Ulysses Underground: Joyce and Contemporary Art

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Abstract

A number of contemporary artists have sought to put Joyce's literary work into visual or plastic form. The reasons his work lends itself to appropriation by the other arts has to do with its own permeability and hospitality to non-literary material, the relative absence of an authorial presence or of a master narrative, the absence of a hierarchy of taste, a formal disposition toward fragmentarity and discontinuity, toward a multiplicity of voices, of points of view, and of linguistic registers. Joseph Kosuth's installation "Les aventures d'Ulysse sous terre" at an underground parking garage in Lyon, France, is a particularly spectacular example of the adaptation of Joyce's work to the medium of conceptual art.

Reference


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Ulysses Underground: Joyce and Contemporary Art

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Abb. # ■Detail from Joseph Kosuth, *Les aventures d’Ulysse sous terre*, a permanent installation in the underground parking garage of the Lyon Part-Dieu railway station, Lyon, France. Photo by David Spurr.

In what Fredric Jameson has called the cultural turn of the late twentieth century, the sphere of the aesthetic has expanded beyond its traditional and experimental forms to become coterminous with market society itself: “social space is now completely saturated with the image.” The utopian space of aesthetic autonomy and its specific claims to an otherwise unspoken realm of being have all been “penetrated and colonized, the authentic and the unsaid, *in-vu, non-dit*, inexpressible, alike, fully translated into the visible and the culturally familiar” (111). When culture at large is transformed into the production of images, objects and textual forms designed to appeal to the public imagination through design, advertising, electronic media, etc., the aesthetic as a privileged category tends to disappear into the universality of the aesthetic.
The consequences of this cultural turn can be summed up as including the calling into question of the nature of art as a cultural and aesthetic category, the production of works that disregard traditional art forms and genres, and the waning status of the art work either as the expression of an individual talent, or as a unique and permanent object subject to private ownership. This situation can be understood partly as one of resistance to the commodification of art most readily seen in painting, which, in the view of many, had been largely reduced by the nineteen sixties to being “an expensive form of home decoration” (Kosuth, “Conversation” 77). Instead, a new generation of artists coming of age in recent decades have conceived of their work as an intervention in the public sphere, frequently taking the form of projects realized in the built environment of public space. Architecture has been of central importance to such projects, not only as providing the concrete context for their realization, but also in its theoretical character as the imaginative redefinition of space in which aesthetic experience intersects with the material forms of social life. Marcel Broodthaers’ Museum of Modern Art, Eagles Department (1972), Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc (1981), Joseph Beuys’ Plight (1985), and Christo’s Wrapped Reichstag (1995) all belong to this tendency of contemporary art to define itself in relation to architectural form. With this group, one would have to include Joseph Kosuth, one of the key figures of the ‘conceptual art’ movement. The particularity of Kosuth’s ‘conceptual’ art lies in its materialization of language, and in the free play of linguistic and architectural forms in its ongoing interrogation of art’s meaning in relation to its human context. Kosuth essentially confirms Jameson’s analysis of the relation between contemporary art and the economic foundations of culture when he states, “My initial reasons in the sixties for attempting to use language as a model for art [...] stemmed from my understanding of the collapse of the traditional languages of art into that larger, increasingly organized, meaning system which is the modernist culture of late capitalism” (“No Exit” 63). The difference is that where Jameson sees this situation as one to deplore, Kosuth and other artists of his generation see in it the possibility for art’s subversive intervention in late capitalist culture.

