

JOSEPH KOSUTH AND
THE PLAY OF
THE UNMENTIONABLE

David Freedberg

There is, of course, a tell-tale sign: as if to warn against the possibility of any erotic thought that she might arouse, a small cross hangs beside the left thigh of Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* (p. 73). And while she certainly covers herself modestly with her right hand (it is the same gesture of modesty as the ancient statues known as the *Venus Pudica*), the heavy chain that binds her hands and gives a further clue to the intended subject of the sculpture seems to act as nothing so much as some kind of ancient chastity belt. Not surprising, we might think, that this smooth and perfect form should have been one of the great artistic successes of the Universal Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851; but surely not only because of the chaste thoughts she aroused in her beholders? The very idea of an impure thought, however, would have been swiftly denied by the sculptor—

whether by repression or rationalization, though, we cannot really know. After all, he had a clear moral view of the subject, apparently inspired by accounts of how, during the Greek war of independence of 1821–1830, the Turks took a number of beautiful Greek girls as prisoners in order to sell them on the slave market. “These were Christian women,” he wrote,

and it is not difficult to imagine the distress and even despair of the sufferers while exposed to be sold to the highest bidders. *But as there should be a moral* in every work of art, I have given to the expression of the Greek Slave what trust there could still be in a Divine Providence for a future state of existence, with utter despair for the present, mingled with somewhat of scorn for all around her.

We may suppose that not everyone would have troubled so long with the expression of the *Greek Slave*—at least not long enough to discern this moral. For even then she must have seemed, were it not for the sign of the cross, more pagan Venus than Christian slave. And can the artist himself have been unaware of the most famous story associated with the ancient statue of Venus that served as the direct artistic model for his work, the *Venus of Cnidos*? For, as Pliny, Lucian, Aelian, and many others recount, this was the statue that so excited a young man of Cnidos that one night he stole out of town in order to be alone with her, and left on her beautiful form the very evidence of his desire.

But one does not, of course, have this sort of thought inside a museum, let alone a museum that began with as much a scientific as an artistic purpose, and where the moral dimension was so pronounced. Or does one? In the same year as the Universal Exhibition, the Brooklyn Institute—the precursor of The Brooklyn Museum—received \$12,000 in order to endow a series of Sunday Night Lectures on “The Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God as Manifested in His Works”; and a few years later, its large collec-

tion of casts of Greek and Roman sculptures was especially singled out by a group of clergymen as providing evidence of the noblest qualities of Man. These may not be the first things that come to mind as we look at the Roman statues of Dionysos and Apollo in the context of the objects displayed alongside them in Joseph Kosuth's "The Play of the Unmentionable" (pp. 88–93); instead, the texts and objects Kosuth has assembled for this installation force us to ask ourselves about their meaning both to ourselves and to others, and to be honest about those meanings. They also make us face these inevitable questions: In what ways are the puritanisms of the mid-nineteenth and late twentieth centuries different from each other? What are the implications of such differences? And what effect do our concepts of art—of what art is, or should be—have on judgments of this kind?

The Brooklyn Museum started as a "museum of everything" (as former director, Thomas S. Buechner, once put it). It was meant to cover the world: by no means only a museum of art, it was also a museum of science and ethnography. The objects it held ranged from an entire Hindu street to the best collection in the world of kachina dolls, as well as stuffed bears and fifty-five thousand dried butterflies. As soon as the new cultural institution was on a secure footing, a huge palace of a museum was commissioned from the noted New York architects of McKim, Mead & White, to be constructed in their best classical style. To the burghers and patrons of Brooklyn, no style could have seemed more appropriate for the housing of art and for the architectural declaration of its public status. Although the building may now seem grand enough, only *one sixth* of the original plan was constructed. By 1934 the decision had been taken to restrict the range of the great museum to art and ethnography alone (by then, of course,

ethnography had become institutionalized and naturalized as art). Natural History was abolished. The taxidermists took their leave, and one of them expressed his fears for the future in these words: “Modern art was beginning to show its ugly, incomprehensible forms with a vengeance, and there would be no place for anything else, so I decided to look for another job.”

Art replaced science, and an old anxiety was again awakened, though not for the first time—that the radical and the unpalatable might become institutionalized as art. In fact, 1934 was the year in which McKim, Mead & White’s monumental entrance staircase was removed. This was done in the interests of modernism: not only would the entrance appear more in keeping with the modern spirit, the museum would seem (it was supposed) more accessible to the people.

No nexus could have been more fragile than that one, of modern art and its public. In 1933, for example, the Nazi SS wrote a letter to Mies van der Rohe in Berlin concerning the recently closed Bauhaus. (This institution, probably more than any other, was responsible for the change of taste that dictated the removal of the grand staircase in faraway Brooklyn.) The SS letter declared that the Bauhaus could only be reopened on the following conditions: Vassily Kandinsky and Ludwig Hilberseimer were to be fired, the curriculum was to be changed in accordance with the dictates of the Ministry of Culture, and the faculty was to sign its full agreement with the new conditions.

That such a letter was in perfect tune with Hitler’s views on art is made clear by Kosuth’s characteristically challenging mosaic of quotations. “Challenging” because Kosuth constantly makes us revise views we take altogether for granted, and he makes us reflect on positions that we unthinkingly accept. For example, although it is hard to imagine agreeing with any utterance of Hitler’s—let alone with the sentiment behind it—

Kosuth confronts us with at least one view of his that, *on the face of it*, seems quite laudably democratic: when it comes to art, the people are the judge. But beware of taking the view out of context. Soon the material Kosuth presents makes us realize, or remember, that things are never so simple. What Hitler means is that the artist must submit his will to “the sure and healthy instinct of the people.” The transcendent, God-given artist is, above all, *decent*; he must eschew all radicalism, and must not paint blue meadows and green skies. If he does so because this is the way he feels or experiences things, he is either defective or a liar. Accordingly, there is to be no painting for small cliques; the artist must produce an art that can, from the outset, count on the readiest and most intimate agreement of the great mass of the people (whose instincts, clearly, are more reliable than those of the artists). Otherwise it is a matter for the criminal court.

There is no great distance between clusters of views such as these and the ones expressed at the time of the Chicago Armory Show of 1913. The works of the Cubist artists, like those of Matisse, were regarded either as forms of mystification, charlatanry, insanity, or simply as hoaxes. At best, such artists were believed to be guilty of insincerity. Their pictures corrupted public morals—especially, of course, the morals of children and women (notoriously more susceptible than men). M. Blair Coan, the inspector for the Senatorial Vice Commission declared that Futurist art was immoral, and that every girl in Chicago was being given the opportunity of *gazing* (not just looking) at examples of distorted art. When a clergyman saw the art on display, he had to turn back his flock of children at the head of the stairs, lest they see the latest degeneracies from Paris. A schoolteacher denounced the exhibition as nasty, lewd, and immoral, while his superintendent declared it off-limits. The Chicago Law and Order League called for the suppression of the exhibition altogether.

