SAMUEL BECKETT AND/IN CONTEMPORARY ART: JOSEPH KOSUTH’S SERIES OF INSTALLATIONS-EXHIBITIONS
SAMUEL BECKETT, IN PLAY (2010-2011-2012)

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INTRODUCTION
Between November 2010 and August 2012, veteran Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth had a series of five solo exhibitions on three continents, which comprised both new and retrospective work. The new work took the form of installations that appropriated Samuel Beckett’s oeuvre, emphasising within it (as the titles of the installations suggest) Texts for Nothing and Waiting for Godot. The series started at the Galleria Lia Rumma in Milan, Italy where ‘Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play showed from 12th November 2010 to 31st January 2011. It continued at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, Australia with ‘(Waiting for –) Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play exhibited from 21st December 2010 to 27th February 2011, in a partial chronological overlap with the installation’s Italian counterpart in the Northern hemisphere. From 30th March 2011 to 30th April 2011 the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, USA showed ‘Texts (Waiting for –) for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play. During the summer of the same year, between 26th May 2011 and 1st August 2011, ‘Texts for Nothing (Waiting for –)’ Samuel Beckett, in play was exhibited at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv in Zürich, Switzerland. Finally, a year later, ‘Texts for Nothing – Enniskillen’ Samuel Beckett, in play was installed at The Happy Days 1st International Samuel Beckett Festival in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, UK from 9th August 2012 to 29th August 2012.¹

The following discussion of Kosuth’s appropriation of Beckett is part of a larger research project that aims at the systematic and comprehensive mapping of Beckett’s pervasive presence in contemporary art practices and discourses in the last half century, around the world. Many issues that I’ll deal with here – in an attempt to illuminate Kosuth’s Beckett and the ways in which it itself illuminates fundamental features of Beckett’s own creative endeavours – will also allow me to exemplarily illustrate the main challenges of the ‘Samuel Beckett and/in Contemporary Art since the 1960s’ project.²

KOSUTH’S SAMUEL BECKETT, IN PLAY SERIES: DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION, CHALLENGES
Although the work of a prominent contemporary artist hailed as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of Conceptual Art, which has greatly impacted contemporary art practices in and since the mid-1960s, Samuel Beckett, in play has been (so far?) critically assessed mainly in passing, in a handful of short newspaper, magazine and journal reviews.³ The only catalogue available to date, which documents the Melbourne exhibition-installation, was published mid-2012, more than a year after the opening of the ACCA show.⁴ Further (more or less) reliable documentation are press releases, posters, photographs and short videos posted on or linked to the internet websites of the five galleries/organisations that hosted Kosuth’s Beckett-related works. Each of the reviewers referred to above deals only with one given installation-exhibition-location Samuel Beckett, in play, unaware of the fact that it belongs to a series. All reviewers take for granted that the only works by Beckett relevant to Kosuth’s project are either only Texts for Nothing or Texts for Nothing and Waiting for Godot, these being overtly mentioned or alluded to in the titles. It is certain that none of the reviewers has seen the whole series in situ, most likely not knowing about it as such. In fact, even if someone had known about it, it is improbable that s/he could/would have travelled on three continents within a relatively short time-span to actually see the work. Finally, even the
information given by the galleries is incomplete, none of them pointing out all the other relevant installations-exhibitions-locations.

While these elements seem anecdotal, they reveal in fact a first considerable challenge to the ‘Beckett and in Contemporary Art’ project caused by the programmatic objectlessness of many contemporary art practices. Simply put, the challenge consists in the unlikelihood of directly experiencing ephemeral Beckett-related artworks (due to geographical, temporal, informational, etc. constraints) and, correlative, in the scarcity, unreliability and/or inaccessibility of their documentation. This circumstance is partly responsible for the false impression that Beckett’s presence in contemporary art practices is less substantial than it actually is. In fact, there isn’t a major art ‘movement’ since the second half of the 20th century – from ‘Abstract Expressionism’ to ‘Conceptual Art’ passing through ‘Fluxus’, ‘Minimalism’, ‘Pop Art’, ‘Art & Language/Text’, ‘Video and Performance Art’, ‘Earthworks’/‘Land Art’, ‘Mail Art’, etc. – that doesn’t include at least one key representative working, at one moment or another, in response to Beckett. Among the quoted ‘movements’, more than half rest on processual rather than objectual conceptions of art, rejecting the validity of creative endeavours whose main or sole aim is the production of art objects. Similar notions of art-as-process, art-as-activity or art-as-intervention also ground the praxis of a number of distinguished and ‘independent’ (i.e. difficultly assignable to a ‘movement’) contemporary artist figures that have produced Beckett-related works. Yet in the absence of an ‘object’ of study proper, in this particular case art ‘objects’ with a ‘Beckettian’ dimension, the researcher’s task is considerably impeded.

With Kosuth’s Samuel Beckett, in play the problem is worsened by the fact that the series uses primarily written language as a ‘form or mode of presentation’, which is typical for the artist’s practice. Arguably, the language ought to be, sooner or later, both legible and intelligible if the series is to be properly studied. However, all five installations were set in an unlit room, on the walls of which unreferenced quotes from Beckett’s works were mounted in blacked out warm white neon. All reviewers have noted the initial perceptual fuzziness of these fainted luminous neon signs which could be made out as language only gradually and only from certain angles and distances. Moreover, in none of the installations was the whole language visible as such at once, due to both the specific materiality of its writing, which made it hard to distinguish between figure and ground, and the particularity of its spatial placement (as explained below). The situation of the researcher studying the documentation of Samuel Beckett, in play parallels to a certain extent that of the installations’ direct readers/viewers in so far as available records allow one only to partly reconstruct the quotes, whole pieces of which are missing from the existing photographs and videos.