In Joyce in Art, Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes has documented the heterogeneous ways in which Joyce has inspired the work of many contemporary artists. In my own assessment of precisely what it is about Joyce’s work that makes it of interest to contemporary art, I would cite the following reasons. First, Joyce materializes language; he continually calls attention to the visual and the auditory dimensions of the word, such that the reader sees and hears Joyce’s language in highly vivid ways. This rendering of the word as a material object corresponds with Joyce’s re-appropriation of the ‘readymade’ language of public space, for example that of advertising and newspaper headlines. When Joyce incorpo-
rates an outdoor sign like that advertising “Kino’s 11 – Trousers” (U 8.90–93) into his work, it is no surprise that such a move should attract the attention of artists like Kosuth, who want to put their work in the public space offered by billboards. Both are examples of breaking the artistic frame and of exploiting the visual, physical presence of language. This reason for contemporary artistic interest in Joyce’s work is related to a second one, which we can define as the displacement and re-contextualization of discourses not traditionally part of literary language. The hospitality of Joyce’s work to political rhetoric, theological disputation, barroom talk, gutter slang, sensational journalism, popular songs and real estate promotion can only serve as inspiration to other artists who want the freedom of using every possibility offered by modern material culture in the construction of an artwork. When Kosuth, as we shall see, posts literary texts in the form of illuminated signs in a parking garage, it is but the reverse, in terms of displaced cultural registers, of the move made by Joyce when he puts a list of tram lines in Ulysses (U 7.3–9). This permeability of the work, its hospitality to non-literary material, is only one aspect of Joyce that tends to put the nature of the artwork itself in question. Others include the absence of an authorial presence, of a master narrative, and of a hierarchy of taste; a formal disposition toward fragmentary and discontinuity, toward a multiplicity of voices, of points of view, and of linguistic registers.

Kosuth is the artistic creator of a permanent installation entitled The Adventures of Ulysses Underground (1995). Commissioned by Lyon Parc Auto, a mixed public and private enterprise that builds and operates parking facilities for the city of Lyon, France, this work consists of a series of 25 illuminated signs bearing texts from James Joyce and Lewis Carroll and distributed throughout the underground parking garage of the Part-Dieu railway station. The installation occupies the principal spaces used by the public: the pedestrian entry hall and the four levels of parking surface below. Its material form is that of black serigraph texts on framed, translucid plates of white glass illuminated from behind by tubes of fluorescent lighting. The luminous fragments from Joyce and Carroll, both of them masters of the underground, the dark, and the dream, are embedded in the walls and pillars of the structure in such a way as to organize the different spaces of the garage into a continuous text. The architectural space

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1 In conformity with standard practice in Joyce scholarship, citations from the Gabler edition of Ulysses give the chapter number followed by the line number.
2 The on-site title of this installation is Les aventures d’Ulysse sous terre, and the texts used are French translations of Joyce and Carroll. The former is the translation of Ulysses originally by Auguste Morel and Valéry Larbaud (Paris: La Maison des amis des livres, 1929; Gallimard, 1930). For the purposes of this essay I have used the original English texts throughout.
thus serves as a literalization of the underground world of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and as a spatial metaphor for the hallucinatory depth of the “Circe” episode (chapter 15) of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). It also provokes a reflection on the relation between these texts: between the *demi-monde* of Dublin and the erotically-charged fantasy world of Victorian Oxford, including the manner in which both constitute a series of metamorphoses which the hero or heroine survives by successfully resisting a total anarchy of desire.

Kosuth’s interpretation of Joyce is relevant to the concept of parallax according to the first two definitions of this word given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first, from astronomy, defines parallax as the change in the apparent position of an object as seen from two different points. In Kosuth’s installation, the spectator is invited to contemplate Joyce’s text through Carroll’s, thus altering the familiar position of *Ulysses* on both historical and semantic levels, as if it were written “in the wake” of the Alice books, which indeed are to figure prominently in *Finnegans Wake*. The second *OED* definition for parallax concerns the figurative sense of “distortion; the fact of seeing wrongly or in a distorted way.” Such distortion is the most pervasive feature of the “Circe” episode; it is also suggested by Kosuth’s installation, where the luminous panels of text, strangely suspended in the subterranean darkness, appear altered in aspect by the moving lights and reflections of the passing vehicles.

In keeping with the nature of the architectural space of the garage, the spectator as reader is necessarily mobilized. Whereas in other installations one can take in the entire work in from a single spot, in Lyon one performs the act of reading only by being on the move, much like the ambulatory persons of *Ulysses*. If one is to read the texts from Joyce and Carroll in the order in which they figure in the works from which they are cited, one passes from one level of the parking structure to the next in descending order, on each level making a clockwise tour of the entire surface, beginning and ending at the north end, which is also where motorists enter and leave the structure. In addition to an introductory sign in the entrance hall, there are six signs on each level. These are mounted on either side of the massive concrete pillars supporting the entire structure on its central axis. Their illumination serves the practical function of helping people find their way in these otherwise shadowy depths.

