

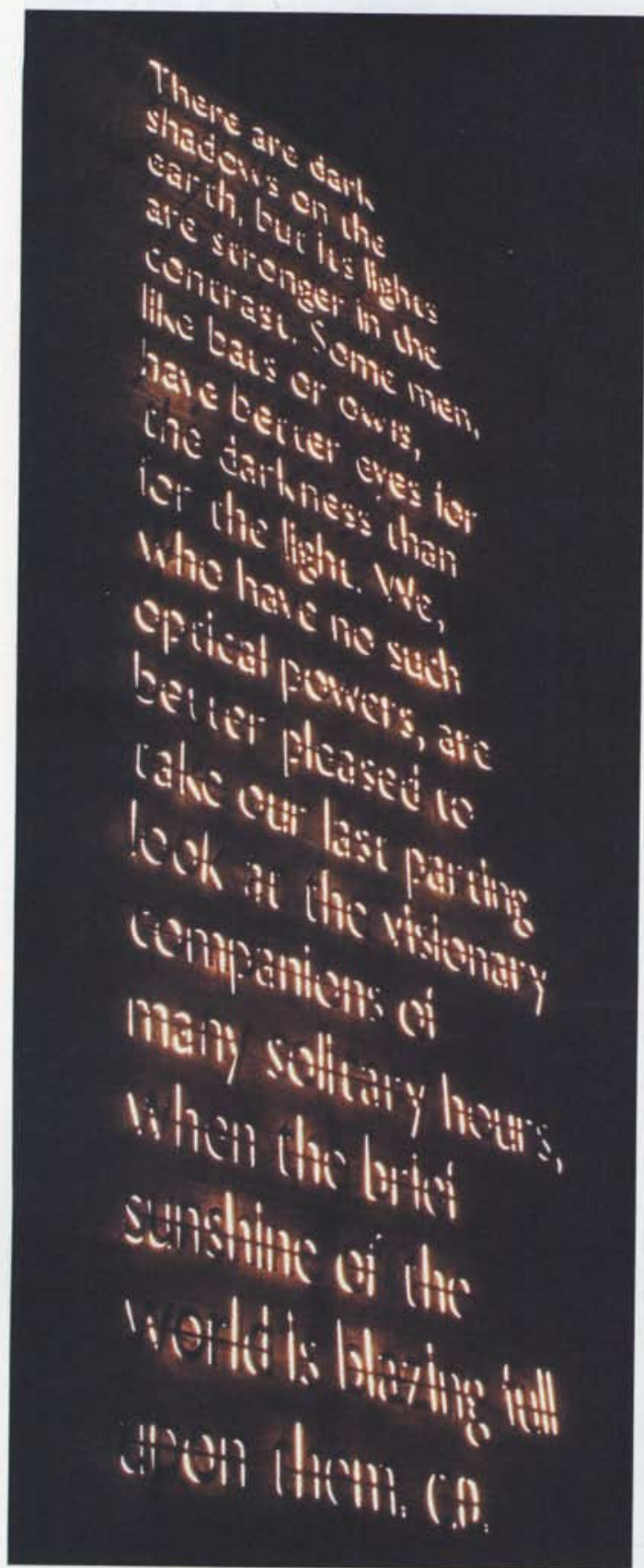
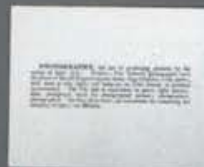
JOSEPH KOSUTH