Thus, regardless of how one may come to interact with these works by Kosuth, one becomes acutely aware of one’s own processes of reception and reconstruction mainly because of the difficulty of accessing presumably relevant information. The fragmentariness of the available information is further manifest in the fact that Samuel Beckett, in play operates with quotes, i.e. pieces excerpted and isolated from an ensemble. Both in their formal display and in the expression of their content, the installations explore and exploit incompleteness and in so doing expose the inherent subjectivity of their reception as that which strives to form a whole, i.e. a coherent and consistent account, from the actual bits and pieces that are offered. Difficulties of reception are only too familiar to Beckett readers/viewers, too, who, as a rule, struggle at several levels – semantic, enunciative, narrative, (inter-)textual, performative, (inter-)medial, etc. – to make sense of whatever is presented to them as a poem, novel, prose text, theatre, radio or TV piece, Film or critical-theoretical writing.

Both Beckett and Kosuth deliberately create works that disrupt deep-seated reception habits grown into unconscious automatisms, ‘waking up’ the readers/viewers as such, i.e. to the consciousness of their own activities of reading/viewing. They make readers/viewers inquire into how their reading/viewing operates, what sorts of faculties and knowledge they mobilise for these activities, how they come to bestow such and such
meanings upon the read/viewed, and consequently they make readers/viewers take responsibility for their own meaning-making. It is this process of responsibilisation of the reader/viewer for his/her own meaning that constitutes, for both Kosuth and Beckett, the ‘ethical’ dimension of art, which does not reside in art’s content but in its effect. From the very beginning of his career Kosuth’s artistic activity was twofold, consisting in both his creative practice and his theoretical discourse. One of the reasons for which Kosuth started to write about his own praxis, and the conception of art that supported it, was to take personal responsibility for the meaning of his work, a meaning which was not necessarily coextensive with that which art critics, theoreticians and historians assigned to it. Kosuth argued against the alleged ‘objectivity’ of art discoursers, an ‘anti-objective’ stance that Beckett also took in his art criticism. The acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the discoursers, as the individual instance generating the discourse, logically leads to assigning him/her the responsibility for it. The following descriptive-interpretative considerations are therefore not only tentative in so far as they rely on a broken record, but they are also emblematic of their own necessary subjectivity.

In all Samuel Beckett, in play installations, each displayed Beckett quote did not exceed thirty words. Typically, quotes were much shorter than that, even when they were made up not of single sentences, but of a cluster of adjacent sentences or (in the case of quoted theatre and TV plays) lines. While the above applies to all Samuel Beckett, in play works, each installation differed from the others in at least one significant way. Galleria Lia Rumma’s ‘Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play was the only bilingual installation of the series, ‘bilingual’ in the sense that some quotes were displayed in English and some in Italian, and not in the sense that both an English quote and its Italian counterpart were simultaneously used. As regards the spatial arrangement of the Milan installation, its nineteen block-like quotes of anywhere between one and four (oftentimes discontinuous) lines were organised in a ‘constellation’ configuration that assigned either four or five quotes to each wall, where they occupied, in an asymmetrical yet balanced fashion, the entire surface. Although the installation’s title mentions only Beckett’s Texts for Nothing, quotes were also excerpted from The Lost Ones, All Strange Away, Fizzes, Ping and Imagination Dead Imagine, as well as from the following Italian translations – either from the French or from the English: Testi per nulla (Textes pour rien), Lo spopolatore (Le dépeupleur) and Quello che è strano, via (All Strange Away). In Melbourne, New York, Zürich and Enniskillen quotes in English only were used. In the first three cases, they were placed in a continuous line running round the exhibition room at cornice level (i.e. immediately bellow the ceiling). The Enniskillen installation resembled this arrangement, as it employed solely single-lined quotations, but it also differed from it, in that the lines were discontinuous and placed at almost eye level. Like in Milan – where the quotes were, however, predominantly multi-lined – in Enniskillen, too, the quotes were separated from each other by the ‘negative space’ of dark wall areas. In contrast, in the other three locations of the series, quotations were unobtrusively delimited by mere vertical strokes (also in neon). In the English, single-lined installations, Kosuth used an additional ‘form of presentation’ along self-illuminating language written in blacked out warm white neon, namely a black and white photographic reproduction (on neon lighted transparency print?) of David Caspar Friedrich’s painting Two Men Contemplating the Moon, which was allegedly a source of inspiration (among many) for Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. The Friedrich reproduction is consonant with the titles of the Melbourne, New York and Zürich installations, since these quite explicitly allude, although by ellipsis, to Waiting for Godot. Yet similar to the Milan installation title, all the other Samuel Beckett, in play titles describe only approximately the works which they name.