Who would have thought that views like these could return with such vengeance in 1990? One had believed them to be dead and buried. But no: the guardians of public morality—and others whom one might have thought less concerned about the well-being of ordinary men and women—revived the old connections between art (above all modern art) and immorality. They did so in order to wave the banner of corruption, degeneracy, and the decline not just of morality, but of society as a whole. The two things—corruption of art and corruption of society—obviously go together. Although it is true that the issues seemed the same as they always had been, there was one significant difference. Having assimilated—however uncomfortably, however meagerly—some of the realities of female sexuality, society was able, in 1990, to be less inclined to hide its general fear of sexual representation behind fears for the corruption of women. But now there was some new threat to deal with (or, to put it more accurately, some threat that was newly out in the open): the representation of homosexuality. Naturally, the anxieties about children and sexuality remained. Once again the great social fears were acted out in the domain of art.

The year 1990 saw the trial of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center and its director Dennis Barrie, the Reverend Donald Wildmon's legal pursuit of David Wojnarowicz, the National Endowment for the Arts' rejections, equivocations, and volte-faces over the performances of Karen Finley and Holly Hughes. Already in 1989 one could detect the beginning of a kind of general hysteria about the permissible and the unmentionable gripping not only the radical Right but also both houses of Congress and a largely craven public press. From every quarter came renewed pressure for the government to control and legislate the arts. Puritanism, prudishness, and hostility to homosexuality—all as usual in the guise of preserving the best and purest of civilization from degeneracy and corruption—had wait-

ed in the wings. Now they could return to center stage. The prosecution of the Cincinnati arts center and Barrie for “pandering obscenity” and for “the illegal use of children in nudity-related material” by having publicly exhibited seven photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe swiftly became the most famous of these episodes. Proceedings began on September 24 and concluded on October 5. This is the background to “The Play of the Unmentionable,” and it is in this context that it had—and has—to be seen. The installation opened at The Brooklyn Museum on September 26, the day before the selection of the jury at the trial in Cincinnati.

Asked by The Brooklyn Museum to produce one of the installations for which he was already famous, Kosuth knew that financial support would at least partly have to come from the National Endowment for the Arts. But since he is an artist especially well known for his critiques of the institutionalization of art, the subject of the installation, in 1990, must have seemed both inevitable and urgent. It was to examine the consequences of the institutionalization of art for artistic liberty. His installation would be both a reflection and a provocation. Its aim would be to engender self-reflexiveness in each viewer’s judgment about the relations between art, morality, and censorship. It was to be less overtly theoretical than his previous installations such as those at the Freud Museum (1982) and in commemoration of the Wittgenstein centennial in Vienna and Brussels (1989), and more specifically related to current political issues. But the theoretical *armature* of the Brooklyn installation was closely linked to the earlier ones, and the view of the nature of artistic work and the place of the installation within it remained the same. It was the logical outcome of Kosuth’s long engagement with the problems of the production of meaning, with the role of context in the making of both art and mean-

ing, and with the dialectical relations between viewer and work of art.

The Vienna-Brussels installation, "Wittgenstein: The Play of the Unsayable," was predicated on the second of the agendas in the great philosopher's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: to demonstrate that what could not be spoken was necessarily to be left unsaid, or to be omitted. (This was clearly different from the first of his agendas, which was to give an articulate basis for what *could* be said). Kosuth's aim was to suggest the ways in which meaning was produced through the *play* of what was not or could not be said. He did so by using both artworks and texts, juxtaposed in such a way as to elicit self-consciousness about context (both personal and institutional) and about the way in which one's notion of art depended on context. At this stage in Kosuth's thought, the idea was that art provides the evidence for what cannot be said, or for what can be said only indirectly. If art can never *say* anything directly, it has the power of being able to *show* that which cannot be said.

For over twenty-five years Kosuth has been producing mosaiclike juxtapositions in such a way as to produce new (or surplus) meanings that go beyond the individual texts and objects made by others. These mosaics of appropriated texts and objects become works in their own right, in which new meanings arise in the interstices between texts and texts, texts and objects, objects and objects. The Brooklyn installation was thus a work like any other by Kosuth. Fundamental to everything that he has done is the belief that meaning cannot reside in the object or the text alone and is in no sense autonomous. The meaning of a work of art depends wholly on its context and on its relations with the viewer. Meaning, as Wittgenstein himself declared, lies in use. If the Wittgenstein show was about the unsayable, the Brooklyn installation was about that still more remote category, the unmentionable. If art is able to show, even to describe, that which

cannot be said, it is even more capable of showing that which cannot be mentioned. The point of the Brooklyn installation was to enable, through the play of these unmentionables, the laying bare of what we are no longer allowed to mention (because of the coils of institutionality), or cannot bring ourselves to mention (because of repression). This Kosuth achieved by juxtaposing objects selected from The Brooklyn Museum's collection, and by displaying texts around them on the walls of the Grand Lobby (and now collected in this volume). In making his selection from the museum, and in explicitly acknowledging the subvention from the NEA, Kosuth was able to raise a whole series of questions in the minds of his viewers, beginning with these: What is the role of the institution in the formation of our view of art? Who, finally, decides what is art and what is not art? What are the consequences of that decision? How do our own views of art affect our moral judgments about representation and, therefore, our larger moral and political judgments?

The choice may seem to lie between acceptance of the rules and fetishization on the one hand, and a constructive, critical, self-reflective view of art on the other. The latter is the more difficult path; and it is this path, which requires both work and active thought on the part of the beholder, that Kosuth invited his viewers to follow. That so many people should have accepted the invitation is a tribute to his skills, and testimony to the urgency of the issues. It was as if people realized that what concerned them most deeply and touched them most profoundly could not be edited out by the dictates of government and by the officers of institutionalized morality.

Kosuth's art, like that of his fellow conceptual artists, does not lie simply in the production of a painting or a sculpture. For him, art is prior to its material; it is constituted by the very process of its being questioned, and is therefore wholly dependent on context. Being an artist means questioning

the nature of *art*, not of painting or sculpture. The work of art, as he puts it, “is essentially a play within the meaning system of art.” That play within the system is fundamentally predicated on the historical and social context of the individual viewer, and so the artist has necessarily to concern himself with philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and history. Indeed, for all his rejection of painting and sculpture as viable art forms now, and for all the fierceness of his critique of the institution of art history, there are few contemporary artists whose commitment to history runs as deep as Kosuth’s. For him the power of the work we see in museums is derived from the concrete experience of the historical moment, both present and past. In short, “no matter what actual form the activity of art takes, its history gives it a concrete presence.”

Kosuth’s positions have been worked out over a long period in a series of notable essays, many of which have a direct bearing on the way in which the Brooklyn installation was conceived and presented. The phases of his work have often been presented as being comparatively disjunct, but in fact they follow logically one from the other. If the lodestar of the early phase was the philosophy of Wittgenstein, that of the second phase was radical anthropology, and that of the third the psychology of Freud. Yet Kosuth’s engagement with each of these disciplines is unimaginable without the others. Throughout, the commitment to the role of art within the political and moral life has remained unwavering. For these reasons it is impossible to grasp either the impact of the Brooklyn installation or its place within his work without a brief consideration of the evolution of his thought.

