

# One and Three Virtual Chairs: Kosuth in Second Life

Alejandro Schianchi

Departamento de Arte y Cultura, Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, Buenos Aires,  
Argentina  
alejandro@schianchi.com.ar

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## Abstract:

A recreation of Kosuth's "One and three chairs" in a virtual world updates the idea of the seminal work dealing with the concepts of original, reproduction, language, and conceptual art. If in Kosuth's work the relation between the three objects were made by the different elements referring a chair: a dictionary definition, a photograph, and an actual chair. In this new virtual work the three elements are different, as they can be recognized as a chair, a photograph of that chair, and the definition of the word chair, but at the same time they all share the same digital representation of the virtual world itself.

## 1. Introduction

One and three chairs in a virtual world. One author's idea as a work of art, a physical presentation of that idea, and a virtual presentation of that idea. Presentation and representation. A copy of a real work, or an idea. Exclusive and shared authorship. Difference and repetition of concepts, production, and authorship. One author's idea as a work of art, the idea of another author based on that idea, and a presentation of that idea as a work of art. An old idea as new, again.

## 2. Real Kosuth

Joseph Kosuth's original work from 1965 is considered to be one of the first expressions of what is known as conceptual art. The term refers to works of art in which the idea takes precedence over the materialization of such idea. Conceptual art sets aside technical skills and considerations regarding composition, form and color amongst other traditional concerns involved in the production and analysis of a work of art.

Though Marcel Duchamp and some of the experiences by Fluxus artists inevitably prefigured 20th century conceptual art, it is Kosuth's "One and three chairs" that concentrates, like no other work of art, the debates on language, representation and presentation that were so popular at the time. A real chair, a photograph of this chair as it is actually installed in the room and a definition of the word "chair" pose a disconcerting mental and conceptual game in the form of a work of art.

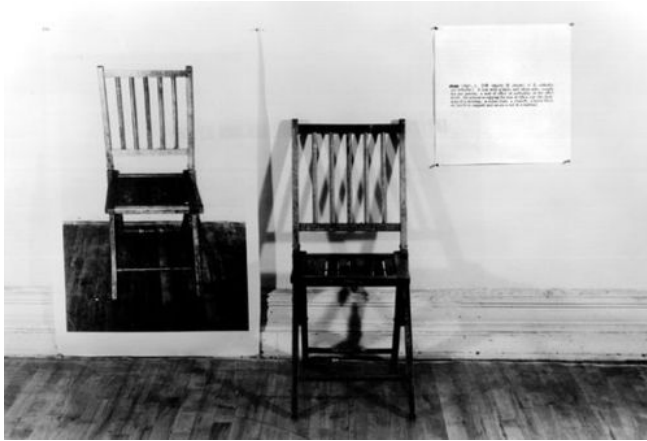


Figure 1. Kosuth's "One and three chairs" (1965). Image property of MOMA. All rights reserved.

On the other hand, since the work of art is conceptual, its materialization, its actual exhibition may take place with certain variations, provided the idea behind it is respected. Kosuth explains this notion in the following words: "Everything you saw when you looked at the object had to be the same that you saw in the photograph, so each time the work was exhibited the new installation necessitated a new photograph. I liked that the work itself was something other than simply what you saw. By changing the location, the object, the photograph and still having it remain the same work was very interesting. It meant you could have an art work which was that idea of an art work, and its formal components weren't important."

The best known exhibitions of the work "One and three chairs" are in the MOMA in New York, and at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. In the work exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, the variation lies in the definition of the word "chair", because when the work is presented at a non-English-speaking location, the English language definition of the word must be replaced by the English-to-pertinent foreign language dictionary definition pertaining to the country where it is being exhibited.

Another interesting point of the work is that it doesn't have any handmade skill, because it uses an industrial chair, and technical devices to make the reproductions of the chair and the definition of the dictionary. The concepts of aura and reproduction of Walter Benjamin are inherent to Kosuth's original work, but it still works with a "real" object.



Figure 2. Kosuth's "One and three chairs" (1965). Image property of Centre Pompidou. All rights reserved to Adagp, Paris.

### 3. Virtual Kosuth

In the case of Alejandro Schianchi's work "Untitled" (2009) made within the virtual multi-user environment Second Life®, the issues involving the object, its representation and its definition are respected in keeping with Kosuth's work, but they acquire a new dimension when the chair-object is virtual as are its photographic representation and the definition of the word "chair" (in this case with its translation into Spanish). In other words, the "experience" of the work in the virtual world resembles that of the original work, but what is evidently experienced or felt as a chair-object, a photograph-object and a dictionary definition-object are representations generated by computer algorithms that model and simulate these objects in a virtual world as if they were real.