First, because the Melbourne, New York and Enniskillen installations continued to comprise quotes from other works by Beckett than Texts for Nothing and Waiting for Godot, namely: Dream of Fair to Middling Women, The Unnamable, Ghost Trio (Melbourne); Fizzes,
Enough, The Last Ones, Ping and Lessness (New York); Fizzles, Lessness (Enniskillen). Second, because in New York, although Texts for Nothing were signalled in the title, they were actually ‘out of play’, not being quoted in the installation proper. It seems that only in Zürich the title and the work matched each other suitably, the only works quoted here being indeed Texts for Nothing and Waiting for Godot. However, the Zürich installation comprised a quote already used in a previous installation of the series, namely “Only the words break the silence, all other sounds have ceased.” (Text for Nothing VIII, Beckett 4: 320), which corresponds to the Milan quote “Soltanto le parole rompono il silenzio, tutto il resto tace.” (Testo per nulla VIII). Zürich’s Samuel Beckett, in play initiated a practice of self-quotation within the series, via translation, which was subsequently developed in the Enniskillen installation, where some quotes in English that had already been used previously, were used again. This practice of quotation as self-quotation and re-contextualisation points toward the series as a whole and thus connotes an on-going process of signification that discovers quoted text as context.

SERIALITY, CONTEXTUALISM AND MEANING-MAKING IN KOSUTH’S BECKETT AND IN BECKETT

In fact Samuel Beckett, in play relies on creative principles fundamental to both Beckett and Kosuth that relate to the central issue of processes of signification and their constitutive dimensions, such as: seriality and the attendant interactions between repetition and variation, identity and difference; self- and meta-referentiality; contextualism; bilingualism, polyglottism and (self-)translation; transposition from one medium to another; appropriation strategies; inherent subjectivity, in the sense that meaning-making activities are performed and assessed by human subjects, hence, as noted above, the importance of artistic processes (as opposed to objects) of creation and reception; ‘Wirkungsgeschichte’ (i.e. an oeuvre’s effect/impact on the history of culture); etc. Although all these issues are connected to one another in Beckett and Kosuth’s creative handling of them, in what follows I shall only touch on some, so as to highlight both commonalities and contrasts between their respective practices.

Given this interconnectedness, as good a place to start as any other is seriality, understood as the ‘investigation’ of meaning-making – carried out in different works that make up a series – by varying successively a single parameter/element or a limited number of parameters/elements within a configuration that, although kept largely constant, necessarily even if only minimally changes with each local modulation, while it also gradually shifts, as a network of relationships, by integrating all its previous slight alterations. In this connexion, it is interesting to note that in Samuel Beckett, in play Kosuth mostly draws on works by Beckett that have been either published or interpreted as ‘series’: the thirteen Texts for Nothing; the eight, seven or six Fizzles; and the so-called ‘skull-scape’, ‘permutational’ or ‘minimalist’ pieces of the 1960s: All Strange Away, Imagination Dead Imagine, Enough, Ping, Lessness, etc.

What is even more interesting to note is that Kosuth chose quotes that uncovered (or established?) direct and concrete, i.e. verbatim, relationships between works by Beckett that belong to different ‘series’, suggesting thus that the entire Beckett corpus actually rests on a seriality principle as defined above. This corresponds to the ‘echoes’ resonating across Beckett’s whole oeuvre that readers/viewers cannot escape (and have not escaped) becoming aware of. Yet, even informed readers/viewers such as scholars have focused until recently only on thematic and narrative ‘echoes’ – that operate on a conceptual/semantic level – to the detriment of actual word, phrase and sentence repetition. It is somewhat ironic that it is Kosuth, a Conceptual artists, who highlighted in Samuel Beckett, in play new, literal ‘echoes’ that may surprise even a Beckett scholar (or at least they have surprised this one).
Having managed to decipher in the Milan installation the quotes “Il che a prima vista è molto strano.” (“This at first sight is strange.”, my emphasis) and, on a different wall, “Così a poco a poco quello che è strano, via.” (“So little by little all strange away.”, my emphasis), one subsequently is quite amazed to discover that the two sentences do not come from the same text but from Quello che è strano, via/All Strange Away (Beckett 4: 357), the latter – this being in all likelihood the single source hypothesised by most informed viewers/readers – and Lo spopolatore/Le dépeupleur/The Lost Ones (Beckett 4: 386), the former. Milan’s “Emptiness, silence, heat, whiteness, wait, the light goes down, all grows dark together, ground, wall, vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the greys, the light goes out, all vanishes.” (Imagination Dead Imagine, Beckett 4: 361, my emphasis) is also relevant here, because its rather inconspicuous (reader? narrator? character?) address – “wait” – both anticipates and directly connects to the over-quoted “Wait!”’s from Waiting for Godot (especially in New York).

Being placed on two different although contiguous walls, the possibility that the two sentences about “strange”-ness be read one immediately after the other (in the order that I have given above or in reversed order) is quite improbable. The viewer/reader of ‘Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play is thus very likely to experience an ‘echoing’ effect analogous to that experienced by the reader/viewer of Beckett’s oeuvre, in as much as both ‘echoing’ processes rely on rather dim memories. And although the ‘echoes’ may not be registered at all – the memories of past readings/viewings vanishing completely – both Kosuth and Beckett’s creative practices require, in order to be not only properly understood but also properly experienced, that the ‘echoes’ be actualised. It is in fact this actualisation of merely potential relationships between various textual elements, which defines meaning-making. Both Beckett and Kosuth not only often thematize and problematize this process in their works, but they also manage to ‘show’ how it operates by devising pieces that need to be per-formed by the viewer/reader if (some of) their potentiality is to be realised. Tellingly, Kosuth’s Zürich installation ‘Texts for Nothing (Waiting for –)’ Samuel Beckett, in play was placed under the Swiss proverbial epigraph “Ein guter Zuschauer schafft mit.”/ “A good spectator also creates.”