In a famous essay of 1969 entitled “Art after Philosophy,” Kosuth worked out the consequences of the view that works of art are akin to analytic propositions in language. The crucial proposal was that the work of

art, like an analytic proposition (and unlike a synthetic proposition), contains no reference to any matter of fact beyond itself. Its validity is not dependent on any empirical, much less any aesthetic presupposition about the nature of things. Art precedes its material. It is tautological, like an analytic proposition, in that it contains its definition within itself. The artist's nomination of the work as "art" is what makes it art. In these respects, art is essentially linguistic in character (Kosuth would later modify this position by claiming, in line with the later Wittgenstein, that a defining characteristic of art is that it can show that which words can not say). Such a position has serious implications not only for the future of art, but also for its past. The difficulty with modernist painting and sculpture is that it exists solely in the realm of aesthetics and is essentially decorative. Since it refers to that which is beyond art (aesthetics), it does not add to our understanding of the nature of art. Worse still, since modernism became institutionalized and fetishized rather swiftly (as one might have predicted), it simply shored up the tradition, the conventional art histories, and—above all—the market.

Much of this may seem to be at a considerable remove from the Brooklyn installation, but it is less so than one might think. For Kosuth, the notion that we can only understand art as the *context* of art was as fundamental to his work in 1990 as it was in 1969. Of course, as Kosuth noted then, any object is eligible for aesthetic consideration once it is presented in, say, a museum; but because what makes art is its definition, what gives it its meaning—just like language—is its use.

Kosuth links his political agenda with his concern for the nature and concept of art thus: we cannot ignore the link between politics and the concept of art precisely because the presentation of the work in the museum or gallery is an ideological position, by the very fact of its institutional-

ization. I would add that the catch lies in the play between our own responses to the objects as objects, referring to the world of facts beyond them, and our responses to the objects understood (by virtue of denomination or installation) as works of art. We must also allow the discomfort of the never-ending cancellation of one response by the other, and acknowledge that it is from such discomfort or irritation that we achieve a form of understanding.

In the course of the next few years, Kosuth developed his thinking on the fundamental problem of context under the influence of Marxism and radical anthropology. The 1975 essay entitled “The Artist as Anthropologist” is, of all his earlier writings, perhaps the most directly relevant to the Brooklyn installation. Throughout it he constantly returns to his belief that the meaning of the work is constituted by the individual beholder. The first implication of this position is that we ought to renounce the old Cartesian distinction between experience and reality. The only reality is experienced reality: we cannot stop the emotions from interfering with the judgments that supposedly form the basis of scientific knowledge, and we must acknowledge the repression of sensuality under the domination of rationality. Objectivity can only be conceived of as alienation: the pressures of institutionalization to suppress what is most meaningful to us should be resisted. Hence the need to examine as critically as possible the ways in which fashion and the market determine our taste. Consumption and the fetishization of art as commodity reduce the autonomy of our judgment. It is imperative to remain as attentive as possible to “the sway of society over the inner life of the person,” as William Leiss, one of Kosuth’s great anthropologist heroes, puts it.

And so we begin to understand Kosuth’s need to single out works that

are not, as he later phrased it, part of the great *Autobahn* of masterpieces. “Lesser” or less famous works offer a better chance for us to form independent judgments, since the potential of such works is less likely to have been corrupted by their having been institutionalized, commodified, and turned into fetishes. For in his effort—his desire—to avoid reality, the fetishist focuses his attention on what is secondary. This, then, was another advantage of making a selection of works from the collections of The Brooklyn Museum. One could hardly fall into the trap of thinking, as a distinguished modern art historian once did, that “the superior craftsman, and only the superior one, is so organized that he can register within his medium an individual awareness of a period predicament.” The fact is that even the undistinguished craftsman is likely to be able to register within his medium the period predicament, whether seen “individually” or as reflection of some common consciousness. If ever one needed evidence of the authority of “lesser” works of art as historical documents, it was to be found in Kosuth’s installation.

But the issue went far beyond history and documentation; it forced a reevaluation of ourselves and our relation to present culture. In “The Artist as Anthropologist,” Kosuth sought to show why one had not only to acquire fluency in a culture, but also to diminish the spurious distance, imposed by a false scientism, between oneself and that culture. Radical anthropology renounced the notion of the objective investigator; in the same way as one examined other cultures, one had to examine one’s position within one’s own culture. There are abundant lessons to be learned from other cultures, to be sure, but most important is to perceive the subjectivity of our own ideology, and the failure of objectivity. The duality between subject and object which permeates the “objectivity” of so much Western thought is only an impediment to understanding the inquiring

self itself and, therefore, to understanding the object of its investigation. And, as The Brooklyn Museum show demonstrates, since art only exists in context and as context, it becomes a critical implement not only in the activity of self-reflection, but also—and thereby—in the liberation from the constraints of fashion, taste, and the dictates of dominant social structures.

To say this may be to invest too much faith in the possibilities of art; but the moral dimension of Kosuth's work proposes that, with religion no longer viable, and with science doomed to its positivisms, we must turn to art for the understanding of ethics, value, and those issues of meaning that go beyond the laws of physics and the decrees of God.

Kosuth's concern with the role of the viewer soon led, naturally enough, to an intense engagement with the work of Sigmund Freud. Through Freud, Kosuth seems to have grown increasingly aware of the ways in which an individual beholder's contexts change, and of how meanings are lost, canceled, reclaimed, and revised in the light of personal experience. The opening quotation in his notes on the work entitled *Cathexis* came from Freud's 1915 paper on the Unconscious: "Thought proceeds in systems so far remote from the original perceptual residues that they have no longer retained anything of the qualities of those residues, and, in order to become conscious, need to be reinforced by new qualities."

This provides an important clue to the way in which Kosuth conceived of the Brooklyn provocation. His aim was to make the beholder as self-conscious as possible about the relation between conditions of context and the production of meaning. And he did so by making one as aware as possible of the *process* whereby meaning is constructed. The viewer begins to see the work of art in the way the artist does, "as a struggle to make and cancel meaning and re-form it." Understanding the work of art becomes

an event that both locates and includes the viewer through the innumerable evocations, cancellations, and superimpositions called forth by the juxtaposition of objects and texts—in this case, in the domain of the “unmentionable.”

One further element in Kosuth’s conception of art and artwork bears directly on the Brooklyn installation—his view of the problem of the artwork’s aura. He derived it, of course, from that maverick early associate of the Frankfurt school, Walter Benjamin.

