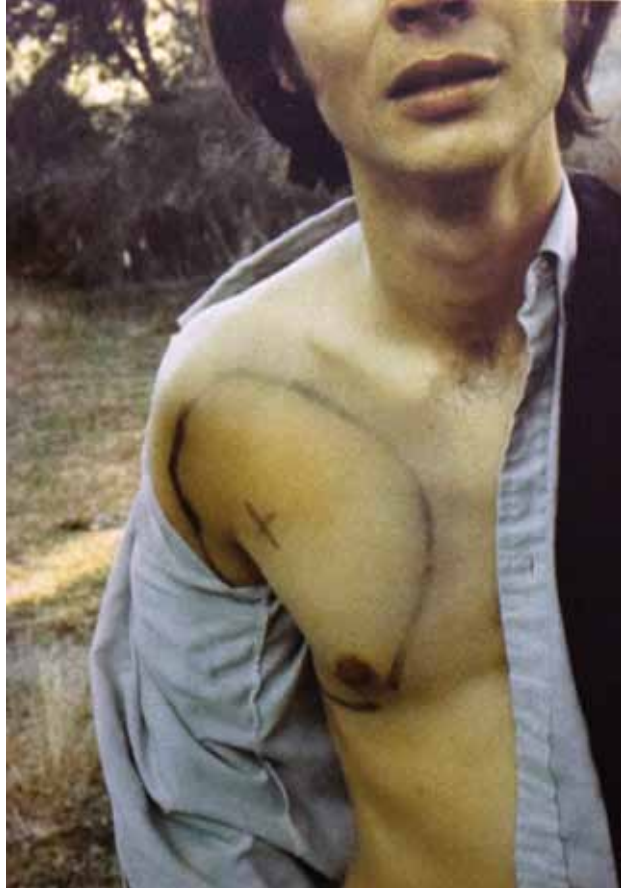


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BERIUM

**A**  
**Paul Kos**  
**Survey**

April 16–October 2, 2016

DI ROSA, NAPA

# Equilibrium: A Paul Kos Survey

*"I seek to raise ordinary elements to extraordinary. I try to choose an element that performs double duty, meaning it must contribute both to the form and the content, creating an equilibrium between them."*

—Paul Kos<sup>1</sup>

In 1968 Paul Kos experienced an artistic epiphany on the di Rosa property in Napa, California, that would lead to a major shift toward working with materials in relation to a site. Rene di Rosa (1919–2010) had hired the young artist, who at the time was attending the San Francisco Art Institute, to graft vines at his recently acquired Winery Lake vineyards and ranch, and invited him to make some of the first outdoor sculptures on the property. After completing two polychrome works, Kos realized that the use of toxic materials—fiberglass, resin, automotive lacquers, or spray paint—was at odds with the pastoral environment.<sup>2</sup> He asked if he could make a third piece, and proceeded to create the ephemeral *Lot's Wife* (fall 1968 and summer 1969; see poster on verso) by installing pillars of salt for the resident Jersey cattle to slowly lick away. "Ever since that time, I've tried not to look back," he observed.<sup>3</sup> He would soon thereafter become one of the Bay Area's leading figures of Conceptual art. *Equilibrium* surveys the renowned San Francisco-based artist's long-standing engagement with the Western landscape, from Wyoming to the Sierra Nevada. Kos's background informs his affinity for the land and his use of simple, natural elements—wood, rock, sand, sulfur, salt, ice—as core aspects of his broader and wide-ranging sculptural practice.

Shortly after completing *Lot's Wife*, Kos shared it with Tom Marioni, an influential curator and artist who proceeded to include Kos in key early shows foregrounding idea-oriented and process-based work at the nearby Richmond Art Center and Marioni's own legendary alternative space in San Francisco, the Museum of Conceptual Art (MOCA, 1970–84).<sup>4</sup> Kos's *Condensation of Yellowstone Park Into 64 Square Feet* (1969) appeared in

Marioni's seminal 1969 exhibition *The Return of Abstract Expressionism*, which brought together a core group of artists exploring natural forces and raw materials, marking (per the curatorial statement) how "for the first time, the artist is freeing himself from the object. . . . It is the act of creation itself which is art."<sup>5</sup> Restaged for this exhibition for the first time since its initial presentation, the piece showcases, atop an eight-by-eight-foot platform-cum-stage, the alchemical forces at work in the sulfur springs of Yellowstone National Park. Activated by aquarium pumps, the bubbling mixture of mud and sulfur engulfs the viewer in a heightened sensory experience of elements that "perform" throughout the run of the show. As in *Lot's Wife*, Kos puts the indigenous characteristics of materials at the service of the artwork: they complete the piece.