The problems arising from this ‘creative’ stance – that Beckett, Kosuth and a number of contemporary artists responding to Beckett’s work require from the viewer/reader – are evidenced by the few reviews of the Samuel Beckett, in play series, which largely miss the point. Yet the reviewers have attenuating circumstances, for who is able, in realistic terms, to perfectly master and have unrestricted access to whole artists’ oeuvres as well as to the personal creative, disciplinary, institutional and cultural histories within which these oeuvres are deliberately and trickily embedded? For it is precisely this type and range of knowledge that represent the prerequisite for the reader/viewer’s ‘creativity’. A Beckett scholar may be expected to know his/her Beckett in minute detail but the same cannot be expected or demanded from him/her as regards all contemporary artists that have ever responded to Beckett. And yet this is precisely what is required by the ‘Beckett and/in Contemporary Art’ project. This necessity is a function of the contextualism highlighted above as one of the main principles that govern processes of signification as understood and employed by Beckett and Kosuth.

SAMUEL BECKETT, IN PLAY:
THE CONTEXT OF KOSUTH’S HISTORY AS AN ARTIST
To illustrate, I’ll focus below on the Milan and New York installations because these are the only ones that I was able to fully reconstruct as regards their written ‘form of presentation’ (see Appendix). Kosuth’s series indicates from the very beginning, i.e. from its very title, that several contexts are meaningfully ‘in play’ within it. If one is Beckett’s oeuvre, another one is
Kosuth’s own. ‘Nothing’ and ‘play’ (should) activate the reader/viewer’s memories of other works by Kosuth, the titles of which contain these very same words, most notably and likely: *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* and *The Play of the Unsayable: Ludwig Wittgenstein and 20th Century Art* (1968) and *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1989). One of Kosuth’s best known pieces, “nothing,” is part of his *First Investigation* series (1966-1968) that was preceded by his Proto-Investigations (1965) and followed by nine other *Investigation* series (titled *The Second Investigation*, *The Third Investigation*, etc. up to *The Tenth Investigation*), which the artist carried out at the beginning of his career, until 1975, aged 20 to 30. It is mainly the creative work of the (Proto-)Investigations and Kosuth’s theoretical writings from the same period – especially his 1969 article “Art after Philosophy”, which framed and laid the ground for his praxis – that earned the artist a place in contemporary art history under the heading ‘Founders of Conceptual Art’.

Like all the works in *The First Investigation* – among which one can count *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, “box”, “water”, “east”, “white”, “colour”, “concept”, “meaning”, “idea”, “art”, etc. – “nothing” is presented in the form of blown-up photostatted dictionary definitions. There are several versions of “nothing” each consisting of a definition excerpted form a different kind of dictionary, e.g. etymological, explicative, bilingual, etc. Kosuth’s aim was to make works that would operate and be relevant only on a conceptual level and whose form, technique and medium was, consequently, immaterial (pun intended). The artist started to use language as the most appropriate ‘mode of presentation’ of concepts, because language is, as our main means of communication, simultaneously the largest repository of pre-set and commonly available concepts, and the preeminent tool for their formation, manipulation, investigation and manifestation. Kosuth’s artistic (as opposed to a philosophic) investigation of concepts such as those mentioned above was triggered by his primary interest in artistically investigating the concept of art.

Kosuth’s answer to the question ‘What is art?’, at this early stage of his career, was that art was the ‘idea of art’, the way in which one conceived of art and which grounded one’s artistic practice, rather than the objectual ‘residue’ of this practice. Hence Kosuth’s tautological proposition of the idea that art was first and foremost an idea: ((Art as Idea) as Idea). Kosuth’s idea of ‘art as idea’ was directly and explicitly opposing the prevalent idea of art in 1960s’ USA, namely the radical Modernism that Clement Greenberg was championing on behalf of Abstract Expressionism and which conceived of art as the artist’s individual expression of his/her formalist exploration of medium specificity (especially painting). For Kosuth this was not art as such but merely one particularisation (among many possible) of the concept of art according to features believed to be defining, such as artistic medium, form and subjective expression. Kosuth’s interest lay in investigating the ways in which various features (such as those above and others) were brought to ‘play’ a role in this or that definition of art. Drawing on writings in the philosophy of language, Kosuth suggested in “Art after Philosophy” that art was analogous to an analytic as opposed to a synthetic proposition, to a nominalist-performative conception of language as opposed to a realist-mimetic-referential one, to signification as the homologous relationship between signifieds as opposed to the heterogenous relationship between signified and referent. Thus he conceived art as the ‘interplay’ between the various notional components that entered its definition and not in terms of its correlations with referents (medium, subjective expression, forms, etc.), i.e. with entities of a different ontological order.