For Benjamin, the aura of a work of art—and he was thinking particularly of painting—was tied to notions of authenticity and uniqueness. In an age of religion (or magic), aura was provided by ritual context (ritual space, the ritualization of tradition, or some combination of both); but in what he terms the age of mechanical reproduction, “the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production [and] the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.” Aura had become a nostalgic bourgeois category. The context that endowed the work with aura had now become the institutions of capitalist society, such as the museum and, *mutatis mutandis*, the market. Kosuth recognized the factitious aura of painting and the extent to which it was a product of hegemonic institutions—and so he gave it up. For him, the whole of art became the questioning of art. A truly political art, he realized, would not content itself with the message alone; it would—it had to—engage the viewer in a questioning of the nature and process of art itself. Only in this way could we understand the nature of the institutions and the pressures they exert, and thereby subject them to the necessary critique. For Kosuth, then, an art such as Hans Haacke’s—in which the message lies primarily in the content—simply reinforces the positions already held by his viewers. It is too unambiguous. It cannot change any-

one because it fails to question its status as art and, therefore, its institutional presumptions and presuppositions.

This is the essential background to “The Play of the Unmentionable.” This is how a major conceptual artist came to select a series of historical works of art from a major museum in order to make a political intervention that, although less obviously theoretical than much of his previous work, was wholly in keeping with the concerns of his practice.

“The Play of the Unmentionable” was an extraordinary success: over ninety-one thousand visitors came to visit the installation in the space of a little over three months. At any given time, the Grand Lobby of the museum—a large space of over eight thousand square feet—was unusually crowded. In recent years the Museum has done everything to ensure that this would not simply be empty space, in the way that grand museum lobbies often are; but now it took on an aspect that was both animated and intense. One had the distinct impression that the visitors to the installation were not simply making their way across the space to the main galleries of the museum, or to the exhibition of the works of Albert Pinkham Ryder that ran, also successfully, for the duration of the installation. They were concentrating, engaged in the issues so clearly presented by the images and mosaics of texts written with calculated elegance across the walls—beside, over, and under the objects. Kosuth’s habitual skill in the presentation of texts made the installation seem at the same time eminently accessible and deeply provocative.

While several of Kosuth’s preceding installations adopted similar strategies, none had enjoyed the same popular success. In comparison with the Brooklyn installation, the Wittgenstein exhibit in Vienna and Brussels would have seemed rather esoteric, both for its texts and for the difficult

works it showed. Not that Kosuth would apologize for such difficulty: he has never claimed that art is, or should be, easy. But in the Brooklyn installation the stakes were plain, and they were revealed in the context of works that were clearly a part of our own history.

All this proved to be a seductive strategy. In most cases it required no great initial leap to understanding. The works were generally ones that formed part of the traditions and conventions we know. But Kosuth's juxtapositions and the spatial and intellectual intervention of the texts set an unexpected kind of mental effort in motion. One found oneself meditating on the relations between objects, between objects and texts, and between objects, texts, and oneself. Constantly one sought to construct the work, as work of art, below the fragments of other discourses. By using texts, "the mystified experience of aesthetic contemplation was ruptured." Because texts, as Kosuth insists, are human marks, and since language is daily and banal "the individualizing profundity of contemplation was denied." As he affirmed with regard to his earlier work, *Cathexis*, "the viewer, as a reader, could experience the language of the construction of what is seen. That cancellation of habituated experiences which makes the language visible also forces the viewers/readers to realize their own subjective role in the meaning-making process."

As a result, one could hardly have failed to see that there are no intrinsic meanings in an object or an image, but that meaning always exists in relation to the viewer, as well as "to society, and in relation to what preceded it, to what it shares, and to what follows." Soon one could see that meanings were being produced that went beyond the overt content of the works. We, as viewers, were made aware of *our* role in the production of meaning, and the old mystifying, transcendental status of art was broken. We could grasp the full extent of art's embeddedness in history and culture, and in

this manner be led to engage the issues of censorship, control, and the limits of art. For they, too, could now clearly be seen as subject to determination by context, period, and convention. They were as inabsolute as the transcendence of art. The unmentionable was revealed through the play of the unmentionable and through the processes by which meanings are constructed and made apparent. Every beholder was made conscious of the processes whereby history and context interact with the individual. And art could show what words alone could not say.

Nor could any visitor to the Brooklyn installation have had any doubt that one was dealing with a new work, one by Kosuth. This was not just another exhibition of individual works of art, curated by an art historian or museum curator in such a way as to leave our sense of the autonomy of art objects and their historical distance unimpinged (let alone unthreatened). The exhibition was clearly dialectical. Individual works were actualized, as it were: because the production of meaning lay so clearly with the viewer, the artworks were charged with meanings and implications they had never had before. Or, to put it more precisely, the objects were charged with meanings that had lain dormant in them, waiting, one might say, to be awakened under the conditions of both Kosuth's work and the historical moment in which it was set.

The challenge became obvious as soon as one entered the museum. For one thing, there were the texts. Printed in white lettering on gray walls, in various typesizes, they arrested one's attention, both for their form and their content. The large, banner-style slogans captured the eye, drawing it down to the longer sentences, and then to the paragraphs, inscribed in the smallest print around discrete clusters of objects and images. The texts insisted that we read them. There was no need to search, as we sometimes anxiously do, for the innocuous and "objective" labels that we generally

need as historical crutches with which to look more safely (or less ignorantly) upon works that we do not know or have not seen before, or that come from another period. These “labels” were comments, provocations, insults, puzzles, contradictions, and stimulations. One was impelled into a personal interaction with each text, and with each image or object on which the text commented—if one had not already been forced into some interaction by the strength or unusualness of the object itself.

The provocation—like the challenge to see uniquely—also began immediately, with the inscription of the title of the installation on the entrance wall of the Grand Lobby. “The Brooklyn Museum Collection: The Play of the Unmentionable.” The series of oxymorons, of contradictions, had started off: *museum/play/unmentionable*: these are not the usual or the conventional collocations. Beneath this title came a frank acknowledgment of the support of the National Endowment for the Arts. The mighty second museum of New York! The greatest grant-giving body in the field of the arts! What place could there be for the unmentionable within these institutions—one erected by virtuous citizenry as the very embodiment of the relations between knowledge, art, and authority, and the other nothing less than an arm of government? Off to the left one caught a glimpse of a picture of a naked man and a variety of sculptures of nude young men (pp. 88–93). Revealing himself, as it were, from behind, the man in the picture seemed casually to be attending to some need (he turned out to be lighting a cigarette) of a seated clothed figure (p. 91). Off to the right one could make out three large oil paintings of more or less unclothed children (pp. 111–113).

The Cincinnati trial, which began the day before the opening of “The Play of the Unmentionable” at The Brooklyn Museum, revolved around a

well-known homosexual artist's photographs of men in sadomasochistic poses, and of children with their genitals exposed. The coincidence of dates was by chance and not by design, of course; but for months—as everyone knew—the NEA had been equivocating, vacillating, and finally submitting in the face of pressure not to fund, directly or indirectly, the production or exhibition of artworks representing the supposedly unmentionable. But who decides? This must have been at least one of the many questions that now entered into play.