Salt was one of the first natural materials Kos worked with; the other was ice. The proposals *Aerial Salt Sculpture* and *Aerial View of Kinetic Salt/Water Sculpture* (both 1969) furthered his interest in exploring the performative aspects of such elements through concept-based drawings and texts. *Real Estate Sculpture on Loan* (1968–69), an official document permitting the loan of a vacant lot (owned by his grandfather) in the ghost town Contact, Nevada, to the Richmond Art Center in exchange for a \$1.27 tax payment, paired with a drawing by the artist that illustrates the lot's subterranean volume, also demonstrates his conceptual and material proclivities. Kos's works from this period point to a constellation of influences, including Land art and Arte Povera.<sup>6</sup>

Kos was also among the first artists in Northern California to create performance-based film and video works and installations.



Lot's Wife, 1969



Roping Boar's Tusk (still), 1971

*rEVOLUTION* (1970; see cover images), a rare live performance witnessed by a private audience at the di Rosa property, consisted of a ninety-minute "invisible weight exchange"—the weight in this case being forty pounds of shotgun ammunition fired by Kos into a suspended target. A circle drawn on the artist's shoulder marked the spot where the rifle would kick back, mirroring the appearance and function of the target. Both Kos and the target were on scales. Kos also periodically threw rocks at a plane he hired to repeatedly pass overhead. *Newsweek* critic Howard Junker was asked by Rene di Rosa on the spot to give an impromptu review, and he made an analogy between the forty to fifty onlookers and the phenomenon of battle tourists in the nineteenth century who would voyeuristically set up picnics on the sidelines of combat areas.<sup>7</sup> Kos later reflected that the combination of the plane, the recently planted rows of vines (resembling a cemetery), and the roving cameramen (two students and George Bolling photographing, videotaping, and filming like war journalists) gave a Vietnam War-like resonance to the performance. One of the distinctive aspects of the piece was the importance placed on the act of documentation—in this case through still photography, audio, film, video, and a live closed-circuit feed broadcast to the di Rosa residence. The resultant installation of the target, spent shell-casings, and remastered Super 8 films and split screen video is shown here for the first time since its presentation in *Fish, Fox, Kos* (1971) at the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University, where Kos taught

and first gained access to a Sony Portapak video camera before later acquiring his own.<sup>8</sup> *rEVOLUTION* manifests two recurrent strands that emerge throughout this exhibition: the artist's performances for a camera, and performative actions of elements that create either a balance or an opposition.

The revelation of *Lot's Wife* gave the artist a sense of license to make art wherever he went and with whatever was available. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, Kos's annual summer family destination—his childhood home in Rock Springs, Wyoming, reached via a 1,200-mile drive in a Volkswagen bus—would become his studio space.<sup>9</sup> He recorded numerous solo and collaborative pieces with his first wife, Marlene, in relation to Wyoming's landscape and lore. The state's wide-open desert plains, buttes, and lakes have figured largely in our collective imagination through the lens of Hollywood Westerns. Kos upends the romantic image of the heroic cowboy in the short film *Roping Boar's Tusk* (1971), in which he attempts and fails to "lasso" the landmark form—a volcanic plug—on the distant horizon. In *Ice Makes Fire* (1974/2004) the artist realizes an extreme wilderness survival trick by spinning a block of ice on one of his mother's cooking pot lids to shape it into a convex lens to magnify the sun in order to start a kindling fire on the snow.

Kos's work consistently considers the phenomenon of reflection, such as the dynamic between silence and sound, or shadow and light. In the video installation *Are Tinny / Aren't Any* (1974), the artist wanders through the desert scrub near Pilot Butte, Wyoming, chanting, "There aren't any sounds in the desert; there are tinny sounds in the desert." The wordplay is embodied in the form of a sculptural apparatus: the audio



Container for an icicle (or Mind Over Matter), 1982

from the videotape connects via a transducer/wire to two suspended steel sheets that vibrate with the sound and act like cymbals or a loudspeaker. In other works, Kos utilized a type of small game trap from his boyhood as a kinetic object. In *Pit and Pendulum* (1971), traps are set off by the motions of pendulums, one a swinging lightbulb and the other a swinging ice block dripping into fire: two independent, self-destructive systems set in competition.

