

PORTRAIT / EARL WAN

# THE WRITING ON THE WALL

*Having his work denounced by the Pope hasn't deterred conceptual artist JOSEPH KOSUTH. On the contrary, he's still exploring the nature of art and language, as PAYAL UTTAM discovers*

**I**N THE LATE '80s, Leo Castelli, one of the most powerful art dealers in New York, sat Joseph Kosuth down and let him in on a secret. It was just after the death of Andy Warhol. "Listen, Andy swore me to secrecy but he's dead now, and you should know that for all these years he'd been secretly buying your work and donating it to museums," Castelli said. "I thought, 'Wow,'" whispers Kosuth, recalling his shock. At the time he was a budding artist and Warhol was a legend.

It is an overcast afternoon and Kosuth is narrating the story to me in the corner of a Wanchai cafe. As it turns out, the pop-art

guru wasn't his only fan. At 67, Kosuth is one of the most significant artists of our time. Dubbed the grandfather of conceptual art, he's known for his fixation with language and philosophy. Rejecting traditional methods of painting and sculpture, Kosuth declared that anything could be considered art - what mattered was the intention and meaning behind the work, not the forms themselves. So sweeping is his influence that his works have appeared at five Venice Biennales, four Documentas and just about every major contemporary-art museum in the world. Recently, Kosuth has been placing text



RIPENSARE IL VERO (B.C.)/RETHINKING THE TRUTH (B.C.), PIAZZA DEL PLEBISCITO, NAPLES, 2001

PEPPE CAVALLONE





LEFT: NI APPEARANCE NI ILLUSION (NEITHER APPEARANCE NOR ILLUSION), THE LOUVRE, 2009.  
BELOW LEFT: IL LINGUAGGIO DELL'EQUILIBRIO/THE LANGUAGE OF EQUILIBRIUM, VENICE BIENNALE, 2007

When we meet, Kosuth has just put the final touches to a large four-wall installation in the American billionaire Robert Miller's home on The Peak. "Oh my lord, has it been busy," he says in a thick Midwestern accent. Round faced, with a confident manner, Kosuth is dressed entirely in black, wearing a hat, waistcoat and small oval spectacles. The artist, who keeps studios in London and New York, is in Hong Kong for a few days. Since he's arrived, his phone hasn't stopped ringing. "So the people here like your art?" I ask. "Is that a fact? It's a scary idea that anybody does," he replies with a playful glint in his eyes.

Something of a renegade, Kosuth first caught the attention of the art world in the '60s with his starkly conceptual installations. "I was very avid as a young artist," he remembers. "I believed in art but I didn't believe in painting and sculpture, I felt it was used up." For Kosuth, art was about ideas. A literature obsessive, he turned to novels, philosophical treatises and anthropological texts for inspiration. He created artworks using everything from Calvin and Hobbes comics to newspaper cuttings: "I was fighting with museums to re-educate them on what art was, that other people could make it for you, that you could be appropriating something from popular culture and you were still the artist."

Kosuth's first major breakthrough came in 1965 when he produced *One and Three Chairs*, a work consisting of a wooden chair beside a photograph of a chair and a photostat of the dictionary definition of the word chair. Calling into question the elitism of art forms such as painting, he deliberately selected simple objects that anyone could re-create. Instead of signing the objects, Kosuth signed a set of instructions on how to assemble the work, which also functioned as a certificate of ownership. The art was neither the chairs, nor the signed paper; rather it was the idea behind the work.

The installation was quickly acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York and placed in its permanent collection. "I was 20 years old when I made the work so I had to keep my age a secret. They'd never let anyone so young into MOMA, are you joking?" exclaims Kosuth, who hid his age for years. "I would dress in suits from the used clothing stores. I was kind of a smart kid so I sounded older and got away with it."

Fiercely intelligent, Kosuth had a life that reads like a film script: child prodigy grows up to outsmart the art world, travels the globe,



made out of neon tube lights - a medium he began using in the '60s - in unusual public spaces, including an Armenian monastery in Venice, the walls of a former brewery-turned-museum in Germany and the facade of a 16th-century mansion in the Canary Islands. Among his most prominent permanent works have been text installations on the ceiling of Japan's Sapporo Dome (created for the 2002 World Cup); the floor of Paul-Löbe-Haus (an annex to the German parliament) in Berlin; and the courtyard

of the Parliament House in Stockholm.

