far as to concur even with Reinhardt's provocative statement that “Art is always dead, and a 'living' art is a deception”.¹⁵ Thus the assertion – that art draws strength from life, from reality, from the era, bringing up the real problems and questions of human existence – is meaningless. This often happens, but it isn't a proper criterion of being art. Although we use geometry to measure the physical space, its theorems (actually various geometries) do not apply to the physical, but are the consequence of

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 22.

certain axioms. We simply provide a physical interpretation to these theorems – which remain indifferent to the question of their empirical truth or applicability. They can only be considered from the point of view of purely formal veracity (consistency).

This becomes more evident today when civilization radically accelerates and breaks with the standardization of the visual sphere, which leads to an enrichment of experience. Kosuth rightly notes that art does not have much to say in the visual sphere. This is why one would not expect that the experiments in the domains of painting and sculpture would be able to rival television or other achievements of technology in intensifying the visual experience. These aesthetic needs can be also met by kitsch. Despite this hypertrophy of the visual, the art which considers that its natural or primary function is its use, which is free from restrictions imposed by the philosophical assumptions and assessments – may retain its unique character, its civilizational validity, enforceability, and thus vitality.

While logic, mathematics, or science can be practically used, and this does not interfere with their aspirations, the purpose of art is “art for art's sake”. The attraction of art does not lie in what it uses and how it is used itself, but in the way in which it uses forms. That can be seen even in the differences of using the simplest forms in the works of the above- mentioned artists. What really matters is the conceptual invention – the ingenuity of an *a priori* use of something in the context of art. Neither can one overlook the basic concept of using different objects to generate art. These objects may not be unique or have formal (physical, perceptual) properties that allow them to be classified as objects of art. The distinction between art objects and other objects is not easy, and the relations between them are ambiguous and not conclusive, but they are all considered – in accordance with Wittgenstein's theory – as involving family resemblances.

Kosuth does not see the difficulties that arise when on the one hand he talks about an autonomous, *a priori* context of art, and on the other about art as a philosophical *tabula rasa*. When the present author asked him – at the beginning of 1994 at the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw – whether the *a priori* nature of art must be considered as the *a priori* laws of sense in the grammar of Husserl, he did not take up this issue and did not give a binding answer. This shows that in his model of art there is tension between apriorism and aposteriorism, essentialism and conventionalism / antiessentialism.

Art as a game and text – against stylistic conceptualism

The implementation of Kosuth's program encountered serious difficulties, which he had to mention in the second part of his *Art after Philosophy*. The

selection of the quotes from his favorite artists (Duchamp, Reinhardt, Judd, and Sol LeWitt), on overcoming the hegemony of painting and sculpture (in fact conceptually dependent on painting because it repeats its fictional character¹⁶), ignoring the flourishing of formalist art (which had produced the complex, highly specialized, yet showing symptoms of exhaustion, abstract painting of the 20th century), rejection of the stereotype of an intuitive painter in favour of the image of an intelligent artist, similar to a poet or writer, all this demonstrates that Kosuth wanted to consolidate the position of conceptualism as contemporary art. In his unpublished reflections on poetry, he shows that not only painting and sculpture, but also poetry is bankrupt, as demonstrated by the formalization of its material in the form of concrete poetry.¹⁷ Kosuth did not want to be associated with it, although some of his conceptual works look like a new kind of painting making use of typography. As he said in an interview with Jeanne Siegel, he wanted to avoid the accusation of cultivating a simplistic and pseudo-avant-garde formal condensation. For Kosuth as a conceptualist artist there are no better symptoms of the decay of art than when the traditional conceptual poets begin to focus on the physical material. But the current crisis or exhaustion of art – the result of formalism – also affects Conceptualism, because – as Kosuth notes – this term is applied to phenomena which have practically nothing to do with Conceptual art.