*Container for an icicle (or Mind Over Matter)* (1982) encapsulates key aspects of Kos's practice, including a focus on symbolic gestures and a desire to circumvent the market. Crafted from incense cedar wood and lined with the sawdust from its making, the narrow, triangular work did once house a spear of ice, plucked from the roof of the artist's home in the Sierras and transported to San Francisco as a donation to an art auction; it was acquired by the San Francisco-based collector Austin Conkey. The piece made a remarkable transition from a work that had material form to a purely conceptual piece following the melting of the icicle. Only the lingering imprint in the sawdust remained as a keepsake of the gesture. Ron Meyers, an artist and Kos's former student, notes, "Ice changes form twice: from solid to liquid, and from matter to memory."<sup>10</sup> Kos has stated with respect to *Container for an icicle*, "This is the epitome of collecting conceptual art."<sup>11</sup>

Fast forward to 2006: to enact the performance piece *I Can't Get It Right No Matter Where I Go*, Kos hiked Donner Summit in the Sierras with an accordion, an instrument he took up as a tribute to his Slovenian



Equilibre I, 1990

heritage when his mother passed away. An avid rock climber and hiker since his youth, Kos has described how the act of ascending a mountain can offer a heightened focus on the present moment. Long before gym climbing walls were ubiquitous, Kos developed several architectural interventions that brought the physical intensity of rock climbing into the gallery space.

Other works that speak to Kos's sense of play, gravity, and relationship to his audience are *Equilibre I* (1990), a two-wheeled antique freight cart supporting eight steel pétanque balls, and *Equilibre III* (1992), an upright, freestanding broom balancing an outstretched wire hanger adorned with two bells. The latter originated from a chance studio encounter with a broom (he has often mentioned that he trusts accidents more than ideas) in which he was thinking with his head propped on his hands on top of the handle, and the broom remained upright when he moved away. The precarious nature of both works defies belief; they practically dare the viewer to test their stability. Their simple appearances belie the precision invested in them by the artist. The delicate balance between artist, material, and curious viewer is a distinct departure from the earlier chance-based experiments. When describing *Equilibre I* to Rene di Rosa, Kos wrote, "It is, like you, a calm facade but a little naughty."

Kos's works on the di Rosa property include *Zizi Va* (1994), which was recently restored in anticipation of this survey exhibition.<sup>12</sup> A favorite pastime of the artist, the French ball game pétanque (similar to bocce) is a social sport. Since the 1990s Kos has brought pétanque into various exhibition contexts and public commissions, inviting audience participation in order to manifest the full



Noah's Ark, 1997, and Chartres Bleu, 1982-86

expression of a piece. *Zizi Va* consists of two pétanque courts and a wooden cabinet housing a sculptural installation of a bottle of Pernod and two pétanque balls, viewable through a small peephole à la Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-66). The work is located between di Rosa's Main Gallery and Kos's *Tunnel/Chapel* (1997, with Isabelle Sorrell). Two of the parts of *Tunnel/Chapel*—*Noah's Ark* and *2x2*—allude to the biblical story of Noah and were made in response to the California floods of 1997.<sup>13</sup> The underground structure also showcases Kos's twenty-seven-channel video masterpiece *Chartres Bleu* (1982-86), which condenses the passage of twelve hours of daylight through a stained-glass window of Chartres Cathedral into twelve minutes. This cluster of site-specific works represents a sustained relationship of more than thirty years in which Rene di Rosa pursued a vision of a place for art and nature to coexist.