While contemporary art history has recorded mainly or even only the tautological character of Kosuth’s brand of Conceptual Art, the artist himself has been critically appropriating his own creative praxis and theoretical discourse at least since 1975, i.e. for the best part of his forty-five years-long career. In fact, his artistic *Investigations* already escaped his contemporaneous theorisations of art, as “nothing” shows only too well. Tautologically, “nothing” can be understood as the (dead) end of “the dictionary works
[that] went from abstractions of particulars (like *Water*) to abstractions of abstractions (like *Meaning*)" (Kosuth: 30), so as to culminate – or break down under their own conceptual weight – in what one could call the ‘abstraction of nonentity as such’. However, a reader/viewer of Kosuth’s 1968 show at the Los Angeles Gallery 669 – which “consisted of the word ‘nothing’ from a dozen different dictionaries” (Kosuth: 30) – could understand [*nothing*] from a quite different perspective as well. The juxtaposition of so many non-identical [*nothing*s], variously defined, exemplified and/or translated in several languages, cultures and time periods reveals conceptual shifts, gaps and incongruities, in other words the elusiveness of concepts rather than their ostensible definitional self-sufficiency. Can a single, cohesive and comprehensive concept of ‘nothing’ be adduced from the many [*nothing*s] on display? The answer has to be ‘No’. What is thus foregrounded are conceptual processes (i.e. concepts’ making, transformation, interpretation, translation, etc.) and factors conditioning them, such as the conceptual and expressive possibilities and limits of a given language, time and culture, i.e.: What can be thought and said in such and such idiom, at such and such epoch, in such and such cultural context?

It is this kind of questions, which were only latent in his early definition and other *Investigations* works, that eventually lead Kosuth from a tautological to an anthropological idea of art, from concept to meaning and from a still Modernist understanding of art-in-terms-of-art to a Post-Modern perspective on art-as-a-domain-of-culture. Whatever one’s conception of art, what became important for Kosuth after 1975, was to investigate not the various notional components that entered this definition, but rather what made it possible that precisely this conception be considered relevant to the detriment of many other conceivable alternatives. Put differently, what became important were the conditions of possibility of such and such conception of art. To give an example: Whence the idea of ‘art as idea’?, i.e.: Why conceive of ‘art as idea’ rather than in any number of other ways? Kosuth came to the conclusion that one’s answer to the question ‘What is art?’ was dependent on many contextual parameters: one’s own history as an artist; the history of art, i.e. previous answers given to the same question; one’s cultural, institutional, social and political environments that, for any number of reasons, may or may not accept as legitimate one’s answer; etc. And since one of the main characteristics of these various contextual parameters is mutability, it is possible and even quite likely that one’s answer to the question ‘What is art?’ will also change.

The exhibition *The Play of the Unsayable* that Kosuth curated in 1989 and which like [*nothing*] ‘echoes’ within his *Samuel Beckett, in play* series highlights the tense continuity or the continuous tension described above not only between Kosuth’s praxis and his theoretical writings but also between them as carried out at different moments in his career. Placed under the sign of Wittgenstein, the exhibition may seem to confirm the tautological interpretation of Kosuth’s practice and discourse that many contemporary art historians espouse. However, *The Play of the Unsayable* actually pits the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* against the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* in a tension analogous to that which characterises Kosuth’s own career. What Kosuth shows in *The Play of the Unsayable* is that at any given moment there is a multiplicity of networked contexts ‘in play’ that condition meaning and processes of signification. In the spirit of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, this idea can be formulated as follows: at any given moment in time several ‘language games’ are ‘played’ (i.e. are taking place) so that the very ‘same’ utterance (e.g. word, phrase, sentence, etc.) can actually have different meanings depending on the ‘language game’ of which it is considered to be a part (‘move’). The *Philosophical Investigations*’ description of language in terms of use – what language does – as opposed to and beyond what it merely says, acknowledges the fundamental role of the user/locutor/interlocutor in the meaning-making process. Both Kosuth and Beckett are well aware of and exploit creatively in their works this ‘user parameter’ that fundamentally conditions signification.
BEYOND TAUTOLOGY:
‘LANGUAGE GAMES’ IN SAMUEL BECKETT, IN PLAY

The observation – about the multiplicity and hence necessary ambiguity of meaning as the result of the fact that individual ‘fragments’ (‘moves’) can be variously integrated in different contextual ‘wholes’ (‘games’) – applies only too well to Samuel Beckett, in play and to Beckett’s oeuvre itself. This is again quite obvious already in the installations’ titles, where ‘in play’ can be understood to mean any or all of the following: ‘in operation/in effect/active’, ‘available to use’ and ‘in jest/as a joke’. All these meanings can be brought to bear self-referentially upon the Samuel Beckett, in play series in which Beckett’s work is indeed i) ‘in operation’ via Kosuth’s appropriation of it; ii) ‘available to use’ by the readers/viewers of the installations (after having been ‘available to use’ by Kosuth himself in the creation of the installations); and iii) part of a ‘joke’ played on the reader/viewer as regards the Beckett contexts (i.e. works) that are pertinent to the series. Moreover, the first two acceptations can also be understood meta-referentially in relationship to Beckett’s oeuvre ‘operativeness’ in recent contemporary art practices and discourses following his ‘availability’ to be used increasingly by artists, curators, art historians, critics and theoreticians. In Wittgenstein’s terms, it seems that there is a ‘Beckett game’ being currently ‘played’ in contemporary art and Kosuth’s series is not simply a ‘move’ in that ‘game’, but a critical reflexion on it.