Conceptual art – instead of being an introduction to the analysis of the foundations of art – was becoming a trend similar to a style. Thus Kosuth strongly opposed any attempt to establish stylistic conceptualism, which did not focus on the conceptual – immaterial – sphere, but on the material – negative – aspect of art. The use of objects – evident in Bainbridge's or Hurrell's concepts and investigations – could not be the most important aspect of these works. The idea was to distinguish between the proper Conceptual works and the superficial, formalist, or even anti-formalist works, with an artificial, accidental link to Conceptualism, such as the works of Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Eva Hesse. Kosuth also questioned in 1970 the conceptual status of the artists too attached to the material aspect of art, such as Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner, with whom he was previously associated (on the occasion of the project of Seth Sigelaub¹⁸), and as Douglas Huebler, who used the media instrumentally for documentation, but nevertheless this photographic documentation relates to his sculptures, which are his main message. In contrast, Kosuth connects his pure Conceptualism worked out in

16 Ibid. pp.89-92.

17 Ibid. pp.35-36.

18 Ibid. p. 81.

1966 in New York with the works from the same year made by such British artists as Terry Atkinson and Michael Baldwin (the colleagues of David Bainbridge and Harold Hurrell, also members of the Art & Language group). This group also includes On Kawara, because the wall-to-wall Japanese artist created highly conceptual work already in 1964, Christine Kozllov, who made some movies since 1966, and the works of Iain Baxter, James Byars, Frederic Barthelme, Bernard Venet, Hanne Darboven, the books of Edward Ruscha, including some works by Bruce Nauman, Barry Flanagan, Bruce McLean, Richard Long, Steven Kaltenbach, and Ian Wilson. These artists are the elite of Conceptual art which flourished from 1964 to 1969, accompanied by less obvious attitudes and works of the artists close to Conceptualism, to name some conceptual themes in the works of Franz Erhard Walther, Mel Bochner, Jean Dibbets, Eric Orr, Allen Ruppersberg, Dennis Oppenheim, Donald Burgy, Saul Ostrov, Adrian Piper, and Eugenia Butler Perpetua. He also mentioned briefly the works of John Baldessari. Unsurprisingly, owing to these very harsh judgments he did not win many friends in the art world. He confessed a year later in an interview with Jeanne Siegel that the relations between himself and the Conceptual artists were quite hostile, and he was interested in only a few of them. A lot of his American friends – such as Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, and Douglas Huebler – cannot understand his support for the Art & Language group in England (especially for Atkinson, Baldwin, and Charles Harrison). He himself inclines towards a cleaner, objective, theoretical version of Conceptualism, for which there is no understanding in the United States, except for the three artists based in New York: the Australian Ian Burn and the two Englishmen – Mel Ramsden and Roger Cutforth.

These divisions and rearrangements clearly indicate that Kosuth attempted to radicalize the discourse of Conceptualism and free it from the undue influence of the option associated with Sol LeWitt, recognized by Terry Atkinson as a groundbreaking artist at the helm of the constitution and consolidation of the Conceptual movement. Kosuth shared LeWitt's belief that art is not an illustration of philosophy, although he was undecided whether to separate himself completely from the influence of other formal disciplines (especially logic). However, it is clear that he wished to downplay the formalist, minimalist genesis of Conceptualism, counterbalancing the conceptual tradition with his own genealogy (starting from his *Leaning Glass*, 1965), therefore with the influences of Duchamp, Jasper Johns and Robert Morris, Ad Reinhardt and Donald Judd. He also advanced suggestions of the movement's neo-Dadaist affiliations. The confirmation of Kosuth's belief in this transgressive tradition – born of artistic dirt, because Duchamp was born of the impurity introduced by Picasso – is his insistence on the validity of such neo-Dadaist concepts as Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased DeKooning Drawing or Portrait of*

Iris Clert, and some works of Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni. It was in this context of the progressive internalization of Duchamp's legacy, that Kosuth placed his first tautological works – based on dictionary definitions, whose aim was to present an idea by de-objectifying an object.