To have opened with the *most* famous of the passages by that great philosopher of liberty, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (“man is born free but is everywhere in chains”), would have been too obvious; but it was powerfully alluded to by the first three images in the installation: Barbara Kruger's *We are notifying you of a change of address*, where heavy chains both imprison and bar access to an apparently bare female figure (p. 72); Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Lucretia* with a large chain around her neck, as she stabs herself in shame at her rape (p. 73); and finally Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*, with the heavy chain that both enslaves her and seems to preserve her chastity (p. 73). These are such contradictory choices that they force us to work to resolve them. Alongside the images came the opening quotation, not the obvious one by the philosopher of Geneva, but another, even more germane:

The savage lives within himself, while social man lives constantly outside himself and knows only how to live in the opinion of others, so that he seems to receive the consciousness of his own existence merely from the judgement of others concerning him.

Reminders of *their* autonomy and *our* slavishness would henceforth punctuate the installation. We had embarked on the difficult search for the

integrity within ourselves, by being made to reflect on the process of artistic activity and on the implications of our own definition of art. The constant issue would be our independence of judgment: who, Kosuth seemed insistently to be asking, decided what was or was not art, and what follows from that decision? Freedom and tolerance, or control and censorship?

At the same time, though, there was another issue, that of the nature of artistic activity and its legitimate domain. In calling attention to the Koranic parallels between the creative powers of the artist and those of God himself, the text that immediately followed the opening cluster of images presented all too clearly the threat of artistic autonomy to institutional power, and the need to control the freedom that comes from creation.

On the Day of Judgement the punishment of hell will be meted out to the painter, and he will be called upon to breathe life into the forms that he has fashioned; but he cannot breathe life into anything. In fashioning the form of a being that has life, the painter is usurping the creative function of the Creator and thus is attempting to assimilate himself to God...

To make what one likes, and to be free to do so, is to aspire to a power that is not of the human realm, because it is the power to make images vital. This is the threat that the lawmakers cannot tolerate, because it is the guarantor of the potential of our resistance to control.

But what are the further implications of this freedom—to make what one likes and to be free to do so—and of the varieties of constraints that are placed upon it? While the Islamic proscriptions may be concerned with the dangers of aspiring to creative powers that only God is supposed to have, what is it in the West that constrains freedom? In “The Artists as Anthropologist,” Kosuth cites William Leiss on the ways in which the transformation of all of nature (including consciousness itself) into the material of

production comes to be “compulsive, blindly repetitive and finally self-destructive.” For Leiss, “the final stage is reached when the only rationale for production that can be offered is that many persons can be induced to believe that what they really want and need are the newest offering of commodities in the marketplace.” This is the most insidious constraint on artistic freedom. Whether or not we now take such a bleak view of the effects of the marketplace, it is not hard to grasp the lesson here, and it is phrased in such a way as to serve as a perfect motto for “The Play of the Unmentionable”:

At this stage domination over nature and men, directed by the ruling social class, becomes internalized in the psychic process of individuals; and it is self-destructive because the compulsive character of consumption and behavior destroys personal autonomy and negates the long and difficult effort to win liberation from that experience of external compulsion.

This is a complex and important point; but one can perhaps speak still more bluntly and plainly, just as Kosuth himself does. The Brooklyn installation, as we have seen, was conceived as a direct response to recent assaults on freedom of expression and artistic liberty. The situation was all too clear. The NEA had refused to give grants to works that it, in its wisdom, had decided were immoral or pornographic; the Corcoran Gallery in Washington had, at the last minute, canceled a show of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe; and the Cincinnati trial was about to open. The issue of what an artist could or could not do—should or should not be allowed to do—was on the minds of many more people than usual. Under these circumstances, photographs such as those by Larry Clark could only have been taken as some kind of deliberate provocation (pp. 95, 107–10, 141). Beside them, photographs by Mapplethorpe such as the one on display from The Brooklyn Museum collection must have seemed altogether innocuous and tame, slick and decorative (p. 92). One has no difficulty in

finding in them just those formal qualities that seem to be so lacking in Clark (though, as always, there is no shortage of people willing to offer a formal analysis of *his* works too).

The depiction of sex in Larry Clark's photographs seems plain and explicit enough. Even the more sophisticated viewers, upon seeing them for the first time, are likely to ask themselves (or at least, to entertain the thought): Can these works really be *art*? And if they are, what then are the conditions of art? These are exactly the questions that Kosuth wants us to raise. The whole of his own art is about this. It is not just that he brings out of storage a painting of an apparently homosexual exchange, showing a wholly nude male figure (the model for *Prometheus!*) with an attractive rump (p. 91), or coy pictures of seminude children (pp. 111–113), in order to bring the very issues that were most debated in 1990 to mind. It is that his use of context and contextualization is so effective.

For example, in confronting us with Larry Clark's picture of a boy handling his penis (p. 95), and setting it in the visual context of the Roman statues of Dionysus and Apollo (pp. 90, 93), he makes us face the possibility that we may be more aware than we like to admit about the absence of the male member (whether lost by chance or by deliberate mutilation) in the antique works. Or that we may either be more sensitive to, or more inclined to suppress, the sexual aspects of the Egyptian bronze (p. 94) of a Pharaoh worshiping the Otter (which he does, we may not immediately notice, with a phallus attached to his forehead and by masturbating as he worships).

We have no difficulty in classifying these Egyptian, Greek, and Roman works as art, and we tolerate their sexual dimension by suppressing our interest in it; but with Larry Clark....? In the case of the ancient statues it all seems much clearer. Either we do not notice the sexual dimension because

the objects are in a museum, and because art permits us to repress that which would trouble us in an object we are more reluctant to admit as art—or we simply *pretend* not to notice. From the Rodin bronzes (pp. 100–101) to the Japanese woodblock albums (pp. 104–106), these were the issues that “The Play of the Unmentionable” brought constantly, insistently, and trenchantly to the fore.

In a direct allusion to one of the Mapplethorpe photographs singled out by the Cincinnati prosecution, Kosuth showed a Mughal painting *Intoxicated Ascetics* (p. 103), the central scene of which is a man urinating directly into the mouth of another. Kosuth did not hesitate to have an enlargement made of this scene, as if in defiance of all “scientific” art-historical commentary, which has never commented directly on it (even though the page itself is well-enough known). It is reported to be an illustration of the fastest way of allowing opium to enter the bloodstream; but once we have *this* information, there is yet another problem, yet another aspect of the play of the unmentionable. Are we somehow supposed to feel that historical knowledge—essentially *social* knowledge—somehow detracts from the transcendental status of art? Or does it have nothing to do with art at all?

