To “Speak Another Language”
When art loses its ties to the aristocratic and the mythic and begins the modernist trajectory from Manet on—from here on out—the very idea, the very project of art is open to be defined. At first it turned on the issues of the picture plan and perception, which is the question of depiction, perspective, impressions, sense impression, the multiple. But this was still within the plastic space of the older media, painting and sculpture. Myth was first to be turned over with abstraction. And class concerns (that is, who or what is the subject, and for whom is the work made) also change, had changed already from Caravaggio to Vermeer, Manet, Toulouse-Latrec, Bonnard, and on and on and on.

What was an object that could be called art, be art—all that gets wrapped up in the readymade. The designated, what is art is art not because I say it is so, but it becomes art for me, it becomes for others. It affirms and invites its designation and designation as such.

The function of art, as a question, was first raised by Marcel Duchamp. In fact it is Marcel Duchamp whom we can credit with giving art its own identity. (One can certainly see a tendency toward this self-identification of art beginning with Manet and Cézanne through to Cubism, but their works are timid and ambiguous by comparison with Duchamp’s.) “Modern” art and the work before seemed connected by virtue of their morphology. Another way of putting it would be that art’s “language” remained the same, but it was saying new things. The event that made conceivable the realization that it was possible to “speak another language” and still make sense in art was Marcel Duchamp’s first unassisted Ready-made. With the unassisted Ready-made, art changed its focus from the form of the language to what was being said. Which means that it changed the nature of art from a question of morphology to a question of function. This change—one from “appearance” to “conception”—was the beginning of “modern” art and the beginning of conceptual art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.

The “value” of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying “what they added to the conception of art” or what wasn’t there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art’s nature. And to do this one cannot concern oneself with the handed-down “language” of traditional art, as this activity is based on the assumption that there is only one way of framing art propositions. But the very stuff of art is indeed greatly related to “creating” new propositions.

Joseph Kosuth, Art After Philosophy (1969)