Kosuth's neo-Dadaist depreciation of the medium as a negative aspect of art and his transfer of emphasis onto conceptual exploration, directly derived from philosophical inquiry. Highlighting the concept of a game, he tried to prevent the return of formalism to the Conceptual project and consequently to prevent its collapse. Therefore, he argued that the essence of art resides neither in painting, nor sculpture, but in the *investigation of art*. Kosuth goes even further in this argument by concluding that the function of Conceptualism is not only the creation of sentences on art (concepts), but working out the proposals for investigating all the implications of the term “art”. Thus a conceptual artist goes beyond the framework of conceptual art, investigating the nature and function of art as such, its meanings, or the usage of the term. According to Kosuth, who refers to the linguistic turn, the radically understood autonomy of art and the critical independence of artists are specific to the American version of Conceptualism, and especially to the works of Kosuth himself. Although the Americans share the general views of their British colleagues, they differ in the selection of tools and methodologies useful in attaining the general objectives.¹⁹

It is worth remembering that the term “context” appeared at the start of Kosuth's deliberations. However, the use of this term was limited to the expression “the context of art”, suggesting that art provides a self-contained context that somehow exists in itself and for itself. Only by this assumption Kosuth was able to develop further his reflections on the function of art. The occasion was the exhibition in Turin in 1970 accompanied by the multilingual publication *Function, Funzione, Funcion, Fonction, Funktion*.²⁰ As the title suggests, Kosuth focused in this book solely on the investigation of the concept of function. He emphasized that art exists only as a context, i.e. that it has no other properties, which excludes the understanding of art as a subject (object) or a structure; but the final and crucial context is not limited. The functioning of a set of sentences within another set makes their borders temporary and arbitrary, and the whole depends on the pursued objective. The functioning of art as a set (a corpus or a body) of sentences is viewed from two perspectives: an internal and external one. Because of the nature of the subject, the final and crucial context is unknown (except for the personal terms used), and it cannot remain in relation to any iconic wholes such as – for example – a gestalt. Thus,

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 37-40.

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 41-42.

“art as art” can have no – implied or real – relation to any mental object or a conceptual work of art, but only a (direct or implied) relation to a succession of investigations. Art – in the formula “Art as idea as idea” (correctly “as (an) idea”) – operates like a game whose participants change the functions and the meanings of the ideas, which are non-quantifiable and non-determinable.

Kosuth contributed to the civilizational process of radical linguistic change, which rendered realism *nađ've*. In the journal published by the New York School of Visual Arts in 1970, he quoted the views of Edward Sapir.²¹ The conviction that man is in direct contact with the objective world and social reality is an illusion, because this image is always mediated by the language of the community in which he lives and the language in which he expresses his worldview. Language is not something accidental, but it is an indelible medium in which human cognition takes place. Therefore, the so-called real world is always founded upon the subconscious predispositions of language which affect the choices of different world interpretations, so it depends on the collective use of language. Language is also the means of expression in art – both in traditional and in modernist art, in which the exploration of the means has become an end in itself, in order to find new uses of media or artistic languages. A consensus has emerged as regards the exhaustion of the language of traditional art, becoming unreliable and unrealistic. Today each artist creates his own language, undermining the basis of art education. Such actions often border on the ridiculous – on fraud or parody. But the art schools, at least in the beginning, force the students to master the traditional language of art, which is treated almost as a moral obligation for the future adepts of art. The students as embryonic artists need to learn to ask questions not only about the *how*, but above all about the *why* of art – as Kosuth wrote in one of his unpublished texts.²² The artists appreciated by Kosuth knew *how* to create art, before they went on to reflect on *why* they should do it. The modification of artistic education, which Kosuth has proposed, would consist in its treatment as a process of reading, and the school as a *library* where an instructor would suggest what *books* the students should select, focusing their attention – taking care not only of the standard education but, first and foremost, of their individual development. Its consequence would be the consideration of art works as analytic sentences and art as a self-definition of an artistic act. Kosuth has told Jeanne Siegel in the abovementioned interview that the relation of art to cultural meanings is abstract, and art itself acquires meanings not in relation to the world, but to a linguistic system. Therefore, Conceptualist abstraction of reality, society, and culture is

21 Ibid. pp. 43-45.

22 Ibid. pp. 79-82.

greater and more interesting artistically than – for example – Cubism’s abstraction of nature.

It seems, however, that – already in 1970, at the time of his interview with Jeanne Siegel – Kosuth began to realize that the opening of art to various linguistic systems generating different meanings means an introduction of many heterogeneous contexts into the autonomous context of art. These contexts are necessarily accidental (contextually contingent). Nevertheless, Kosuth still abstained from considering them as a proper matter of art, ignoring the relationships between the elements that generate the randomness of art. He preferred to manipulate relationships between relationships. He did not want to rely on objects, but like Mondrian to denaturalize matter and to explore only relationships.

