**Joseph Kosuth,** *The Language of Equilibrium / Il Linguaggio dell'Equilibrio*, **2007 (full caption below)**

# Smart Art

## Joanna Fiduccia

*Intelligence…is the faculty of manufacturing artificial objects, especially tools to make tools.*
— Henri Bergson

*It's like a discipline without the discipline of all of the discipline.*
— LCD Soundsystem

"Einstein's brain," begins the eponymous chapter in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, "is a mythical object," embodying both mechanical perfection and quasi-gnostic illumination. The same terms could describe genius artworks, too—as a union of technical mastery and some fundamental, obdurate kernel of inspiration, divine or otherwise. It bears mentioning, nevertheless, that obduracy isn't always inspired. In fact, sometimes it's just stubbornly obscure. Somewhere in the middle is "smart art."

Over the past fifty years, a number of artists have turned toward analytic philosophy for the themes and forms of their work, marshaling its precise language and even its argumentation into the visual arts.[1] Vaulting into aporia from a springboard of academic heavyweights and analytic discourse (which gives it the allure and authority that technical mastery might have provided in another century), smart art today can often look to viewers like Einstein's brain did to Barthes: rigorous, erudite, rational—and yet, entirely beyond one's grasp.

This elusiveness traces back to smart art's foundations in the late 1960s. In his 1969 essay "Art After Philosophy," Joseph Kosuth is careful to establish his bailiwick: not over truth or knowledge about the world but, rather, over (tautological) truth and (often conflicted) knowledge about art itself. He writes:

> Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context—as art—they provide no information whatsoever about 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 a particular work of art is art, which means, is a *definition* of art.[2]

Kosuth so circumspectly avoided empirical or extra-artistic claims in order to better level his tautologies at his target: the authority of modernist criticism in the tradition of Clement Greenberg. Kosuth's putsch would consist in redefining art itself, carrying the modernist inquest into the essence of a specific medium to its extreme: the ontological investigation of art or art-in-*general*.[3] Peter Osborne describes this project as *exclusive* or *strong* conceptualism (as opposed to *weak* and *inclusive* conceptualism, whose proponents included Sol LeWitt as well as, unintuitively, philosopher and artist Adrian Piper). Osborne calls strong conceptualism an "odd philosophical interlude" in the history of conceptual art.[4] And yet, to judge by the work of contemporary artists, from Falke Pisano and Benoît Maire to Martin Beck, Liam Gillick or Thomas Hirschhorn, that philosophical interlude has generated many variations, and even something of a tradition.

The project for these subsequent generations, however, is visibly different and considerably more diffuse than Osborne's strong conceptualism. If the realignment of art in ontological terms is no longer the primary stake for smart art, its strategies have remained the same: namely, the use of analytic philosophical tropes to gain social control over the artwork. In a discussion with Justin Lieberman in this issue, Chris Sharp posits that the trajectory of the term "strategy," from its one-time martial use to its recuperation by the marketing industry, is paralleled in "retard art"—and, I would add, in smart art, too. The erudition exuded by smart art has come to operate as a substitute for technical mastery, as intellectual dazzle that compensates for plastic indifference, or even emptiness. Bamboozling its viewer into passivity, it forecloses critical exchange.

### Philosophy and/as Art
Smart art emerged within a generation of artists who were largely university-educated and confronted with the new opportunities and antagonisms of their epoch. These artists began making art in the shadow of critical powerhouses, Greenberg first among them, whose standards of judgment left little margin for new art, particularly art that responded to the society and politics of advanced capitalism and the various headways made in civil rights and progressive social politics. It thus seems inevitable that criticism and art would butt heads, and would do so over the very definition of art.

