‘A Play: The Herald Tribune, Kafka and a Quote’
In Hirshhorn WORKS—a special exhibition program—invited artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. By using the museum as studio, medium, or subject of their work, these artists highlight the museum’s particular architectural spaces and reveal its institutional function.

Joseph Kosuth is among the first of a generation of artists who, in the late 1960s, advanced a re-definition of the work of art as a philosophic concept or social construct rather than a specific physical object embodying universal aesthetic values. In his writings since 1966, Kosuth has proposed that the artist's activity resides in the making of meaning rather than the making of objects. Through his work, he explores the relationship between art, philosophy, and language. Like the linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Kosuth proposes that the meaning of anything exists in its use, and that art can express meanings that cannot be stated directly. In his work, therefore, Kosuth often uses photomechanical reproductions, printed texts, and a variety of formats and materials in a strategy of juxtaposition and recontextualization.

Joseph Kosuth was born in Toledo, Ohio, on January 31, 1945. He studied at the Toledo Museum School of Design, 1955-58, and the Cleveland Institute of Art, 1963-64. He moved to New York City in 1965 and studied art at the School of Visual Arts, 1965-67, and philosophy and anthropology at the New School for Social Research, 1970-72. Currently he is professor of Fine Arts at the Kunstkademie Stuttgart. Around 1965 he conceived a series of works, including One and Three Chairs (Museum of Modern Art, New York), in which he juxtaposed an object, a photograph of the object, and its dictionary definition to address the multiple aspects of the idea of something and its forms of presentation. These works were followed by many others using dictionary definitions and various texts, in formats including books, billboards, and projects using neon lighting. Since the early 1980s he has focused on the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Sigmund Freud. As an extension of his methodology, Kosuth has also organized two exhibitions incorporating such texts and works of art by other artists: The Play of the Unsayable: Wittgenstein and the Art of the 20th Century, in Vienna and Brussels (1989) and The Play of the Unmentionable, an exhibition about censorship at the Brooklyn Museum (1991).

More recently, Kosuth has used quotes from the works of the writer Franz Kafka, whose name has become synonymous with a modern sense of anxiety and alienation. The Hirshhorn project uses excerpts from the International Herald Tribune, fragments from Kafka's Parables, and quotes from other authors as ready-made sources. It is related to the permanent installation Kosuth completed for the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago (1991). Entitled A Play: News From Kafka and a Quote, that work features a single Washington Post news article (a report on a study of U.S. citizens' anger and feelings of political powerlessness), silkscreened fourteen times around a room that, like the Hirshhorn space, serves as an entrance foyer. Paired with each article are a quote from Kafka's Parables and one from another literary source (including Goethe, Mark Twain, John O'Hara), also silkscreened directly on the walls. The following text is from an interview conducted by mail in July and August 1992.

Phyllis Rosenzweig
Associate Curator
PR: Why did you choose the museum’s third-floor escalator lobby as the site for your project? What appealed to you about it?

JK: Part of how we see, and what we see, is organized by the context. Architecture is one of our most political art forms: it naturalizes the presumptions of its social organization, it can psychologize the banal and make it appear inevitable. In short, it is a humanly made world that functions as nature. The psychological approach that the architectural context provides greatly organizes the kinds of meanings that we give to the work itself. This work, ‘A Play: The Herald Tribune, Kafka and a Quote,’ needed to be in a passage, a space that had the atmosphere of being functional. If the same work would be in one of the more conventional gallery spaces it would have taken on a kind of rarified and precious ‘profundity’ as well as invite a kind of formalistic scrutiny. A museum context always provides this, but here in this passage it is reduced.

PR: Why did you choose to use these texts from the Herald Tribune and Franz Kafka’s Parables? What is their significance, or the significance of their conjunction, especially in this particular situation?

JK: I have studios in both New York and Belgium, primarily to support work I do on both sides of the Atlantic. In the past few years I have been living more and more in Europe. Partly that’s because of work, but another part of it has been my distress at what I believe has been happening to my country for the past dozen years: America’s dark age. We always had anti-intellectual, anti-cultural attitudes existing in America, but we’ve never seen an attempt to institutionalize them before. Our concept of good leadership, traditionally, has meant that an effort was made to elevate and educate, rather than exploit base instincts for short-term political ends. As a result of living in Europe, my knowledge about events in America came from the International Herald Tribune. Clippings from this newspaper are one of the elements used in the work. For anyone who’s lived abroad for any time at all, the Trib is a bridge back home. Quite simply, what I did was take a part of my daily life and use it in order to anchor certain issues about ongoing life in the present as part of the work. The concept for this project developed along with the one I did as a permanent installation for the new Chicago Public Library. These works, as well as my recent installation for Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany, come out of what I learned doing The Play of the Unmentionable at the Brooklyn Museum. As for Kafka, isn’t he clear?

PR: Your choice of Kafka may be self-evident, but what is the thinking process behind that decision?
JK: Well, you have three elements, which although they are all 'texts' and all 'readymades' are very different in character. They constitute three kinds of textual 'facts' in the world: news (either reportage or editorial), an individual's statement, and supposed fiction. But this fiction happens to be by one of the greatest writers of the century and reflects with a perceptive accuracy a very real and lived human experience. These paragraphs by Kafka function as the motor of the work, they set the elements into operation. But your life gives it the final context.

PR: Do you think of or use this kind of source material, that is, an excerpt from the newspaper and a work of fiction, differently than some of your previous sources, such as Freud and Wittgenstein?

JK: As a working process there is often little difference. As a learning process, for me, all kinds of works I do teach me a variety of different things. Often that is the attraction to doing a certain kind of work. We are discussing devices here, of course, and not the larger agenda of the work. As for the use of materials that already exist, that is basic to the activity of making art. The truth is that artists don't invent colors or forms, for example, they use what is already there, but what they do invent is new meaning. There, repetition only really exists in the collected residue of history, meaning finds its limit and its place in the experience of the living. When I began my work some twenty-five years ago, it seemed to me that if our work was on meaning and if our perceptions were organized by language, by information, then it was better to confront this situation directly. For me though, distance has to be maintained. My textual material was always borrowed, even stolen; it was fragmented, cancelled, referenced, erased. Bits of language from the world utilized to function as language within art. The language was in the larger role of the art proposition, both as a model of culture as well as its active agent.

PR: Did the Hirshhorn Museum's location in Washington, D.C., or the fact that it is a museum and not some other kind of building, have any bearing on your project?

JK: I mentioned the aspect of context in reference to your first question. Since my earliest work I have realized that this was a major part of the material I was working with. So, of course I had Washington in mind when I did this work, and I had the present political climate in mind as well. This is the context that frames this work. An important aspect of work like mine is that its material is a context of meaning. While such work can be anywhere and use anything, its morality is provided by the artist who takes responsibility for the meaning that is made.
‘A Play: The Herald Tribune, Kafka and a Quote’