

LESSON TWO: Language Arts



**IMAGE SIX:** Joseph Kosuth. American, born 1945. *One and Three Chairs*. 1965. Wood folding chair, photographic copy of a chair, and photographic enlargement of a dictionary definition of a chair, chair 32 3/8 x 14 7/8 x 20 7/8" (82 x 37.8 x 53 cm), photographic panel 36 x 24 1/8" (91.5 x 61.1 cm), text panel 24 x 24 1/8" (61 x 61.3 cm). Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund. © 2007 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**IMAGE SEVEN:** Joseph Kosuth. American, born 1945. *One and Three Chairs* (detail). 1965. Wood folding chair, photographic copy of a chair, and photographic enlargement of a dictionary definition of a chair, chair 32 3/8 x 14 7/8 x 20 7/8" (82 x 37.8 x 53 cm), photographic panel 36 x 24 1/8" (91.5 x 61.1 cm), text panel 24 x 24 1/8" (61 x 61.3 cm). Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund. © 2007 Joseph Kosuth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**IMAGE EIGHT:** John Baldessari. American, born 1931. *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*. 1971. Lithograph, composition: 22 3/8 x 29 1/16" (56.8 x 75.1 cm); sheet: 22 7/16 x 30 1/16" (57 x 76.4 cm). Publisher: The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Canada. Printer: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Lithography Workshop, Halifax, Canada. Edition: 50. John B. Turner Fund. © 2007 John Baldessari



**IMAGE NINE:** Sol LeWitt. American, 1928–2007. *Untitled from Squares with a Different Line Direction in Each Half Square*. 1971. One from a portfolio of ten etchings, plate: 7 3/16 x 7 3/16" (18.6 x 18.6 cm); sheet: 14 1/2 x 14 1/2" (36.8 x 36.8 cm). Publisher: Parasol Press, New York, and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. Printer: Crown Point Press, Oakland. Edition: 25. Gift of the artist, Parasol Press, and the Wadsworth Atheneum. © 2007 Sol LeWitt / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late 1960s, Conceptual artists questioned long-held assumptions about what defined a work of art. In emphasizing ideas over visual forms, they gave language a central role in their work. In this lesson, students will explore the different ways language is used in Conceptual art and investigate how language and images function as systems of representation.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to artworks that emphasize ideas over visual forms and consider how these works fit into or challenge their definitions of art.
- Students will explore different methods of using language in art.
- Students will consider the role of artists in making language-based Conceptual art.

## INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Divide your class into groups of three. Give one student in each group a card with a noun written on it (such as *chair*, *house*, or *dog*). Ask that student to draw a picture representing the noun, and have the other two students guess what it is. Next, distribute a card with a verb on it (such as *run*, *think*, or *fly*) for the second student to draw and the other two students to guess. Finally, distribute a card with an idea or concept on it (such as *freedom*, *community*, or *individuality*) for the third student to draw, and go through the same process.

When your students are finished with the activity, have them reflect on how they chose to represent the word they were given. Was it easier for students to draw and guess a noun than a verb or a concept? It may be helpful to point out that although they share a common language and vocabulary, each student has different, though often related, visual associations with words or concepts.

## IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students the image and detail of *One and Three Chairs*, by Joseph Kosuth (Images Six and Seven).
- Ask your students to describe what they see and consider how the three elements that compose this work are related.

*One and Three Chairs* is an installation that includes a black-and-white photograph of a chair, an actual wooden chair, and a Photostat of a dictionary definition of the word *chair*. The title refers to Kosuth's presentation of one chair using three different forms of representation: an image, an object, and words.

- Ask your students to consider how the photograph and the dictionary definition function differently than the chair itself. Is one representation of the chair—visual or written—more accurate?