The other photographs by Larry Clark present similar difficulties. Kosuth showed these images of adolescent sex in the company of three paintings of disrobed children and a pair of textual reminders by myself—the first about the barrier against regarding realism as art (“Art is beautiful and high. The photograph is realistic; it is vulgar; it elicits natural and realistic responses. In art, nudity is beautiful and ideal; in the photograph (unless it has acquired the status of art), it is ugly and (therefore?) provocative”), and the second about the contextuality of pornography (“Arousal by image [whether pornographic or not] only occurs in context: in the

context of the individual beholder's conditioning, and, as it were, of his preparation for seeing the arousing, erotic, or pornographic image. It is dependent on the prior availability of images and prevailing boundaries of shame," etc.). But beside the oil paintings he also inscribed in large letters a passage from the biography of William Sergeant Kendall, the painter of the picture evasively called *A Statuette* (p. 113). "Americans," wrote Kendall's biographer, "have never felt entirely comfortable with paintings of the nude. Perhaps Kendall's nudes were so well liked because they showed children and were therefore removed from a sexual context." While the first part of this passage may be a fair acknowledgment of a certain state of affairs, the evasiveness of the second only became fully apparent in the context of the Larry Clarks.

But with evasion comes great illumination. It is as hard to believe in the absence of sexual content in Kendall's (seminude) painting of a child as it is to deny that our discomfort with Larry Clark's photographs, however enlightened we may be, springs precisely from the unadorned adolescent sexuality they portray, as well as from our persistent reluctance to integrate sex and art. Kosuth's installation spoke for itself—one had only to survey the history of art to see that they need not be seen as contradictory in terms. At the same time, though, it raised the question: What is the force of institutionalization that impels the separation of these categories? This was the motor that drove Kosuth's selection of works from the Brooklyn collection, a selection sanctioned by the authority of the very institution that had collected them. This, in short, was the paradox that provoked.

We may think a representation pornographic, or acknowledge that others are likely to think it pornographic. We know that this judgment, this assignment of category, is wholly dependent on context, convention, and

education. But how is this judgment affected by the knowledge that the work is a work of art, or even by the *suspicion* that it may be? *Who*, after all, determines? And how is autonomy of judgment affected by the determination of the work as art? It may be that in making his spectators reflect more on the question of the concept of art than on the narrowness of censorship, Kosuth overstated the problem—*his* favored problem. But one must acknowledge the prescience of his demonstration that the very act of social control manifested as censorship is that it is nothing more than an extension of power into the domain of autonomy embodied in the idea of art. And indeed, his prescience was clearly vindicated by the proceedings and the outcome of the trial in Cincinnati.

From the very start of the trial, it was clear that the central issue would be the artistic status of the seven photographs. The fundamental question was: Could such (pornographic) images possibly be regarded as art? The lead prosecutor would show and describe every photograph and ask each member of the jury: "Is this art?" Of course, the prosecution's hope was that the jury would see that the photos could not possibly be art (since art is pure, transcendent, culturally and spiritually enhancing, and so on). As in the early days of photography, if the image was too realistic it could not be art. But to the prosecution the matter must have seemed clear, even if tautologous: if it is art, it is art, but if it is pornography, it is not art. The prosecution cannot long have considered the possibility that someone might demonstrate the contrary. And yet someone, many people, did. The jury was swayed by those authorities (museum officials and critics) who convinced them that the images were art—and therefore not pornographic. Now the legal position was clear, and was set forth with surprising lucidity by a judge whom everyone had taken to be hostile to the museum's case. The threefold test of obscenity was "that the average person applying con-

temporary community standards would find that the picture, taken as a whole, appeals to a prurient interest in sex, that the picture depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way, and that the picture, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

Yet it is impossible not to feel a little uneasy at the facility of the outcome. If the members of the jury genuinely believed, at the outset, that the images were pornographic (say, sexually stimulating in a way that presented some kind of danger to public morality), how could they suddenly have changed their minds just because the images were nominated as art? How does the category of art come to have such power—if indeed it has this power—to alter perceptions? And on whose say-so are such images thus nominated? Do they become art only when they enter a museum? The temptation is to suggest that it was a moral failing of the jury not to retain their independence of judgment, stay with their sense of the pornographic, and refuse to be swayed by the fact that the director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, the director of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, and the former director of the Institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania (and current director of the American Craft Museum) all declared that these images were art. Could not at least one member of the jury have responded, as the prosecutor presumably did, by saying (or at least thinking): “Whatever you claim, I think these images are pornographic”? And could he or she in that case not have resisted adding “and therefore certainly not art”?

Here lies one crux of the matter. But there is another, just as crucial, in what we now may take to have been an unexpected triumph for the position demonstrated by Kosuth’s work. That is, it can only have been a sense of the contextuality of pornography that made the jury refuse the obvious position: Once pornography always pornography. “The picture [of the girl

with her skirt up] is a perfect illustration of the phrase 'Evil is in the eye of the beholder,' " concluded the art critic of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. "Who determines what is a work of art?" asked the prosecutor. "It's the culture at large—museums, critics, galleries. No one person makes the determination. It's more than personal, more than local," replied an expert witness. To refuse the position "once pornography always pornography," as we shall see, is neither to repudiate the power of images nor to deny their capacity to arouse. Nor is it, as some skeptics might claim, simply an indication of upward cultural mobility ("now we too can recognize what makes these images art").

One further aspect of both the proceedings and the jury's decision merits reflection. The jury seems to have been chiefly convinced by those critics who offered a formalist defense of the photographs (their strategy was to prove that the photos qualified as art on formal grounds, as if this were the sole possible basis for proof). Could such a jury, consisting of ordinary members of the Cincinnati community, really have been persuaded, almost overnight, by arguments such as those regarding the figure study of the photographer with a bullwhip in his anus? "The human figure is centered. The horizon line is two-thirds of the way up, almost the classical two-thirds to one-third proportion. The way the light is cast so there is light all around the figure [is] very symmetrical, which is very characteristic of his flowers...." Surely, one might have thought that this was too fancy a diversion from the reality of the image? Apparently not. The trump card was provided by the most adept of the formal analysts who, when asked, "So when you look at a picture, you look at it differently?" replied emphatically, "No! Training in art is just training in life, really."

One could hardly have wished for a more spectacular vindication of the strategy of "The Play of the Unmentionable." If anyone thought that

Kosuth had overestimated the importance of the question of art, the result of the Cincinnati trial (and the relaxation of restrictions by the NEA that followed in its wake) proved that he had not. It was precisely *their own* reflection on “the historical relationship between the artist and the concept of art in this society” that made members of the jury realize the impossibility and futility of censorship.

The jury was swayed by an exposition of the formal aspects of the works at issue. Apparently, either one meaning of the work was set aside or, as a result of their questioning of the nature of art, form became meaning (or, at least, integral to it). One might not have predicted that a jury of people not normally involved with the making or business of art would be moved by formal arguments—and yet they were. This can only mean that both the art establishment and the anti-art establishment misjudge the involvement of most museumgoers with issues of art. But was the day saved only because the works were proved to be art? Once again the question returns: Who decides? We know well enough that at Cincinnati it was the directors of the museums. We could take this as just one further sign of the institutionalization of the radical, which has become so complex an aspect of the cultural politics of our times. But it also seems to mean that Mapplethorpe is now safely institutionalized. Could this be why Kosuth insisted on the inclusion of the photographs by Larry Clark? Beside him, as I have noted, Mapplethorpe’s works look a little too smooth, stylish, and marketable.