Osborne indicates philosophy as "*the means* for [the] usurpation of critical power by a new generation of artists: the means by which they could simultaneously address the crisis of ontology of the artwork […] and achieve social control over the meaning of their work." [5] Deploying philosophical, logico-linguistic discourse *as* the artwork was thus a two-fold strategy to shift authority of the work from criticism to artworks and the artists who made them, while (ostensibly) leaving no aesthetic remainder. While this can be seen as liberating the watershed works of the 1960s, conceptualism's "usurpation" can be read not merely as an affront to old-guard critics but as one possible reaction to the "de-skilling" of art through the course of the twentieth century. Where technical skill became increasingly irrelevant, a level of intense erudition and verbal facility became nearly required. Finally, by acknowledging the tautological nature of his work, Kosuth solved a troubling problem for postwar art: its content. The ontology of the artwork became the great and sufficient *a priori*. Nothing else was needed than that the artwork exist as artwork for it to pass as being "about something"—as being, in Kosuth's terms, a proposition about art.

### Getting Nothing to Get
The serious philosophical approach of Kosuth and his peers made possible a number of developments in mainstream art—not least among them, the use of language as a medium in visual art, and

interdisciplinary art-based research. The influence of these developments is so broad that, paradoxically, its more extreme proponents, like the British artist John Latham's work with flat time, Stephen Willats' systems analysis installations or Sturtevant's philosophically inflected texts and performances, can come across as idiosyncratic or isolated. Recent years, however, have witnessed a return to the tautological form —and therefore to the two-fold strategy—of smart art, making it once more possible to label it as a tendency.

In French artist Benoît Maire's essay "The Obstacle is Tautology," Maire claims that conceptual art proper, by virtue of being tautological and therefore excluded from the world of beings and Saussurean signs, is not "an object of the world" and can only become one when it is repeated, or "when its tautological model is taken as a reference" and "echoed" through subsequent works.[6] If this seems like a justification for neo-conceptualists' repetitions of historical conceptual pieces, Maire's own work, which is more generative and intellectually limber, suggests something otherwise.
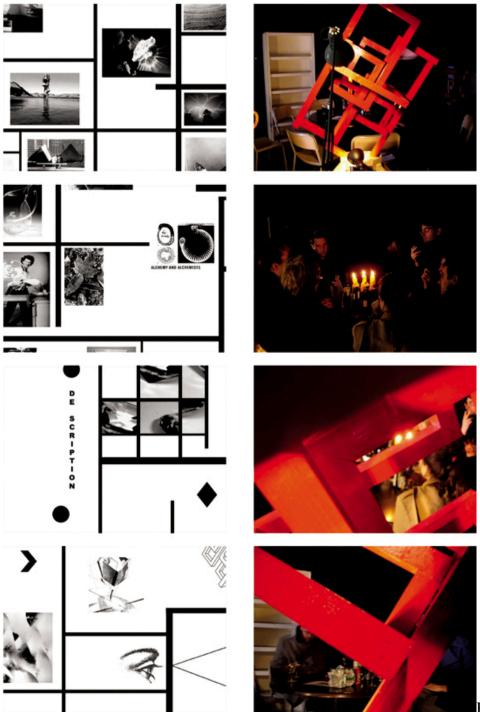
In an early work entitled *The Spider Web* (2006), Maire arrayed a diverse selection of objects to serve as a pretext for a discussion with Arthur Danto (Danto gamely obliged). This was followed up by *Le Réel est l'impasse de la formalisation; la formalisation est le lieu de passe-en-force du réel* (2006) in which the artist translated his interpretation of a passage by Alain Badiou into objects, ranging from a pair of cowboy boots to three glasses of India ink to a globe, which were carefully positioned on two platforms. While both works can be conceived as allegories for interpreting artworks, they also take on the tautological nature of works from the 1960s (i.e., art is a proposition about art), however rehearsing it on the level of viewing (i.e., viewing or *reading* art is a proposition about viewing or reading art). Their rebuslike quality notwithstanding, the works have an ambivalent relationship to their philosophical source texts, whose content is bracketed by the subjectivity of Maire's interpretation, on one hand, and the notion of the "mere pretext for discussion" on the other. One is left instead with the dazzle of a philosophically sophisticated intelligence wrestling with a very erudite reading list.