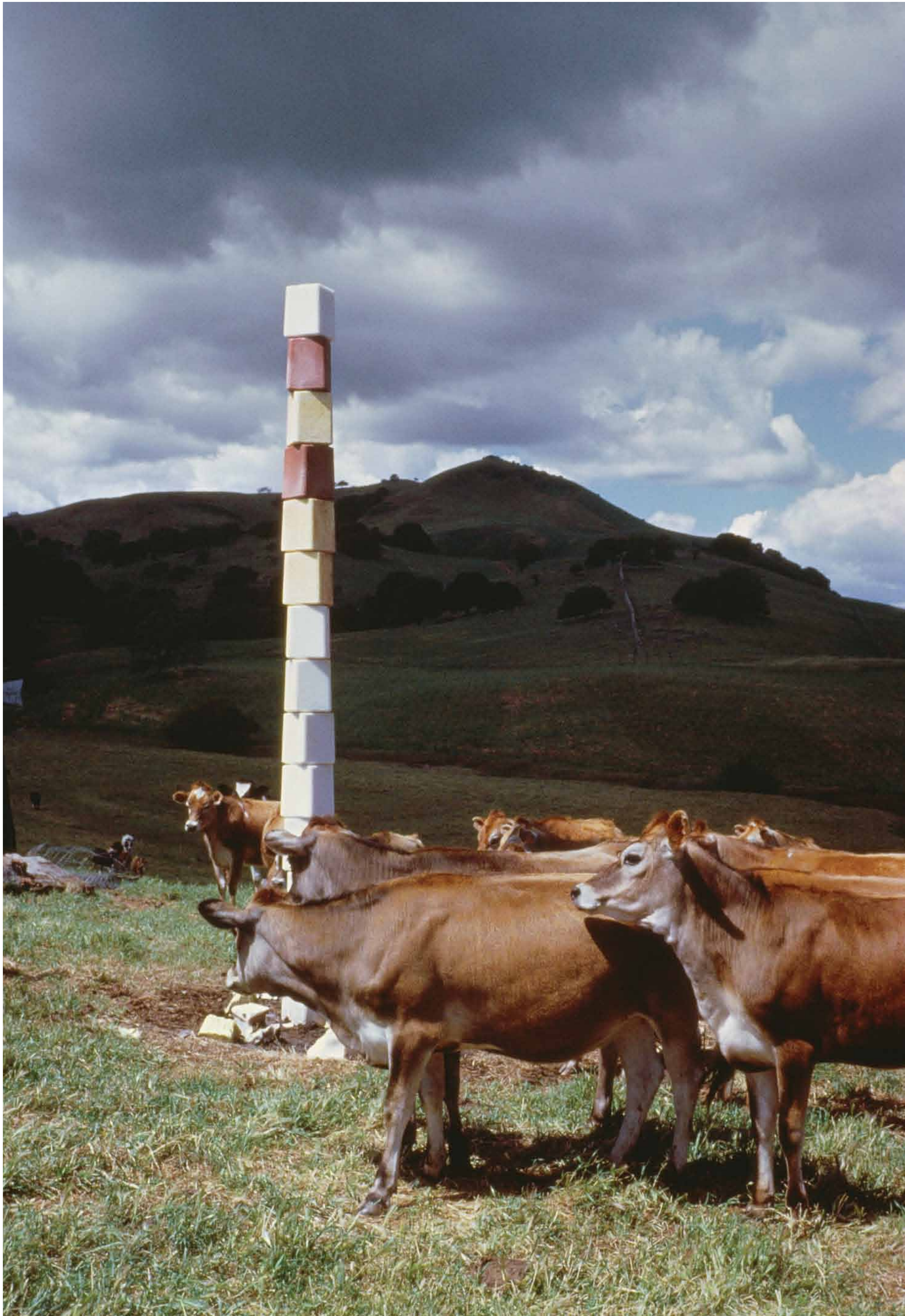
Just as mountainous terrain and desert plains have shaped Kos's distinctive approach to art making, his formative experiences on the di Rosa property triggered an enduring fascination with the confluence of art and life. By the same token, Kos's long history with the site has been influential in defining this institution's ongoing commitment to supporting the production of new outdoor installations and performances by contemporary artists. Revisiting his works through the lens of place, materials, and the dynamic balance of form and content brings new resonance to the art of today and underscores the importance of providing platforms for experimentation both in and beyond the confines of the gallery space.