But here lies a considerable irony. For all his assaults on the connection between style and the market, Kosuth’s own work betrays an extreme degree of what might roughly be called high formalization. It is cool and elegant, and its junctures of words, light, and **visuality** are almost seamlessly consistent. Initially, in his work Kosuth sought a certain neutrality of

presentation. Lettering was intended to be undistinctive, rather than overtly “artistic.” But, whether or not he intended it, even this neutrality gained its own historical momentum and status with the passage of time. The result, ironically enough, has been a distinctive Kosuthian style. We see it in the Brooklyn installation as much as in his other works. And it has, inevitably, become eminently marketable. The artist has been caught on the very hook that he so effectively baited.

At least two more paradoxes, or problems, arise from Kosuth’s thinking. To overlook them would be an abnegation of the very candor his art demands. After the paradox of institutionalization come those of contextuality and aura. They are less obviously paradoxical, but equally relevant to the effectiveness of the installation. They are paradoxical for two reasons: the strength of the installation could be seen to depend, at least to some extent, on a community of response that somehow infringes the rule of contextuality (as is now most obvious in the case of images that are seen to carry a sexual charge); and the power of its images appeared to depend on a quality that might once have been described as aura, had it not been for the critique that Benjamin based on the commodification and institutionalization of art.

In my book *The Power of Images* I emphasized the poverty of a view of the history of art that does not take the constitutive role of the viewer into full consideration, whether for the meaning or the power of images. I argued that it is impossible to understand either the present or the past of images unless one takes the active role of the viewer into account. And I suggested that one means of gaining access to the dialectic of interaction is by plotting and investigating the symptoms of responses, however troubling and difficult, to art and to images. Such an investigation seems feasible only if it is based not simply on the internal history of images, but

also on the application of the lessons of philosophy, anthropology, and psychology.

My trajectory, therefore, is not dissimilar to Kosuth's; we have a kindred sense of the constructive and the limiting roles of context. It is instructive that, as if in alarm at my delineation of responses which intellectuals in general, and art historians in particular, either deny or seek to banish from their territories, choruses of art-historical fear arose. These choruses were reinforced by two anxieties. First, predictably enough, there was the fear that I was somehow reducing the status of art by suggesting that we recall our responses to everyday imagery when we investigate our responses to what we regard as art; and, secondly, there was the anxiety that I was attributing to images some mysterious power, and thereby failing to acknowledge individual needs and the projection of individual desires. I mention these reactions because they offer some insight into the premises of Kosuth's practice, specifically that of "The Play of the Unmentionable."

As we have seen, Kosuth repeatedly insists on the operative role of the viewer, his or her *constitutive* role. There are no intrinsic meanings—no intrinsic *power*; I would add—in objects and images. It is the viewer who must struggle for the meaning of art, in the face of the dictates of market and institutions. Some critics of *The Power of Images* were apparently so afraid of the responses to art that might thus arise that they compounded their fears by suggesting that I attributed the power of images to images themselves, autonomously and therefore somehow magically—the very position I had repeatedly sought to undermine. Such is the power invested in images, it would seem, that even my repeated acknowledgement of the necessity of context renewed the old fears that they might have an inherent power of their own.

The days of belief in the passive spectator are now happily over; and

only the most intransigent believers in the absolute transcendence of great works of art or the staunchest proponents of the market's determining role lament their passing. But that forlorn position has recently come to be replaced by a positivism, that, though it has been nurtured by the worthiest of motives, has become the domain of the fearful and the timid: the positivism of small context, of anecdote, of the narrow forms of what has fashionably come to be called "microhistory."

Granted that the viewer constructs the meaning of the work; but how is the viewer himself or herself constructed? This is the question that has led many astray. The attentive and up-to-date reader may already have raised at least one eyebrow at the ways in which both Kosuth and I sometimes refer to "people," or "the viewer," or make use of the generalized first-person plural. To do so is neither to hypostatize "the viewer" nor to sacrifice individuality for the sake of some kind of corporate response. It is not to minimize difference, nor to say that everyone responds in the same way to a given work or set of circumstances. Rather, it *is* to point up those common bases of response, emotion, and cognition upon which context acts and whose very commonality makes them amenable to analysis. We have no good words for them. They relate to hunger, sexuality, grief, gladness, terror. They are those awkward facts of feeling, instinct, and desire that have their roots in our humanity. Of course, these categories are themselves inflected by context, and subject to social and gender construction—always. Prior to such inflection we must reckon with whatever it is that enables arousal and emotion. To say this is to do no more than declare the work that has still to be done: theoretical on the one hand, technical on the other. While different images may arouse the sexual feelings of different people at different times under different circumstances, it would be futile not to acknowledge the cognitive process, prior to context, that enables

arousal by representation; and because this is a process that is prior to context, it cannot be named (except, perhaps, in neurophysiological terms). It is a theoretical construct with physiological reality.

One cannot understand the desire to censor without understanding desire *tout court*—specifically the desire for what is represented. However much context shapes content, and however much one acknowledges that standards of morality, when applied to art, are wholly determined by socio-historical context and the varieties of conditioning, the link between vision and desire nevertheless remains to be excavated and theorized.

For the sake of argument, let us say one attributes the greater popular success of the Brooklyn installation (in comparison with the 1989 Wittgenstein installation, “The Play of the Unsayable”) to the fact that people are more interested in the unmentionable than the unsayable. But to maintain such a position these days causes scandal, and it is not hard to imagine Kosuth himself, the artist as anthropologist, objecting on the grounds that there is no such thing as “people” in general, only different people and different contexts. But it is clear enough that the installation would have failed had not every spectator been able to recognize the sexual charge of the Larry Clarks, or the savagery of Cindy Sherman (p. 134) and the slicing off of the breasts of the Spanish Saint Agatha (p. 137); or the pricking of the needles in Clark’s *First Time Shooting Up* (p. 141), Norman Rockwell’s 1944 *The Tattoo Artist* (p. 141), and the Nkisi power figure (p. 140); or the deprivation of vitality betokened by the willful removal of the eyes of a figure in a picture such as the fifteenth-century *Martyrdom of Saints Cosmas and Damian with their Three Brothers* (p. 129), where the eyes were presumably scratched at the time of the iconoclastic disturbances of the next century in an attempt to deprive the executioners of their malevolent life or vitality.

Of course, there are plenty of other aspects of the “Play of the Unmentionable” that would have been incomprehensible in other contexts; but the power of the installation resided precisely in the degree to which it forced its spectators to reflect on the ways in which they judged the inflection of response by context. Of course, one might also claim that its effectiveness depended wholly on the common cultural identity of its spectators—but in Brooklyn, of all places? The argument would be a weak one. No more representative microcosm of the world could we know. The installation forced one to reflect on context; but it depended for its effectiveness on a cognitive grasp of the roots of emotion, appetite, and fear: fear of oneself as much as fear of the other.