With this purpose in mind, Kosuth selected and compiled the views of the Conceptual artists in order to give the readers the conceptual narration as a mosaic of important quotes. This is because – as he wrote in another text in the catalogue published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1970 – the fundamental objective of Conceptual art is the understanding of the linguistic nature of all sentences of past and present art, regardless of the elements used to construct them. Kosuth did not want to be limited in his conceptual choices to single sentences or explorations that are part of art works, because he considered art as a whole in view of the fact that it exists only conceptually.²³

Some consequences of the linguistic turn

The linguistic turn in Conceptual art was primarily a symptom of the exhaustion of the will to artistically objectify aesthetic passions (aesthetic *impetus*), and thus a manifestation of de-objectification, de-localization, and de-aesthetization of art as a finished rational product useful for religion or the state (what Kasimir Malevich wanted purportedly to avoid). Kosuth offered Conceptual art as a text which was an open set of different possibilities – aiming at the disorientation and reintegration of the reader presented with a certain collection of utterances, nothing more than a design for a potential artwork and at the same time an expenditure of energy – a concrete, sensual trace of a re-thinking of art history. It was simultaneously a manifestation of dis-continuation of the ergonomics of earlier art and a piece of multi-layer, condensed, hybrid information, resisting its categorization as an artistic form (an art object) and a market commodity. This quasi-artistic piece was intended, first and foremost, as a sketch ignoring chronology, a set of theorems, and as an aid in teaching students. Art as text

²³ Ibid. pp. 73-74.

would free up talent manifested in the creation of new original theorems based on popular demand. Pleasure – although no longer purely aesthetic, and even derived from contesting aesthetics – the paradox observed by Barnett Newman – came from the understanding of the medium and the recognition of deep relationship between the quotes, from the acceptance of art as a game with a vague status. The artist found it difficult to control the recipients, since he himself got out of control – which he had triumphantly announced in the catalogue *Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects* (published by the New York Cultural Center in 1970).²⁴ Kosuth justified the thesis that art exists only conceptually by a proposal or rather a hint of an unpublished text dating from that same year. This is because man exists – perhaps – only conceptually.²⁵

In *Art after Philosophy*, the conviction that thinking is fundamentally metaphorical was the basis for the functional and instrumental conception of meaning as the way of using expressions. Soon, however, Paul Ricouer argued, in *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language* (1975) that substitution theory was too narrow and could not be a satisfactory explanation for the existence of metaphor, because it could not be reduced to a deviation of reasoning by analogy. Metaphorization does not consist simply in the handling of notions (names or ideas), it is a rhetorical and quasi-cognitive (heuristic) statement assuming a paradoxical intuition of the similar in the dissimilar, which is indicated by hermeneutic theory of tension, more general than the theory of substitution. This is due perhaps to the fact that in the tautological model of art we have to do with an erroneous modelling attribution, with the tension between identity and difference. Thereby, the tautological formula “art as idea as idea” was only an unsuccessful attempt to adapt conceptism to the neo-positivist or analytical paradigm of knowledge that rejects heterogeneity of concepts (generated by *ingenium* or wit) as a basis of language or acts of speech. Similarly misguided was Kosuth's crusade against philosophy in which – for example – he repeated sceptical (also philosophical) arguments put forward in support of his criticism of realism.

In the early 1970s, Kosuth thus began to look for a different model of art. In his (*Notes*) *On an 'Anthropologized Art'* (1974) and in *Artist as Anthropologist* (1975) he clearly rejected the general validity of the tautological model in favour of an anthropological model of art, and went on to try and reclaim the profundity of art, as well as overcome the opacity of the modernist practice. To him, Conceptualism was just an ethno-logic of the Western civilization. He regarded the tautological model, like any other model assuming the autonomy of art, and more generally any theory, independently of ideology and social

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 57-71.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 77-78.