The textual content of the illuminated signs follows a certain syntax. Each text bears at its head, underlined in bold capitals, a chapter title from either *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* or *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). This is followed by a passage cited from Joyce’s “Circe.” For example, the first illuminated sign on the first level down (level − 1) of the parking structure is headed “Down the Rabbit Hole,” the title of the first chapter of *Alice*. This is followed by a passage from the first part of “Circe,” where Leopold Bloom, in pursuit of the
wayward Stephen Dedalus just as Alice pursues the white rabbit, finds himself in Talbot Street amidst the bewildering surroundings of Dublin’s Nighttown:

■ BLOOM
Stitch in my side. Why did I run?
(He takes breath with care and goes forward slowly towards the lampset siding. The glow leaps again.) \(U 15.162-5\)

An illuminated sign on the same level is headed with the initial chapter title from *Through the Looking-Glass*, “Looking-Glass House,” and quotes the second speech from “Circe,” the “answer” to the call, “Wait, my love, I’ll be with you”:

■ THE ANSWER
Round behind the stable.
(A deafmute idiot with goggle eyes, his shapeless mouth dribbling, jerks past, shaken in Saint Vitus’ dance.) \(U 15.12-15\)

The anonymous calls and responses that Bloom hears on entering Nighttown can indeed be read as a kind of auditory equivalent to Alice’s giddy experience in Looking-Glass House, where the chess pieces are alive and Alice floats through the hall without touching her feet to the floor.

The only exception to the rule of using Carroll’s chapter titles is the introductory panel of the installation, a long illuminated sign mounted on the wall of the entrance hall to the structure. This is what members of the public first see on descending the escalator or the stairway from the main floor of the railway station. Its heading, *The Adventures of Ulysses Underground*, combines elements from the titles of Carroll’s and Joyce’s works, while making explicit reference to the excavated space which the passer-by is about to enter, usually in search of a parked car. This title is followed by the opening lines of “Circe,” which introduce us to the surreal scene of colored lights, deformed creatures, and the wonderful sight, amid the squalor of grimy houses with gaping doors, of an ice gondola in the form of a swan making its way through the dim streets at midnight:

(\(\text{The Mabbot street entrance of nighttown, before which stretches an uncobbled tram siding set with skeleton tracks, red and green will-o’-the-wisps and danger signals. Rows of grimy houses with gaping doors. Rare lamps with faint rainbow fans. Round Rabaiotti’s halted ice gondola stunted men and women squabble. They grab wafers between which are wedged lumps of coral and copper snow. Sucking, they scatter slowly, children. The swancomb of the gondola, highreared, forges on through the murk, white and blue under a lighthouse. Whistles call and answer.}\) \(U 15.1-9\))

The 13 meters of Kosuth’s sign are long enough to print the entire nine lines from the Gabler edition of *Ulysses* on only two lines of illuminated glass. The
“underground” of the installation’s title reminds us that Alice’s dreamed Wonderland is underground, and that her Looking-Glass world, as well as Joyce’s Nighttown, are also underground in a metaphorical sense to the extent that they represent an alternate universe to the waking world of logic and rational order. In the background of cultural memory here are Odysseus’s sojourn on the island of Circe, where his men are turned to swine, and Aeneas’ descent to the underworld, where Virgil prays for the power “to show things buried deep in earth and darkness” (Aeneid VI: 267). The basic dynamics of such myths, from Homer to Freud, are fundamental and universal to the human imagination: they are those of metamorphoses and the transgression of limits between the known and the unknown, the living and the dead, the human and the animal, waking and the dream, consciousness and the unconscious. Like Freud, Kosuth understands that these fundamental dynamics of the human imaginary have their place in everyday life. The originality of his work is to have reinterpreted the modern literary expression of these dynamics in terms of the spatial dimensions offered by what generally passes for the most banal and utilitarian of public spaces.