Schianchi's work was devised as a performance in March the 8th of 2009 in which objects are first constructed by a so-called "No Digital" avatar and, once completed, the work as a whole is stored as an object in the avatar's inventory. This enables the avatar to be "teletransported" to another location within the virtual environment and to present its work in fully-completed form. This illustrates in an absurd way the possibility of conceptual art being exhibited easily in different locations without the need of actually transporting the unique, auratic object from one place to another for its exhibition.



Figure 3. Virtual presentation of Kosuth's "One and three chairs" in Alejandro Schianchi's work "Untitled" (2009). Image courtesy of the artist.

The video recording of the action performed was first exhibited on the "UNTREF Platform" curated by Graciela Taquini at the Muntref Museum, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The difference of doing the work in a multiuser environment instead of a three dimension modeling software is that you have the opportunity to model things in a virtual space that other users/avatars/people can view and interact in real time, not as in modeling software where you work in an isolated virtual space. So the idea was to take advantage of this and show the work to other users/avatars as a (digital) performance.

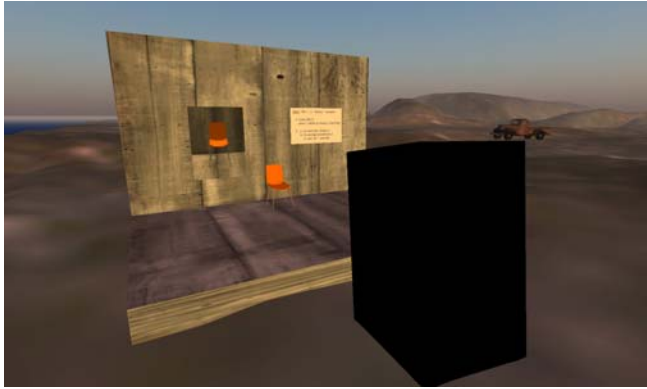


Figure 4. Alejandro Schianchi's avatar modeling the work of art in a virtual world. Image courtesy of the artist.

The places selected in this virtual world to create and show the work were related in some point with it. The modeling and creation of the objects (as shown in figure 4 and 5) were made in the ZKM (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe) Sandbox, this land property of Karlsruhe's New Media Art Center allow any user to create his own models. When it was finished, Schianchi's avatar "No Digital" saves it in his inventory and "teletransports" to IBM Sandbox and "Nueva Argentina" to place his object called "One and three chairs" and show it to other avatars who could see and interact with it. In most cases when the object was shown "No Digital" avatar asks the other users/avatars if they liked that work of art.

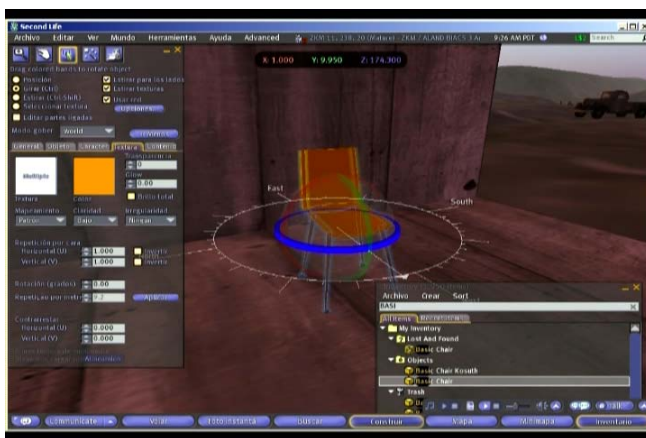


Figure 5. Creation of the work in ZKM Sandbox. Image courtesy of the artist.

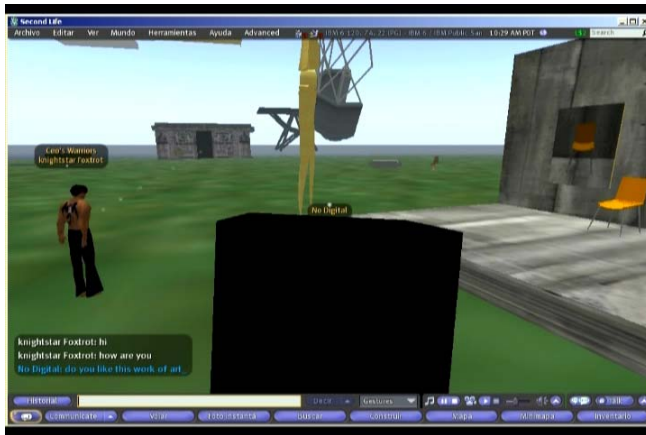


Figure 6. Creation of the work in ZKM Sandbox. Image courtesy of the artist.