In *The Power of Images* I was chiefly concerned with the power that arises in the case of all imagery, and not only in those images we call “art.” Kosuth, however, in the Brooklyn installation took one important step further: he decided to use the power of images as a means of understanding the power of art. While the role of the viewer in making meaning is fundamental to both his and my own aims, Kosuth’s breakthrough was to take the step from representation in general to art itself.

“The meaning of art is how we *describe* it. The *description of art*—which art itself manifests—consists of a dynamic cluster of uses, shifting from work to work, of elements taken from the very fabric of culture—no different from those which construct reality day to day.” On the basis of this position, Kosuth can make the most satisfactory claim we yet have for considering the role of the viewer as a means of insight into making. Viewers make meaning in the way artists make meaning: in both cases meaning is predicated on the questioning of art. Once one acknowledges the definition of art as a questioning, as a test rather than an illustration, one may

begin to see it in terms of its liberating possibilities. It is a (*the*) fundamentally unalienating activity precisely because it allows us to participate in the making of meaning rather than having it foisted on us by some outside force such as superior taste, the market, some august institution, or anything else we might accept unquestioningly. Finally, we are able to interrogate our own complicity.

To remember the lessons of the everyday and the ethnographic is to begin to understand the power of what we call “art.” We fail to grasp the force of images in our culture because they have become anodyne from familiarity, and because of our constant inclination to repress. Who in a civilized society finds it easy to admit to the savage within ourselves, to responses that seem primitive, raw, and basic—the kind we think characteristic of other, more “primitive” cultures? As long as we think of art as no more than expensive decoration, no more than the unthinking “regurgitation of traditional forms ignorant of tradition,” we will continue to think of form as pure and autonomous content; and the motivation to censor—as well as art’s capacity to offend us (or them)—will continue to elude our grasp. If we fail to recognize the full extent to which art can go beyond the pleasing and the decorative, we fail to see the essential disturbances of art, and fetishize instead everything that is on its periphery: style, formalism, aesthetics, and those postmodernisms that are ignorant in their derivations.

And so the problem of aura remains. It remains a useful term, Benjamin’s critique notwithstanding, for referring to the powers of images that we are inclined to repress, such as those that follow from the conflation of signifier and signified. Aura might also be applied usefully to those effects of images that were once clearer and easier to recognize in an age of ritual and religion. And it serves to underline the continuity between responses to religious images in the past and responses to other kinds of images now,

including sexual ones. The corollary, of course, is that we fail to acknowledge the full effects of images because of the varieties of repression legitimized by art. But how to move from the power of images to the meaning of art?

There is, in Kosuth, a high faith in art: not in the art we unthinkingly accept, nor in the art of market or fashion, but rather in art that makes itself by questioning, describing, and defining itself. This, for him, is what replaces the old notion of aura. The viewer, not the ritual, makes the meaning of the work. Power comes from the active, dialectical engagement with the work and from the testing of its status as art. Aura was provided by religion in the past, by various cultural institutions now; but it has become an empty vessel. In an age of easy reproduction aura can only serve the interests of the market; and it does so, of course, by furthering the commodification of the object. Kosuth offers us the only compelling alternative. By replacing the fetishization of the object with reflection on the nature of art, and by showing the actual *work* involved in the process of reflection and questioning, he has reinstated the power of art. This power, in the end, is also a liberating one, because it encourages consciousness to become aware of itself and to recognize the forces that act upon it.

“The Play of the Unmentionable,” therefore, is not only about censorship but also—above all—about the conditions of art. It brings to the fore censorship’s direct dependence on how we and all other viewers think about the nature of art. Censorship is incapable of being programmed; it cannot be made into a set of immutable rules, precisely because it, like our notions of art, is wholly context dependent. Meaning is made by individual viewers in their context; it is not immanent in the objects of art. When we accept the meanings with which the institutions of our culture—whether market,

museum, or people “of superior taste”—endow the work, we relinquish some of our freedom. Kosuth shows how liberation can only come from the ceaseless questioning and requestioning of the nature of art. We ourselves make meaning in the way the best artists do, by never giving up that questioning. Only in this way can we challenge the sterile dominance of institutionally imposed taste. Art, in the end, is what art means to us. It opens to us one of the few roads to authenticity in a society that insists on imposing its taste at every turn and by every means—nowadays, above all, by the market. By means of the questioning on which Kosuth insists, by means of the interrogation of the nature of art, we at least make some progress in freeing our inner life from the sway of ideology. No wonder that Kosuth begins with Rousseau’s critique of social man, who “lives constantly outside himself and only knows how to live in the opinion of others.” Rousseau offers the savage as the model of authenticity; but what is really at stake here is authentic autonomy of judgment. Kosuth seeks to lay it bare not simply by insisting on the independent questioning of art, but by encouraging us to reflect on the ways in which other societies are capable of purer and more independent judgments—though, admittedly, also of similar sorts of social control—with the result that art retains some of the force it has lost in our own.

This loss of force is to be attributed not simply to the dominance of the institutions, but also to the irreversible historical fact that the society in which we live is no longer unified. This, for a start, is why works of art can no longer be pictures of the world. In a fragmented, nonunified society such as ours meanings necessarily differ from viewer to viewer. As we have repeatedly seen, it is the viewer in context who makes meaning—a meaning achieved by an attentiveness to the play within systems of meaning. “The Play of the Unmentionable” makes us see how meaning emerges

from the interstices within the relations between relations, in such a way that we begin to discern still further relations not seen before. Meaning may be elicited by texts, but texts themselves are limited. Art says what texts cannot say. It offers to us the constructive elements for what can only be said indirectly, for the unsayable and even the unmentionable. Kosuth's achievement is to help us understand that art is more than its objects, that it resides in how we question the nature of art, and that understanding emerges from the play of relations. We can only begin the process of understanding if we open ourselves to that play and succeed in ridding ourselves of our socially determined preconceptions about the meanings of works.

Above all, however, Kosuth has succeeded in taking that most conservative of institutions, the museum, and turning it into a liberating place. As in the past, so too now, the museum has become a cathedral where we submissively pay homage to the dogmas of art, and where we either passively yield or actively embrace an orthodoxy imposed from on high. But for a brief period The Brooklyn Museum—with its complicity—became a place where meaning could be made as a result of critical thinking about the process and nature of art itself. For once, ironically enough, that meaning could be achieved free from the dictates of the institution itself, since the play of texts and objects allowed a play of the imagination unfettered by normal rules and constraints.

Once we censor, however, once we accept the full consequences of institutionalization and impose the rules and cancellations censorship demands, we exclude the possibility of art. That is both the threat of censorship and the challenge it poses, not merely to art but to the liberation art offers. This liberation is in turn the most essential, the most indispensable part of the nature of art. By refusing its dangers, censorship takes away art's possibility.