The successive transformations of the series’ titles – by the addition, displacement and different grouping of constitutive elements – also establish various contexts of signification for both individual words and phrases:

‘Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play
‘(Waiting for –) Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play
‘Texts (Waiting for –) for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play
‘Texts for Nothing (Waiting for –)’ Samuel Beckett, in play

Many if not all of the appropriated Beckett quotes can themselves be understood tautologically, i.e. as referring to various features of the installation/series of which they are a part. “Arena black vast.” (Fizzle V, Beckett 4: 412) can be read as a description of the artwork’s dark spatial setting. “Light in a word that not only dims but blurs into the bargain.” (The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 391, my emphasis) and “Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white.” (Ping, Beckett 4: 371, my emphasis) quite accurately refer to the blacked out neon signs as perceived by the reader/viewer, while at the same time revealing/establishing via ‘blurs’ a direct link between the two texts and illustrating the idea of the contextual multiplicity of meaning since the same typographical ‘blurs’ accomplish different grammatical functions in the two sentences. “Subtract. Divide.” (Enough, Beckett 4: 369) seems to either describe or prescribe reception processes (to be) carried out in relationship with the work, whose make up of fragments is also alluded to: “First change of all in the end a fragment comes away and falls.” (Fizzle VIII, Beckett 4: 418). “VLADIMIR: And it’s not over. ESTRAGON: Apparently not.” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 28, my emphasis) and “Traces alone unover given black grey blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white always the same.” (Ping, Beckett 4: 372, my emphasis) can be understood to apply to the serial character of the work and the on-going signification processes that it activates. Continuous meaning-making processes are also favoured by the non-directional constellation and the circular spatial arrangements of the installations.17

However, making sense of Samuel Beckett, in play tautologically is not the only possibility of response that the series allows or, even more, invites. Besides the fact that the Enniskillen installation signals explicitly its connection to a specific place, time and occasion, Kosuth also offers the reader/viewer an opportunity to revisit and engage anew with both
the artist’s own and Beckett’s oeuvre as well as with their respective cultural ‘operability’, i.e. legacy. A rereading/reviewing of works by Beckett is prompted by the attempt to understand the significance of appropriated quotes not within the context of Samuel Beckett, in play but within their original contextual ensemble, i.e. the specific piece and, further, corpus from which they were excerpted. A quote such as Milan’s “No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt.” (All Strange Away, Beckett 4: 352) may well be read as referring to the ‘lifelessness’ and ‘deathlessness’ of artistic representation as such – which, understood tautologically, has a different ontology than that of the ‘real world’ where “flies”, “life” and “dying” occur – and more specifically of an imageless, nonfigurative kind of artistic representation.

Yet in the original context of All Strange Away the sentence signifies quite differently in a number of ways, on a number of levels, i.e. is a ‘move’ functioning deliberately in several ‘language games’. First, being immediately preceded by a sentence that starts with the words “Imagination dead imagine”,18 the quote literally points to Beckett’s text Imagination Dead Imagine (that Kosuth also appropriates in Samuel Beckett, in play) and thus highlights the principle of contextualism which is crucial to both Kosuth and Beckett's creative practices.

Second, “imagination dead imagine” is not only oxymoronic but also ontologically ambiguous in All Strange Away, because the phrase is used to describe both i) the narrator’s presumably defunct imagination, at the very beginning of the text where he once again attempts to set up the components (such as space and character) of a possible/fictive world,19 and ii) his character’s equally defunct imagination, in the immediate vicinity of “No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt.”. The sentence Kosuth quotes in ‘Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play helps to distinguish in All Strange Away between the two imaginations, the narrator’s and his character’s, which operate on two different textual levels, but in relationship to which the very same words (“imagination dead imagine”) are used. Thus the text simultaneously sets up (semantically) and breaks down (stylistically-semiotically-rhetorically) the aforementioned distinction in what seems to be at first a self-cancelling ‘move’, but which is in fact a ‘move’ that highlights the usually implicit ‘games’, i.e. frameworks, that are required for fiction to work.

Third, the same sentence marks in All Strange Away the sudden shift from ‘he’/’Emmo’ to ‘she’/’Emma’ as the character imagined by the narrator as imagining in ‘his’/‘her’ turn the other. This shift is a narrative ‘event’ which reverses subjects and objects of imaginings and thus shows that if representation, considered only as result, i.e. as an object, may indeed be ‘lifeless’, ‘deathless’ and tautologically closed on itself, representation-as-process has its own kind of ‘liveliness’ and ‘deathliness’, turning objects into subjects of representation and vice versa, drawing attention to itself as it seemingly cancels itself out while in fact still ‘going on’ (‘stirring still’), and ultimately revealing its dependence on the reader/viewer: as long as there’s someone to read/view the work the process of representation doesn’t halt, but continues by bringing about and turning over into processes of reception, meaning-making, signification.

Kosuth’s use of this Beckett quote from All Strange Away in the Samuel Beckett, in play series is only one example which shows, when read contextually rather than tautologically, the ‘play’ of meaning and how ‘work works when it works’: “the material of the [art]work [is] these series of contexts or levels. It seems to me that when work works that’s how it works” (Kosuth: 48). Beckett also made his work work – or rather made the reader/viewer work/perform the work – in this way, i.e. by setting up a network of potential relationships between “series of contexts or levels”. The study of contemporary artists’ original responses to Beckett is of interest because the best artworks succeed in shedding a new light on the respective artist’s creative praxis (and, as the case may be, theoretical discourses), on Beckett’s artistic endeavours and on complex processes of signification, cultural transmission and appropriation.
APPENDIX
Quotes used in Joseph Kosuth’s ‘Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play, Galleria Lia Rumma, Milan, Italy – 12th November 2010 to 31st January 2011

#2 “Ultime domande di sempre, pose da ragazzina nelle lenzuola della fine, ultime immagini, fine dei sogni, dell’essere che viene, dell’essere che passa, dell’essere che fu, fine delle menzogne.” (Testo per nulla XIII/Text for Nothing XIII, Beckett 4: 338 “Last everlasting questions, infant languors in the end sheets, last images, end of dream, of being past, passing and to be, end of lie.”)