— Amy Owen, curator at di Rosa, and Tanya Zimbardo, guest curator

## Notes

1. Paul Kos, "Art and Conversation," lecture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, October 13, 2001.
2. The outdoor painted sculptures *Flagellated Flagpole* (1968) and *Floating Piece* (1968), and related studies, are represented in the di Rosa collection.
3. Ibid. The title refers to the moment in the book of Genesis when Lot's wife looks back at Sodom and turns into a pillar of salt.
4. Following the inaugural MOCA exhibition in 1970, Kos became part of a close circle of artists who exhibited and performed there. The Richmond Art Center was the venue of Kos's first solo show, *Participationkinetics*, in 1969.
5. Tom Marioni, *The Return of Abstract Expressionism*, exh. brochure (Richmond, CA: Richmond Art Center, 1969).
6. Kos has noted his interest at the time in temporary artistic gestures in the land, such as works by Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim. He first met Oppenheim at di Rosa and they showed together in exhibitions.
7. For a discussion of *rEVOLUTION* and Kos's history with video art, see the interview by Glenn Phillips in *California Video: Artists and Histories* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008).
8. *Fish, Fox, Kos* also featured Allan Fish (Tom Marioni's artist alias) and Terry Fox. Lydia Modi-Vitale, director of the de Saisset Museum, organized this and several other early exhibitions highlighting performance and video art. George Bolling, the videographer and photographer for *rEVOLUTION*, became the institution's video curator—the first such at a museum on the West Coast. With one of the first Sony Portapak cameras in the region, he shot important early videotapes of Kos and other conceptual artists such as Terry Fox, Howard Fried, and Bonnie Ora Sherk.
9. The annual trips continued until 1978, when Kos purchased a summer home in Soda Springs in the Sierra Nevada.
10. Ron Meyers, "The Art of Memory," in *Everything Matters: Paul Kos, A Retrospective*, exh. cat., ed. Constance M. Lewallen (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2003), 96.
11. "Ice Makes Fire, Paul Kos with Jarrett Earnest," *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2, 2012, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/04/art/ice-makes-fire-paul-kos-with-jarrett-earnest>.
12. On May 21, 2016, a public pétanque tournament will be hosted by di Rosa and the artist. Visit [dirosaart.org](http://dirosaart.org) for more information.
13. Kos and Sorrell were married in a private ceremony inside their collaborative work *Tunnel/Chapel*. The *Tunnel* with the Stations of the Cross in timbers, the *Chapel* with acid-etched floors and *Noah's Ark*, and the yellow *Bell Room* are all collaborative works by Kos and Sorrell.

Paul Kos  
*Lot's Wife* (installation view), 1969  
Salt, Jersey cattle  
Dimensions variable  
di Rosa Collection, Napa



## Works in the Exhibition

### *Border Crossing: Wyoming/Colorado*, 1968

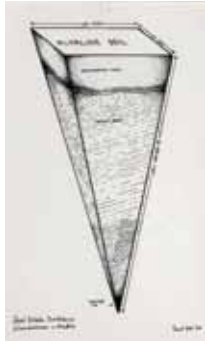
Nine gelatin silver prints  
8 x 10 in. each  
Participant: Marlene Kos



*Salt Stripes*, 1968  
Gelatin silver print  
9½ x 7½ in.

*Lot's Wife*, 1968/69  
Two gelatin silver prints, typed text, mounted on board  
20 x 8 in. overall  
di Rosa Collection, Napa

*Lot's Wife*, 1968/69  
Chromogenic prints  
10 x 8 in. each  
di Rosa Collection, Napa



*Real Estate Sculpture on Loan*, 1968–69  
Tax document, ink on Chrome Coat paper  
Two panels: 22 x 14 in. and 14 x 10 in.  
Collection of Lars Tellman

*Aerial Salt Sculpture*, 1969  
Ink on Chrome Coat paper  
10 x 8½ in.

*Aerial View of Kinetic Salt/Water Sculpture*, 1969  
Ink on Chrome Coat paper  
10 x 8½ in.



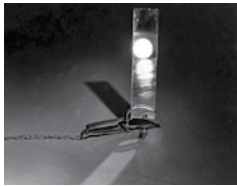
*Condensation of Yellowstone Park Into 64 Square Feet*, 1969/2016  
Mud and sulfur  
96 x 96 in.