In 2001, he sent shockwaves through the city of Naples when he placed 144 metres of neon cursive text across the old basilica of St Francis of Paola in the Piazza del Plebiscito. Titled *Ripensare il Vero (B.C.)/Rethinking the Truth (B.C.)*, the work consisted of writings by Italian intellectual and politician Benedetto Croce, that challenged the idea of absolute truth. The work struck a nerve with the Catholic community and was denounced by the Pope.

"I WAS VERY AVID AS A YOUNG ARTIST. I BELIEVED IN ART BUT NOT IN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE. I FELT IT WAS USED UP"

struggles to pay rent, before finally making it. His story begins in Toledo, Ohio, where he began training under a traditional Belgian painter when he was just 10 years old. "I went to a museum school when I was 12 and won prizes that my mother had to get because I was supposed to be over 18," says Kosuth with a grin. The year 1964 was a turning point for the young Kosuth. He left home for Paris, a Mecca for artists, musicians and writers, and immersed himself in the city's burgeoning art scene. "It was a certain moment in history," he recalls. "I was eating the world, I wanted to know everything."

Perhaps his most vivid memory from that time was a happening (a spontaneous performance) staged by American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti: "He was standing on top of a Volkswagen that was covered in spaghetti, reading his poem. I started making comments and there was an old guy standing next to me who would respond. So he and I began this dialogue. Ferlinghetti was giving us dirty looks because people started laughing." After a few minutes, the elderly gentleman shook his hand and left. Only later did Kosuth discover it was Marcel Duchamp, one of his heroes. A few years later Kosuth was in New York, three months late on rent, when a letter arrived in the mail - Duchamp had selected him for a grant from The Cassandra Foundation, where he sat on the board. "It was his last vote to give money to an artist before he died," says Kosuth. "He changed everything."

As he takes me through stories of his past, Kosuth speaks with such intensity that it's difficult to steer our conversation into the present. I try asking him about his recent installation *Ni appearance ni illusion (Neither appearance, nor illusion)* located in the catacombs of the Louvre and his eyes light up. He tells me the idea for the piece arose from "this new thing on the Internet called Twitter, back when nobody knew what it was yet." The Brooklyn Museum approached him with a project to foster dialogue with younger artists using Twitter, and Kosuth found himself musing over the prospect of filling the walls of the medieval fortress. "I did 12-15 [tweets] and thought, 'My God, I just did my work for the Louvre.'"

The work consists of 15 sentences in white



THE DOG HOUSE, TOKYO, 2012, A KENNEL-SHAPED PUBLIC INSTALLATION THAT ALSO SERVES AS A SHORT-TERM RESIDENCE FOR ARTISTS

neon cursive writing snaking across the 12th-century sandstone passage. Seen together, they raise questions about the context of the museum space, history, archaeology and the viewer's personal experience. As is the case with most of his international works, Kosuth had the words translated into the country's native language, French. "We had something like six translators from three continents, and five different universities all teamed to try to get it exactly right."

Kosuth explains that he has been fascinated by nuances of language and culture since his mid-twenties, when he returned to university to study anthropology and left New York to travel the globe. "I felt

I was an egocentric white guy and I had to understand something about culture in another way," he says. "I went to South America and lived with the Yagua Indians in the Peruvian Amazon, and Alice Springs in Australia, where I lived with Aborigines. I never had the pretence that I would enter their space but I wanted to feel what was the edge of mine." It may have been more than four decades since Kosuth began his journey, yet he continues to venture outside his comfort zone. Whether it's experimenting with new mediums such as Twitter or straddling new cultures (he has upcoming projects in Turkey and Taiwan), Kosuth is still searching for that edge. ■

ABOVE LEFT: ANTONIE MONGODIN. LEFT: DANIELE NALESSO

PETER COOK