Kosuth, who said, “art is making meaning,” emphasized ideas over the convention that art should reflect the artist’s skill or be pleasing or beautiful in some way.<sup>12</sup> Influenced by the artist Marcel Duchamp’s *readymades*—everyday manufactured objects that Duchamp designated as art—Kosuth did not make the chair but, rather, selected one to include in his installation. He had someone else photograph the chair in order to further remove artistic decision making from the process.

12. Joseph Kosuth, quoted in Christopher Lyon, ed., *Contemporary Art in Context* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 47.

- Ask your students to consider Kosuth’s use of a simple wooden chair. How might their interpretation of this work have differed if Kosuth had selected an ornate chair?
- Revisiting their lists of criteria for a work of art (see *Setting the Scene*), ask your students if *One and Three Chairs* fulfills their definitions. Ask them to support their observations with visual evidence.

Kosuth believed that the creative act should always be critical. Following the model established by Duchamp’s readymades, he produced art that questioned supposedly “unquestionable forms of authority of the culture.”<sup>13</sup> Concerned that people accepted things to be works of art simply because they were exhibited at art museums, Kosuth made works that challenged the authority of art institutions to define objects as art.

- Ask your students to name some ways this work challenges artistic convention and institutional authority.
- Show your students the image of *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, by John Baldessari (Image Eight). Ask them to describe what they see and what they think this sentence means.
- Ask your students to consider whether the fact that this statement is handwritten impacts its meaning. Ask them to consider how the meaning of this statement is affected by being repeated over and over.

Baldessari’s art often examines how words as a form of communication are interpreted differently by different people because of their diverse experiences of life. He has stated, “Everybody knows a different world, and only part of it. We communicate only by chance, as nobody knows the whole, only where overlapping takes place.”<sup>14</sup>

Like written language, the language of visual art is also subject to interpretation. What is considered boring to one person may not be regarded as such by another.

- Inform your students how this work was made, using the artist’s own words:

*I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* was my response to Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to do an exhibition there.... As there wasn’t enough money for me to travel to Nova Scotia I proposed that the students voluntarily write, “I will not make any more boring art” on the walls of the gallery, like punishment. To my surprise they covered the walls.<sup>15</sup>

This lithograph was made by those same students responding to Baldessari’s instructions from thousands of miles away, but not under his direct supervision.

- Ask your students to consider the role of the artist. Should Baldessari be considered the artist of *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* since his only role in its making was to provide the idea and instructions? Why or why not? How is Baldessari’s role similar to Kosuth’s? How is it different?

13. Ibid.

14. John Baldessari, quoted in Coosje van Bruggen, *John Baldessari* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 58.

15. Ibid, 11.

The reference to “boring art” in this 1971 print may allude to Baldessari’s *Cremation Project* from the year before. He had abandoned making more traditional landscape paintings, and fed up with his cluttered studio, the artist decided to burn every painting he had made between 1953 and 1966 that was still in his possession. He buried the ashes in coffins and placed a notice in the newspaper documenting his act.

- **Give your students a few moments to look at *Untitled from Squares with a Different Line Direction in Each Half Square*, by Sol LeWitt (Image Nine), but do not tell them the title right away.**

LeWitt wrote instructions, or what he called “operational diagram[s] to automate art,” that also act as the titles of his artworks.<sup>16</sup> Ask your students to infer what one-sentence title LeWitt might have written to instruct someone how to make this work of art, using visual evidence to support their observations.

- **Inform your students that this lithograph is part of a series called *Squares with a Different Line Direction in Each Half Square*. Write this title on the board and ask your students to describe how it relates to the work’s lines and composition.**

LeWitt hoped his work would appeal to viewers’ intellects, rather than their senses or emotions. He believed that words and lines had equal weight in expressing ideas.