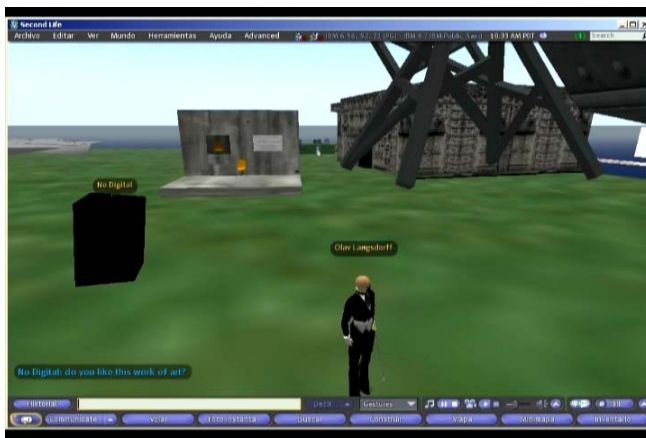


Figure 7. Avatars interacting with the Schianchi's work in IBM Sandbox. Image courtesy of the artist.

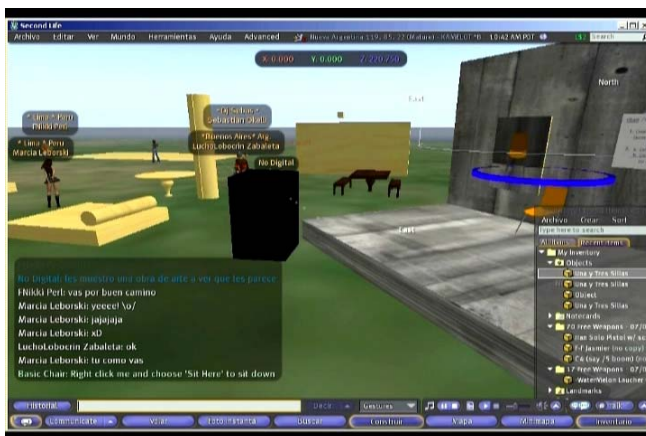


Figure 8. Avatars interacting with the Schianchi's work in Nueva Argentina Sandbox. Image courtesy of the artist.

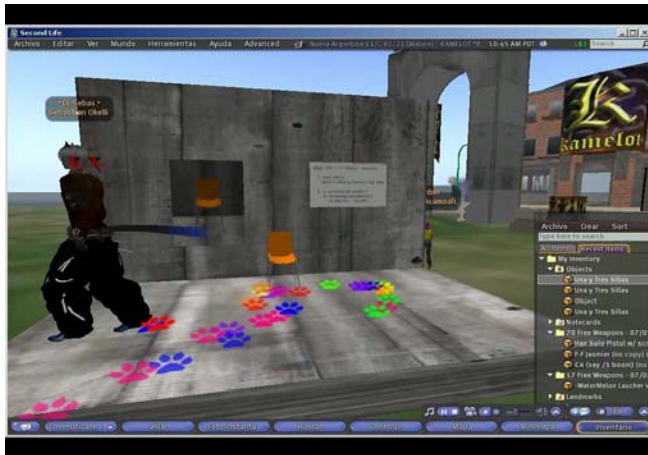


Figure 9. Avatars interacting with the Schianchi's work in Nueva Argentina Sandbox. Image courtesy of the artist.

#### 4. Virtual Kosuth

The work was exhibited again towards the end of 2009 in the form of an installation in “Intersecciones” at the Arte x Arte Gallery (Buenos Aires, Argentina) under the curation of Jorge Zuzulich. In this case, in addition to the tension between Kosuth's original work and its transposition to the virtual world, a new reference point is added within the real world. The installation now comprises three elements: a photograph of Kosuth's original work (or at least one of its exhibitions), a video projection of the copy of the work on the virtual world web system Second Life® and a mirror on which the video projection is reflected. Space is organized in such a manner that the viewer first observes the photo of the original work and then contemplates the video showing as it is reflected on the mirror.



Figure 10. Alejandro Schianchi's “Untitled” (2009) as an installation comprising a photograph of Kosuth's original work, a video projection of Schianchi's work and a mirror reflecting the video projection. Image courtesy of the artist.

We are once again in the presence of “one and three chairs”. On the one hand, the idea of the work presented by Kosuth, the idea of the work presented by Schianchi on Second Life®, and the work presented by Schianchi in space in the form of an installation. On the other hand, within the installation itself, the photograph of Kosuth's original work “One and three chairs”,

the video showing of the copy of the work on Second Life and a reflection of this showing in the mirror.

## Conclusion

Schianchi's art sets out to recover the spirit of conceptual art and to update it via digital computerized form where objects are actually simulations generated by mathematical calculations that can be easily copied and transferred from one place to another. The same applies to the idea behind the work: is Schianchi's work a plagiarism of Kosuth's work or does its presentation in a virtual environment render it new and original?

If Plato's world of ideas was an expression of what lay above the material world, where are objects generated via mathematical calculations that one can interact with through certain devices?

Art can place us in these disconcerting situations in which reality and virtuality, original works and their copies seem to reflect each other continually throughout history.

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