The parking garage as a genre corresponds perfectly to Marc Augé’s definition of non-lieux or non-places: those anonymous if heterogeneous constructed spaces designed for the rapid circulation of persons and goods, like autoroutes, freeway interchanges, railway stations, airports, supermarkets, and, in another register, encampments for military units, refugees, or transitory workers:

Si le lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu. (100)

If place is defined as identitory, relational, and historical, the space that can be defined as neither identitory, relation, nor historical defines non-place. (My translation)

The non-lieu is therefore the opposite of a home, a dwelling, or any place endowed with the significance derived from affect, memory, or myth. Its contents are in constant movement, as here, with the continual arrival and departure of automobiles. What Kosuth has done, however, is partly to have reclaimed the parking garage from its status as a non-lieu.

Indeed, the garage at Part-Dieu is considered by those responsible for it as an “underground museum” in addition to being a functional parking facility. The

3 “Un musée souterrain” is the title of a brochure distributed to visitors by the managers of the 12 Lyon Parc Auto facilities, all of which feature works of contemporary art.
guards behind the security desk also act as informal guides by greeting visitors, passing out brochures, and answering questions about the construction, maintenance, and organization of the installation. Kosuth’s project was conceived in collaboration with the architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, responsible in particular for “interior scenography.”4 In keeping with Wilmotte’s conception, the interior of the structure has a distinctly underground look, as if inspired by the landscape of Jules Verne’s *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864), or rather its 20th Century-Fox film version (*Journey to the Center of the Earth*) produced in 1959. The concrete on the walls and pillars is rough-cast and left without cladding to produce the impression of bare earth, like the walls of a cave; yellow lighting is used, particularly in the elevator shafts, as if to suggest smoldering subterranean fires. Emerging from an elevator onto the landing of each level, one sees the parked cars through circular windows that resemble nothing so much as the salon porthole of the submarine Nautilus in the Disney version (1954) of Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, 1869). However, if the semantic content of Kosuth’s installation reinforces the elements of the fantastic characterizing the architectural structure, its material form owes more to the world of public display advertising. Within the parking structure itself, the fragments of Carroll and Joyce vie for attention with other backlit display panels that advertise, for example, the new Renault Laguna. Moreover, the graphic design of Kosuth’s panels recall an aspect of his work that began in the late sixties by using billboards and other anonymous advertising media in public spaces. In part, this was a way to subvert the modernist tradition of the individual artistic genius who creates works for the private ownership of wealthy collectors – an approach that rejected gallery spaces as well: “We really wanted to break the form of making meaning radically and we didn’t want to show in galleries and museums. We wanted to work directly out in the world” (“Conversation” 76).

From another perspective, this kind of work brought about what Gilles Deleuze would call a “deteritorialization”5 of media: forms like public display advertising could be diverted from their conventional, commercial functions into the art work, which at the same time was being liberated from the limits of its own traditional media, viewing space, and public. It was a way for art to invade public space and speak directly to the public. In the present context, there is something both humorous and provocative in the juxtaposition between the Renault display and the illuminated text on the opposing wall where, under

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5 See, for example, the chapter “Sur quelques régimes des signes,” in Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie II.*
Carroll’s title “Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” we read the following passage from Joyce’s text:

\[ \text{THE SIGHTSEERS} \]
\( \text{(dying) Morituri te salutant. (they die)} \)
\( \text{(A man in a brown macintosh springs up through a trapdoor. He points an elongated finger at Bloom.) (U 15.1556–9)} \)

There is little apparent connection between Joyce’s characters and the inane twin brothers of *Through the Looking-Glass*, unless it is the equally bizarre scene of sightseers quoting Suetonius as the walls of Dublin collapse beneath them, and of the normally taciturn man in the brown macintosh denouncing the newly glorified Bloom. There is even less of a connection between this combination of texts and the Renault advertisement with which it shares part of the space of the parking garage. But this fragmentation of texts and dislocation of contexts is precisely the point. The Renault display by itself does nothing but confirm the users of the garage in their function as motorized consumers; it favors continuity of context in a fully mechanized and commercialized system: to the extent that any fantasy is encouraged on the part of the driver, the object of that fantasy is a new car. But Kosuth’s installation encourages another kind of fantasy, that of the literary imagination, here made both visible and enigmatic, as if to convey the message that the content of art, unlike that of advertising, is always enigmatic. In an early number (No. 10) of *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison in 1710 claimed to have brought philosophy to the breakfast table. In like manner, Kosuth has brought literature into the parking garage, in pursuit of a not-dissimilar class of new readers. Again, the aesthetic is one of rupture, deterritorialization, dislocation, and subversion: to break the frame is also to break the context, making room for the logic and content of the dream in the space of daily life.