#3 “And so on infinitely.” (The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 395)

#4 “Whatever it is they are searching for it is not that.” (The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 391)

#5 “Light heat white planes shining white one only shining white infinite but that known not.” (Ping, Beckett 4: 372-373)

#6 “Yet to imagine if he can see it the last expelled amidst his ruins if he can ever see it and seeing believe his eyes.” (Fizzle VIII, Beckett 4: 419)

#7 “Light in a word that not only dims but blurs into the bargain.” (The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 391)

#8 “If so let them open again and let me out, in the tumult of light that sealed my eyes, and of men, to try and be one again.” (Text for Nothing VIII, Beckett 4: 321)

#9 “Emptiness, silence, heat, whiteness, wait, the light goes down, all grows dark together, ground, wall, vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the greys, the light goes out, all vanishes.” (Imagination Dead Imagine, Beckett 4: 361)

#10 “Il che a prima vista è molto strano.” (Lo spopolatore/The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 386 “This at first sight is strange.”)

#11 “No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt.” (All Strange Away, Beckett 4: 352)

#12 “La sua fioca inutile luce sarà l’ultima ad abbandonarli supponendo che li attend ail nero.” (Lo spopolatore/The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 385 “Its fatuous little light will be assuredly the last to leave them always assuming they are darkward bound.”)

#13 “Immagina ciò che era necessario, non più, a un dato momento, non più necessario, scomparso, mai stato.” (Quello che è strano, via/All Strange Away, Beckett 4: 349-350 “Imagine what needed, no more, any given moment, needed no more, gone, never was.”)

#14 “Ma non è il silenzio.” (Testo per nulla X/Text for Nothing X, Beckett 4: 328 “But there is not silence.”)

#15 “Così a poco a poco quello che è strano, via. (Quello che è strano, via/All Strange Away, Beckett 4: 357 “So little by little all strange away.”)
#16 “Ecco qui la mia vita, perché no, è mia vita, se vogliamo, se proprio ci si tiene, non dico di no, stasera.” (Testo per nulla IV/Text for Nothing IV, Beckett 4: 307 “There’s my life, why not, it is one if you like, if you must, I don’t say no, this evening.”)

#17 “It’s an unbroken flow of words and tears. With no pause for reflection.” (Text for Nothing VIII, Beckett 4: 320)

#18 “That’s it, that’s it, the bright side.” (Text for Nothing II, Beckett 4: 300)

#19 “Soltanto le parole rompono il silenzio, tutto il resto tace.” (Testo per nulla VIII/Text for Nothing VIII, Beckett 4: 320 “Only the words break the silence, all other sounds have ceased.”)

#20 “Grey dust as far as eye can see beneath grey cloudless sky and there all at once or by degrees this whiteness to decipher.” (Fizzle VIII, Beckett 4: 419)
Quotes used in Joseph Kosuth’s ‘Texts (Waiting for –) for Nothing’

#1/#20 “edge as at the centre.” (Fizzle V, Beckett 4: 412)

#2 “VLADIMIR: And it’s not over. ESTRAGON: Apparently not.” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 28)

#3 “Subtract. Divide.” (Enough, Beckett 4: 369)

#4 “This paradox is explained by the levelling effect of the dim omnipresent light.” (The Lost Ones, Beckett 4: 397)

#5 “Arena black vast.” (Fizzle V, Beckett 4: 412)

#6 “E.: Wait!” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 34)

#7 “First change of all in the end a fragment comes away and falls.” (Fizzle VIII, Beckett 4: 418)

#8 “Traces blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white.” (Ping, Beckett 4: 371)

#9 “V.: Wait!” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 34)

#10 “Seldom more.” (Enough, Beckett 4: 366)

#11 “Not quite.”

#12 “V.: That what? E.: That’s the idea, let’s ask each other questions.” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 56)

#13 “POZZO: Wait!” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 34)

#14 “Traces alone unover given black grey blurs signs no meaning light grey almost white always the same.” (Ping, Beckett 4: 372)

#15 “E.: The tree? V.: Do you not remember?” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 58)

#16 “Moments of life, of mine too, among others, no denying, all said and done.” (Fizzle VI, Beckett 4: 414)

#17 “E.: Let’s go. V.: We can’t. S.B.” (Waiting for Godot, Beckett 3: 8, 41, 63, 70, 76)

#18 “Ash grey all sides earth sky as one all sides endlessness.” (Lessness, Beckett 4: 375, 378)

#19 “Not for imagining.” (Fizzle V, Beckett 4: 412)

#20/#1 “As dense at the” (Fizzle V, Beckett 4: 412)
Endnotes


2 This project, the planned outcomes of which are an Internet website-cum-portal, a historical-cum-survey exhibition and a monograph, is described in detail and situated in connection with the already existing scholarship and past exhibitions on Beckett and/in art, in the research file bearing the same name that is posted on T-Space, the University of Toronto Research Repository, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/35569.