This is only more apparent in a recent project, "The Aesthetics of the Differend" (2009). Drawing on Lyotard (as well as Lacan and Badiou), an "explicatory" text outlines the rules of a game (a language game?): "4.3 — description of the elements of the game: / a — the mechanical transcendent, / b — the general mirror of transcendental indexation / c — investigation A (defeated) following the position / d — the empty subject, which only speaks through the scream […]." Last November, Maire discussed the project with Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, Reader in Theory and Philosophy of Art at the University of Reading, at Hollybush Gardens in London. The discussion could have been said to illuminate Maire and Dronsfield's own "differend"—the negotiation of a debate that uses the discourse of analytic philosophy to discuss work that expressly exists *outside* the context of analytic philosophy.

In this respect, Maire's project is rather more like the work of Art & Language than Kosuth. In contrast to Kosuth's practice, which used, in Osborne's words, "logical positivist philosophy of language as a guillotine to eradicate the aesthetic dimension of the work," Art & Language pursued analytic philosophy as an end in itself.[7] However, Osborne continues, "the pursuit of technical philosophical advances in logico-linguistic analysis at the level of the collective action of an artistic community could only be (and was retrospectively rationalized as) the metaphorical performance of a necessary failure."[8] In other words, their failure to contribute to the academic philosophical community from within the tautological borders of art is contrived as a justification for the work in the art world—as a performance of said failure. There is *nothing to get*, and that is precisely the point; failure to communicate is encoded as the content of the work.[9] It is a strategy of assumed or sublimated content, which can be suspected but never verified, thereby empowering itself through the exclusion of understanding.

**Smarts as Substitute**

It is here that current strands in smart art begin to cohere—not around an ontological project but around a phenomenological one. Take, for instance, Dutch artist Falke Pisano's contribution to last year's Venice Biennale, *Making Worlds*. Composed of panels of text and diagrams suspended in metal frames, *Silent Element (Figures of Speech) II* (2009) expanded upon a series of earlier works that concern the relationship between speech and visual apprehension. Pisano's texts are a mash of the vocabulary of existential phenomenology ("Duration can only be experienced when perception takes place from one structure to another; consequently temporal values are transferred to a continuous present experience of time; The figure spoke with the intention of installing a logic of transformation between disparate conditions")—seemingly earnest and untempered by any humor.



Falke Pisano, *A Sculpture turning into a Conversation*, 2006; 2 channel video (25 minutes) and paper sculpture; courtesy Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam, Balice/Hertling, Paris, and Hollybush Gardens, London

Benoît Maire and Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, *Aesthetics of the Differends*; November, 19 2009; lecture at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, Charing Cross Road, London; presented as a collaboration between Hollybush Gardens, Double Agents and Whatistobesaid; courtesy Hollybush Gardens, London

If language like this has not rendered you dumb with indefinite terms and general turgidity, you can make out Pisano's narrative: the confrontation of spectators with a "concrete object"…that is, a sculpture. It is especially difficult in the context of a large, general public affair like the Venice Biennale to see *Silent Element II* more generously than as a "metaphorical performance of a necessary failure"—its opacity returning, tautologically, to its own putative content of "apprehending." To be less generous, Pisano's work is like a riddle in which a familiar sentence is construed in the most complicated terms: those who can't decipher it are liable to feel cowed by a fear of intellectual deficiency (and doesn't genuine smart art trade in that fear?), while those who can are left with little more than a phrase they already knew.