In addition to being a material installation, Kosuth’s treatment of Joyce and Carroll also amounts to a reading of their works in relation to one another, and in this manner can be considered from the perspective of literary interpretation. For literary scholars, the standard reference for Joyce’s relation to Carroll remains James Atherton’s *The Books at the Wake* with its chapter on Carroll as the “unforeseen precursor” (124–36) to *Finnegans Wake*. Atherton cites a host of references to Carroll’s works in *Finnegans Wake*, including allusions to most of the characters from the Alice books, from “Hatter’s hares” (*FW* 83.1) and “Muckstails turtles” (*FW* 393.11) to the “Whitest night ever moral saw” (*FW* 501.31). The *Wake* repeatedly identifies Dublin with the figure of Humpty Dumpty. Joyce’s Iseult is shown to have origins in the person of Isa Bowman, the young actress who played the title role in the first stage production of *Alice*
in Wonderland, and Carroll himself figures in the Wake in his role as a great creator identified with the Egyptian god Atem who, according to myth, peopled the world by spitting on the primordial mud-heap at Heliopolis, or, in a variant of this myth, by spilling his onanistic seed on the same mound. In the particular type of word-sequence that Carroll called “doubles,” Joyce offers his version of what the god Carroll-Atem might have uttered at this moment of creation: “Item...Utem...Otem...Etem...Atem” (FW 223.35–224.07). The divine name invoked here becomes the throat-clearing “Ahem” in a later passage that explicitly acknowledges Joyce’s debt to Carroll, real name Charles Dodgson: “To tell me how your mead of mard is made of. All old Dadgerson’s dodges one conning one’s copying and that’s what’s wonderland’s wanderlad’ll flaunt to the fair. A trancedone boyscript with tittivits by. Ahem” (FW 374.1–4). Wonderland’s wanderlad would be Joyce himself, a male version of Alice, who is copying and flaunting to the literary fair all of Dodgson’s dodges, i.e. his language games in the form of neologisms, condensations, accretions, palindromes, and portman-teau words, in which, as Humpty Dumpty tells Alice, “there are two meanings packed up into one word” (Carroll 187).

If Finnegans Wake is directly indebted to Carroll, Kosuth has nonetheless shown the right instinct in seeing Carroll’s shadow in “Circe” as well, which of all the chapters in Ulysses most resembles the world of Finnegans Wake. In the scene that takes place in Bella Cohen’s brothel, Bloom, having given up his talismanic black potato to Zoe, forlornly speaks the line, “I never loved a dear gazelle but it was sure to…” (U 15.1323), he is only slightly misquoting Carroll’s poem “Tema con variazioni” (1883), itself a parody of Thomas Moore’s sentimental epic of 1817, Lalla Rookh (Gifford 470). But more directly relevant to the Alice books is the threatening speech given by Bella when transformed into the sadistic Bello, who tells Bloom that he will be “laced with cruel force into vicelike corsets” and “restrained in nettight frocks”, pretty two ounce petticoats and fringes and things stamped, of course, with my houseflag, creations of lovely lingerie for Alice and nice scent for Alice. Alice will feel the pullpull. (U 15.2974–81)