4 See Joseph Kosuth, An Interpretation of This Title: Nietzsche, Darwin and the Paradox of Content (vol. 1) and ‘(Waiting for –) Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play (vol. 2). South Yarra, Vic.: Palgrave Macmillan Australia, 2012. While the second volume of this publication documents the Melbourne Samuel Beckett, in play exhibition-installation, the first volume documents another Kosuth installation, also commissioned by curator Juliana Engberg, artistic director of ACCA and of the 2014 Sidney Biennial, this time for the 2009 Edinburgh International Festival. The catalogue of ‘(Waiting for –) Texts for Nothing’ Samuel Beckett, in play was published during the writing of this article and I was not able to consult it.


6 ‘Sentence’ is used here to designate that which starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, not necessarily comprising a verb.


8 Of interest (for the issue of seriality to be discussed infra) is the fact that Friedrich painted a series of three works on the subject of two figures contemplating the moon: Two Men
While the reversed reading/viewing of these quotes is possible, their numbering as #10 and #15 in the photographic documentation of the installation suggests that the first reading order is intended.

10 The relevance of the context represented by the artist’s history is also evidenced by the fact that all Samuel Beckett, in play installations–exhibitions included a selection of old works by Kosuth. The selection was not identical, nor was it identically referred to in all locations. In Milan and Zürich selected old works were actually grouped under a specific heading/title, i.e. ‘An Uneven Topography of Time’ and ‘A History of Installations, 1965–2011’ respectively.

There are quite a few other works by Kosuth that ‘nothing’ and ‘play’ from the Samuel Beckett, in play series evoke: Nothing Circled, Twice, a 1999 public installation for the Parliament of the Region of Brussels in Brussels, Belgium, which also uses as a ‘form of presentation’ circular writing in neon at cornice level; No Thing, No Self; No Form, No Principle (Was Certain) (original title in German: Kein Ding, Kein Ich, Keine Form, Kein Grundsatz (Sind Sicher)), a 1992 installation-exhibition that took place at the Villa Merkel in Esslingen, Germany and that was among the artist’s first to use literary quotes (notably from Robert Musil’s Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften/The Man without Qualities); and The Brooklyn Museum Collection: The Play of the Unmentionable, a 1990 exhibition that Kosuth curated, like the 1989 Wittgenstein exhibition, but this time for and with works from The Brooklyn Museum’s permanent collection, reinterpreting simultaneously the institution and the artist’s histories; etc. However, [nothing] and the 1989 Wittgenstein exhibition can be considered to represent a more likely intended artist context because [nothing] was displayed in all locations in conjunction with the Samuel Beckett, in play installations and because at least one work by Kosuth directly relating to Wittgenstein was also shown in least at one location (i.e. Milan’s Wittgenstein’s color, a 1989 work in red neon). The word ‘texts’ mentioned and permuted in the installation titles of the Samuel Beckett, in play series also evokes older works by Kosuth, primarily his 1978–1979 Text/Context series.


13 The phrase ‘Conceptual Art’ is used in different ways and means quite different things in contemporary art discourses. Although Kosuth was among the first artists to describe his praxis in terms of ‘Conceptual Art’ (terms whose meaning has changed for Kosuth over time although their form has remained the same), Kosuth was not the very first nor the only one to do so in the 1960s.

14 It is interesting to note that the ‘anthropologic turn’ in Kosuth’s understanding and praxis of Conceptual Art resulted (also) in the initiation of a consistent practice of public artworks, which accompanies his works conceived for the art establishment.

In light of the preceding discussion regarding the subjectivity and objectivity of meaning-making and of the following discussion of a *Samuel Beckett, in play* quote from *All Strange Away* it is worth noting that ‘*Texts for Nothing*’ function, in some of the installations’ changing titles, as either the (grammatical) objects or the subjects of ‘waiting (for)’.

The video documentation of the New York installation supports this connotation of ongoing reader/viewer engagement with the artwork by the fact that it doesn’t simply end once a full circle of the writing around the room has been shown in close-up, but continues by showing again, as if in a loop, writing that has already been shown. Kosuth is directly involved in the documentation of his work, his exhibition catalogues and other related materials being realised most of the time either by or in collaboration with him/his studio. It is thus quite likely that the available documentation of the *Samuel Beckett, in play* series also has the artist’s input and/or approval.

“Imagination dead imagine to lodge a second in that glare a dying common house or dying window fly, then fall the five feet to the dust and die or die and fall. No, no image, no fly here, no life or dying here but his, a speck of dirt.” (Beckett 4: 352)

“Imagination dead imagine. A place, that again. Never another question. A place, then someone in it, that again.” (Beckett 4: 349)

Unlike the Milan quotes, the New York ones are not numbered in the existing documentation. Hence I have numbered the quotes myself, starting with the first truncated one, on the left wall from the entrance, and continuing clockwise around the exhibition room. This order of reading is suggested not only by the Western left to right reading convention but also by the video documentation of the installation which starts to follow in close-up the writing displayed around the room, roughly at this point.

It is not certain from which text by Beckett Kosuth has excerpted this sentence. Two possibilities are the plays *Happy Days* and *Rough for Theatre II*. In *Happy Days* “Not quite.” occurs twice, once in each act (see Beckett 3: 281, 301), in contexts that deal with the meaning of words or quotes that Winnie has forgotten. In *Rough for Theatre II* the sentence also occurs in a revealing context, i.e. when the two characters (A and B) consider, at the beginning of the play, if the moon is full or only almost full (Beckett 3: 244), which is consistent with the photographic reproduction of the Friedrich painting that Kosuth uses in the *Samuel Beckett, in play* series, as well as with the theme (and prop) of the moon developed (employed) in *Waiting for Godot*. 