- **Inform your students that although he was interested in all aspects of a work’s creation, from the initial idea to its final execution, LeWitt often hired assistants to execute wall drawings according to his instructions, likening his role as artist to that of a composer of music rather than a performer.**
- **In “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” LeWitt wrote, “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”<sup>17</sup> Ask your students what they think the artist meant by this statement.**

LeWitt hoped that by using written systems, he might eliminate the self-expression traditionally valued in art. Furthermore, he was not interested in the beauty of the final drawings. “If I give the instructions and they are carried out correctly, then the result is OK with me,” he stated.<sup>18</sup>

- **Make sure each student has a pencil and a blank sheet of paper. Ask them to use the same title, *Squares with a Different Line Direction in Each Half Square*, as instructions to draw a composition different from the one they have already seen. After they are finished, your students should share their drawings with the class and discuss how they interpreted these same words. What are the similarities and what are the differences among their drawings? Other works from this series are pictured in MoMA’s Online Collection, at [www.moma.org/collection](http://www.moma.org/collection).**

## ACTIVITIES

### Artistic Influence

LeWitt’s “Statements on Conceptual Art” and “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” were very influential for other artists. A short film of Baldessari singing some of LeWitt’s statements in 1972 can be viewed on UbuWeb, at [www.ubu.com/film/baldessari.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/baldessari.html).

16. Sol LeWitt, quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, “THE STRUCTURES, THE STRUCTURES AND THE WALL DRAWINGS, THE STRUCTURES AND THE WALL DRAWINGS AND THE BOOKS,” in *Sol LeWitt*, exh. cat., ed. Alicia Legg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 24.

17. Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 80.

18. LeWitt, quoted in Lippard, “THE STRUCTURES,” 24.

### Following Instructions

LeWitt often hired people to execute his written instructions for works of art. Divide your class into pairs. Taking turns reading and drawing, the students in each pair should use a black crayon, ruler, and paper to make a drawing according to these instructions from LeWitt's portfolio *WORK FROM INSTRUCTIONS* (1971):

USING A BLACK, HARD CRAYON DRAW A TWENTY INCH SQUARE.  
DIVIDE THIS SQUARE INTO ONE INCH SQUARES. WITHIN EACH  
ONE INCH SQUARE, DRAW NOTHING, OR DRAW A DIAGONAL  
STRAIGHT LINE FROM CORNER TO CORNER OR TWO CROSSING  
STRAIGHT LINES DIAGONALLY FROM CORNER TO CORNER.

After they have finished drawing, each pair should share their works with the class. If there are differences among the drawings, students should determine if it is because the drawer did not correctly follow the instructions or if it is because LeWitt's written instructions can be interpreted in different ways.

### Do it

*Do it* is a compilation written by contemporary artists of playful and provocative do-it-yourself instructions for making artworks and artistic interventions. Selections from the manual are available online at [www.e-flux.com/projects/do\\_it/homepage/do\\_it\\_home.html](http://www.e-flux.com/projects/do_it/homepage/do_it_home.html) (see Selected Bibliography and Resources).

As an after-school activity, have each of your students select one set of instructions to follow from the *Do it* manual or Web site. Once their works are complete, students should present them to the class. If more than one student chooses the same instructions, have them compare how they interpreted the instructions.

**Please note that some artists' instructions may be inappropriate for younger students. We recommend instructions written by the following artists:**

Louise Bourgeois, Critical Art Ensemble, Tacita Dean, Jimmie Durham, Olafur Eliasson, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Joseph Grigley, Roald Hoffman, Allison Knowles, Steve Kaltenbach, Jeong-a Koo, Julius Koller, Jorge Macchi, Annette Messenger, Yoko Ono, Cesare Pietrousti, Marjetica Potrc, and Erwin Wurm.

### Paper Sculptures

*The Paper Sculpture Book* contains instructions and materials developed by contemporary artists for building paper sculptures (see Selected Bibliography and Resources). Have each student in your class follow the instructions to make one of the paper sculptures. When they are finished, have them present their work to the class and then create an exhibition of their paper sculptures in the classroom. Ask your students to discuss whether the instructions are straightforward or if they allow room for interpretation and intervention.