Bella/Bello’s ominous tone resembles that of the Queen of Hearts, who, finding Alice to be trespassing on the royal croquet-ground, turns crimson with fury, glares at her like a wild beast, and screams, “Off with her head!” (Carroll 72), whereas “petticoats and fringes and things” figure both in John Tenniel’s illustrations of Alice and in Dodgson’s photographs of little girls, including the real Alice Liddell. When Bella/Bello predicts that “Alice will feel the pullpull,” s/he is actually referring to Bloom, thus creating the parallel between Alice and Bloom that Kosuth has elaborated in Ulysses’ Adventures Underground. Bel-
la’s menaces transform Bloom into a “charming soubrette with dauby cheeks, mustard hair and large male hands and nose, leering mouth” (U 15.2985–86), one of the many metamorphoses in which he is by turns debased and aggrandized throughout the episode: from adult to child, from king to slave, etc. This inconstancy of form he has in common with Alice, who finds herself alternately shrinking and growing gigantic in unpredictable ways. The underground or dreamlike spaces in which the respective narratives take place favor this continual transgression of the material limits and logical norms that apply in the surface, waking world.

Returning to the form of the textual fragments that Kosuth has put on display, we may observe that, architecturally speaking, they follow the principles that apply to the parking structure itself, those of horizontal continuity on structurally independent levels. Let us recall that each display consists of two distinct textual fragments divided by a horizontal line. If, in moving through the architectural space, the spectator reads the displays in the order defined above, i.e. clockwise on each level down, Carroll’s chapter titles will be seen to follow the order they have in the Alice books. Below the line, the fragments from “Circe” also follow the sequence they have in Joyce’s text, taking into account the fact that together they represent only a small part of that text. Thus the Joyce material, having begun on the entry level to the structure with the introductory lines of “Circe,” passes through various scenes from that chapter on each descending level, ending deep in the earth at the end of level − 4, where a drunken Stephen finds himself involuntarily drawn into an altercation with the soldiers. The last display but one is headed “Which Dreamed It?,” the final chapter title of Through the Looking-Glass. It quotes Stephen’s fantastic, confused speech:

Kings and unicorns! (he falls back a pace) Come somewhere and we’ll ... What was that girl saying...? (U 15. 4481–2)

The last display in the spatial order I have outlined here is headed “Alice’s Evidence,” the final chapter title of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, and the textual fragment beneath it testifies to Bloom’s intervention in the altercation in an effort to restore peace:

(terrified) He said nothing. Not a word. A pure misunderstanding. (U 15. 4600)

But once again, to speak in architectural terms, if the textual fragments are horizontally integrated, creating a continuous flow on each level above and below the line that separates Carroll’s from Joyce’s text, the vertical integration within each fragment, i.e. that which would connect Carroll’s title to Joyce’s fragment in any meaningful way, is left to chance and to individual interpretation. It is only in a general, thematic way that we can connect Carroll’s “Which Dreamed
It?” with Stephen’s drunken speech, for example by noting that “kings and unicorns” occur elsewhere in Carroll and that the figure of the dream applies to Joyce’s text as well as to Carroll’s. Similarly, it is only on this thematic basis that we can understand “Alice’s Evidence” as a formula relevant to Bloom’s intervention in a street altercation, in the sense that both involve a sort of rhetorical defense against a false accusation, whether the charge be that of stealing the tarts or insulting the king. This analysis of the textual structure of Kosuth’s installation can be expressed in linguistic terms: the textual fragments are linked horizontally on a syntactical axis corresponding to the order of their occurrence in Carroll’s and Joyce’s texts, respectively. But the vertical axis within each fragment is metaphorical rather than syntactical, being based on a relation of thematic resemblance rather than textual sequence. This distinction also applies to the architectural principle of the parking structure: on the horizontal axis, each level defines a continuous space, but on the vertical axis, the relation of one level to another is one of resemblance and functional equivalence rather than one of spatial continuity.

At the beginning of this essay, I named a number of reasons why contemporary artists take their inspiration from Joyce. In addition to these, there is a final, overarching reason, which is that Joyce’s work abandons, in form and content, the ideology of aestheticism represented by Stephen Dedalus, and implicitly locates the potential source of its own meaning in its social and cultural contexts: in the institutions of Church, state, and nation; in the network of urban space; in the modern moment’s relation to history and tradition; in the psychopathology of everyday life. As we have seen, this is precisely the move made by contemporary artists from Marina Abramovic to Joseph Beuys to Joseph Kosuth. All of this makes Joyce’s work of direct relevance to contemporary artists who are interested in the question of what art is and how it functions in the world.

Works Cited