*rEVOLUTION*, 1970  
Nine chromogenic prints and text mounted on board  
18¾ x 64¼ in.  
di Rosa Collection, Napa  
Color and infrared photography:  
George Bolling

*rEVOLUTION*, 1970  
Two Super 8 films, color, silent, transferred to video; single-channel video, black and white, sound; wood target; shotgun shells  
Dimensions variable



*Interview with Petrified Forest*, 1971  
Gelatin silver print  
12 x 10 in.  
Collection of Jonathan Leavitt



*Light Trap*, 1971  
Gelatin silver print  
7¼ x 9¼ in.

*Pit and Pendulum*, 1971  
Single-channel video, black and white, sound, 12:22 min.

*Roping Boar's Tusk*, 1971  
Super 8 film transferred to video, color, silent, 1 min.

*Shadow Trap*, 1971  
Gelatin silver print  
7¾ x 9¾ in.

*Alkali Flats*, 1974  
Gelatin silver print  
13¾ x 20½ in.

*Are Tinny / Aren't Any*, 1974  
Two steel sheets, single-channel video, black and white, sound, 7:54 min.  
Sheets: 48 x 48 in. each  
Overall dimensions variable

*The Drawing for a Tool: Ice Lens Maker*, 1974  
Watercolor and ink  
30 x 22 in.



*Ice Makes Fire*, 1974/2004  
Single-channel video, color, sound, 5:21 min.

*Ore*, 1974  
Transfer type, tape, tar on paper  
8½ x 11 in.

*Pilot Butte / Pilot Light*, 1974, printed 2016  
Two gelatin silver prints  
12½ x 19 in. each

*Container for an Icicle (or Mind Over Matter)*, 1982  
Incense cedar  
4½ x 21¾ x 5½ in.  
Collection of G. Austin Conkey, M.D.

*Equilibre I*, 1990  
Wood, steel, pétanque balls, four French francs  
19½ x 52 x 30½ in.  
di Rosa Collection, Napa



*Equilibre III*, 1992  
Broom, coat hanger, bells  
57 x 40 in.  
di Rosa Collection, Napa

*Brushstrokes (After Monet)*, 1998  
Red fir  
10½ x 153 x 29 in.



*I Can't Get It Right No Matter Where I Go*, 2006  
Inkjet print  
16 x 20 in.

All works appear courtesy the artist; Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco; and Galerie Georges-Philippe and Nathalie Vallois, Paris, unless otherwise noted. Checklist is as of the date of publication; some changes may occur.

## More by Kos

Additional works by Paul Kos spanning several decades are accessible by guided tour of di Rosa's permanent collection, including the recently restored site-specific installations *Zizi Va* (1994), a pétanque court with related objects, and *Tunnel/Chapel* (1997, with Isabelle Sorrell), an underground structure showcasing Kos's video masterpiece *Chartres Bleu* (1982–86), a re-creation of the passage of light through a stained glass window at Chartres Cathedral in France using twenty-seven television monitors.

## About the Artist

Born in 1942 in Rock Springs, Wyoming, Paul Kos studied at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, before relocating to the Bay Area to attend the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), where he received a BFA (1965) and an MFA (1967), both in painting. A highly influential educator, Kos taught conceptual art at the University of Santa Clara (1969–77) and performance and video (now part of the New Genres department) at SFAI (1978–2008). Kos has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including *Everything Matters: Paul Kos, A Retrospective* (2003), organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, which traveled to the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati; Grey Art Gallery, New York University; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. He has been featured in group exhibitions at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco; the Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou, China; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin; the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; among many others. His solo and collaborative public art commissions are located in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. Kos is represented by Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco, and Galerie Georges-Philippe and Nathalie Vallois, Paris. He lives and works in San Francisco and Soda Springs, California.

## Acknowledgments

This exhibition is supported by the Fresh Art Fund. Additional support is provided by the di Rosa Collectors Circle and our members.




Design: Jon Sueda / Stripe SF  
Editing: Lindsey Westbrook  
Printing: Solstice Press, Oakland

## Public Programs

May 21, 2016, 4–7 PM  
Curators' walkthrough and pétanque tournament with Paul Kos

June 25, 2016, 4–6 PM  
Curators in conversation with guest speaker Constance M. Lewallen

For details, please visit [dirosaart.org](http://dirosaart.org).

   @dirosaart #PaulKos

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