practice. In this return to reality, the model of anthropological art rejects the uncritical idea of human reality being simply imitated in the reflected act of semiosis (word as a mirror). The artist, adopting the attitude of an engaged anthropologist, does not contemplate (speculate), but inwardly participates in the reality under investigation. An artistic act is the implosion Mel Ramsden talked about, an implosion of a reconstituted socio-culturally mediated overview. Thus the retrieval of transparency to the language of art is not a return to a logico-semiotic interpretation of the work of art which eliminates the verbiage of a concept, but an understanding of that work as a not fully conscious symptom, as an event (ontologization of the artistic language), and with regard to its context it is related to a hermeneutical approach to which Kosuth would later clearly refer. The texts *Within the Context: Modernism and Critical Practice* (1977), *Seven Remarks For You to Consider While Viewing / Reading This Exhibition* (1978/79) and *Notes of Cathexis* (1981) were devoted to the investigation of the conditions in which the meaning-making in art could be achieved. They fit in with the thesis that artistic activity should reflect upon the hermeneutic restoration of meaning while denouncing any attempts to construct a model of art as an autonomous field and to articulate in their place a model of art whose purpose should be to work out proper means of revealing the mechanisms of culture. Following this conceptual evolution of Kosuth's views, we are struck by the radical discontinuation between the neo-Positivistic and neo-Marxist or hermeneutic inspirations, although this change looks more like the difference between the implosion of the first and second Wittgenstein. It seems to be coherent with the theory of linguistic games. In his model of anthropological art Kosuth makes use of the conception of culture as a game. Art is one of the linguistic games played within the domain of culture. The property of each game is its collective character. The "collective consciousness" makes the rules of a given game to be accepted, it ensures their credibility.

Thus, Kosuth himself has questioned the credibility of the tautological model of art in which he compared the artifacts to analytical sentences (i.e. to sentences formed by means of extensional functors whose logical value depends upon the veracity or extension of the compounded sentences). Jan Świdziński was his positive critic, comparing artworks to sentences comprising intensional functors (whose veracity depends upon the contents replacing the variables).²⁶ In Świdziński's view the notion of intensionality, so disconcerting

²⁶ J. Świdziński, *Art as Contextual Art*, Sellem Galerie St. Petri - Archive of Experimental Art, Lund 1976. See: K. Piotrowski, *Art as Contextual Art. Jan Świdziński about the Coexistence of Cultural Absolutism and Relativism*, "Exit" 1996, no 2(26), pp. 1220-1231; Idem, *Hommage à Jan Świdziński. Próba wprowadzenia do 'Sztuki jako sztuki kontekstualnej'*, "Sztuka i Dokumentacja" 2009, no 1, pp. 5-21.

to the logicians, was better at explaining the character of artistic activity than the tautological formula which does not increase our knowledge of reality while pretending to be true in any world. Thus, Conceptualism has shown not only some radical consequences of the linguistic turn in art or in culture in general, but also its limit, i.e. contextualism in art and in epistemology.²⁷ The contextual return to non-linguistic reality allows for the possibility that different contexts set different epistemic standards in which it is difficult or impossible to formulate skeptical arguments of Kosuth's anti-realism generated by the then linguistic turn.

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²⁷ T. Black, *Contextualism in Epistemology*, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/c/contextualism>, 30 XII 2011.

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LINGWISTYCZNY ZWROT W KONCEPTUALIZMIE I PO NIM (streszczenie)

Podstawą jednego z najbardziej spektakularnych zwrotów w sztuce XX wieku była lingwistyczna reorientacja filozofii, której skrajnym przejawem była niedenotacyjna koncepcja znaczenia Ludwiga Wittgensteina. Jej aplikacji dokonał tzw. analityczny konceptualizm, który w tym lingwistycznym zwrocie daremnie usiłował przezwyciężyć heterogeniczny charakter konceptyzmu, z którego notabene się wywodził. Świadczy o tym, zwłaszcza u Josepha Kosutha, pomieszczenie neopozytywistycznej inspiracji z motywem filozofii języka naturalnego, który podkreśla doniosłość metaforyzacji i myślenia z pomocą funktora as [podobnie jak]. Niniejszy tekst przedstawia proces tej niezbornej redukcji sztuki do języka, ukazując niektóre jej konsekwencje oraz jej wyraźną granicę, jaką stał się kontekstualizm.

Słowa kluczowe: ekstensja, intensja, konceptyzm, konceptualizm, kontekstualizm, lingwistyczny zwrot