Critically, the vague "concrete object" belies an indifference to the object itself. It attests instead to extreme bellybutton gazing on the nature of display, echoed in works by artists like Martin Beck and Julie Ault (whose collaboration at the Secession in Vienna in 2006 explored the utopian aspirations for exhibitions as a mode of communication), Liam Gillick or even Thomas Hirschhorn. Pisano is an extreme example for her lack of commitment to issues or politics beyond the mechanisms of display, and her works thus congeal around the tautological nature of the proposition made by these artworks in general. But though they are tautologies, they're no guillotines "eradicating the aesthetic"; rather, their vagueness —their fog of linguistic constructions—is what comes to substitute for the aesthetic, by providing a web of challenging concepts and terms (what I have elsewhere called a "dazzle" of intellect) in the vacuum of that "concrete object."

## Marketing Smarts
In 1974, Marcel Broodthaers designed a cover for *Studio International*, a graphic representation of the words "Fine Arts" with an eagle in place of the "e" and a donkey—or an ass—in place of the "a." Arguably, for Broodthaers, the eagle by then had come to stand in for conceptual art itself—the leveling of medium-specificity, as well as an emblem for its rhetorical, self-promotional force.[10] As Rosalind Krauss noted, Broodthaers made explicit this second meaning on another cover for *Interfunktionen* in 1974, which states, "View, according to which an artistic theory will function for the artistic product in the same way as the artistic product itself functions as advertising for the order under which it is produced." That is, the "redoubling of art as theory" (to which Broodthaers' *Interfunktionen* also belongs) is promotional in essence—without, as Krauss stresses, leaving any "critical remainder."[11] This is art as

theory as marketing, generating no margin for discussion, no excess for critical engagement. The dazzle and fog, the smoke and mirrors of smart art's showy erudition, are exactly what recommends it *as* art within the tautological project set out in the sixties, while making any discussion—beyond that which describes the perplexity it produces—effectively moot. In the end, it may be worth wondering whether smart art needs any viewer at all, or whether the audience isn't liquidated along with critical exchange.

Perhaps it's appropriate to end these reflections with Broodthaers. After all, his practice now appears like a rejoinder to smart art's strategies, meeting their turbid discourse with a certain smirking lightness that sharply underpins his institutional and commodity critique. On the cover of *Studio International*—incidentally, the same magazine that first published Kosuth's "Art After Philosophy"—Broodthaers seems to point to the obfuscating strategy of smart art today, and its power to make asses of us all.

1. As Peter Osborne points out, analytic philosophy "combines the classical cultural authority of philosophy, in the updated guise of a philosophical scientism (logico-linguistic analysis), with a purely second-order or meta-critical conception of its epistemological status. For only a meta-critical conception of philosophy allows for the *re-coding* of 'art' as 'philosophy' while leaving its artistic status intact." Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy," in *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 89.

2. Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1960–1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

3. See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 10.

4. Osborne, 64.

5. Osborne's emphasis. Osborne, 88.

6. The essay was recently published in a booklet along with the exhibition of the same title, co-curated with Jonas Zakaitis of Tulips & Roses. Benoît Maire, *The Obstacle is Tautology*, ex. cat. (Vilnius: Tulips & Roses, 2010).

7. Osborne, 99.

8. Ibid.

9. Compare with the reflections of Max Kozloff, writing on conceptual art in 1972: "The aggressive 'take-it-or-leave-it' psychology of much recent art betrays, I think, uneasiness […] That we are defied 'to leave' the art, that we are often offered nothing, effectively, but this defiance, is the piece's justification." Max Kozloff, "The Trouble with Art-as-Idea," in *Cultivated Impasses: Essays on the Waning of the Avant-Garde 1964–1975* (New York; Marsilio Publishers, 2000), 425.

10. See Krauss, 12–15.

11. Ibid., 15.

Top image: Joseph Kosuth, *The Language of Equilibrium / Il Linguaggio dell'Equilibrio*, 2007; 52nd Venice Bienniale, Isola di San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice, Italy; courtesy the artist and Lia Rumma Gallery, Milan; photo by Daniele Nalesso; © 2010 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York