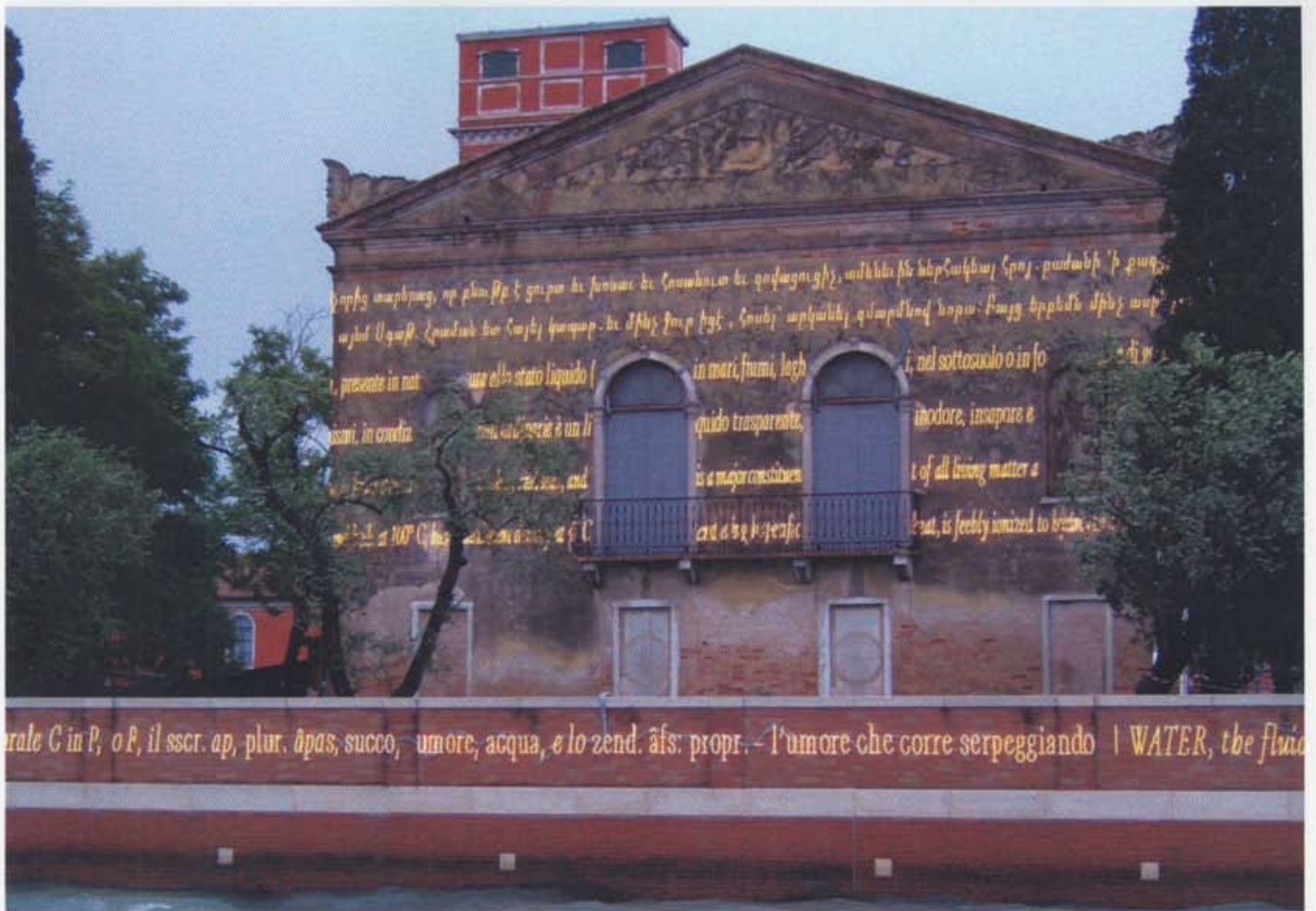
GEAN MORENO

SINCE the mid-1960s, Joseph Kosuth has been working to transform the artwork from an ideologically hazy fantasy object to an analytical tool through which our larger cultural structures can be probed and altered. From the very beginning he replaced the physical object with the linguistic proposition, and cast the proposition within tautological loops that made it a self-sufficient unit of meaning. *One and Three Chairs* (1965), a seminal piece comprising a chair, its photographic representation and its definition (copied straight from the dictionary), is emblematic of the work of this period, as is *One and Eight – A Description* (1965), a neon piece in which eight words – neon, electrical, light, English, glass, letters, red, eight – describe the very work the viewer is facing. A visual artefact is rendered verbal and, in the process, acquires a certain conceptual clarity. Influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and other thinkers from the scientifically structured tradition of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, Kosuth sought to make concise statements, free of the existential and ideological baggage that accrued around the paintings and sculptures that, until then, characterised mainstream modernism.

From the beginning, reacting against the Greenbergian discourse that dominated most visual arts thinking of the time, Kosuth called for artworks to break out of the prison of media specificity. He spoke of a need for artists to leave behind the specific (particular media) and instead focus on exploring a general definition of art. It was a matter of learning to ignore the obsolete question of what a painting or a sculpture could be (artists like Ad Reinhardt, in Kosuth's view, had already driven this line of enquiry to its logical conclusion) and grasp how art, as a cultural process that explores and alters the very culture in which it functions, can be aware of how it operates.

Not only did Kosuth use language as his primary 'material' in order to sidestep the restrictive structure of specific media, but, uneasy with showing in galleries, he began looking for new outlets for his projects. Throughout the 1970s he worked with newspapers, street banners and billboards, seeking to break out of the cycle that turns artworks, especially those produced within the frames of reference of painting and sculpture, into a series of 'arrested forms' that add up to a style. 'When your activity is perceived as style,' Kosuth wrote, 'it has been alienated from reality... But art-making is a process, an on-going dynamic, not the static sum of its residue.' As something that codifies the concerns and expressive range of an artist, rather than engaging the





Opposite, left: *A Last Parting Look*, 2005. Courtesy: Laura Bartlett Gallery, London. Opposite, right: *One and Three Photographs [Ety./Hist.]*, 1965. Above: *The Language Equilibrium*, 2006. Photo: Seamus Farrell. Below: *Information Room (Special Investigation)*, 1970. All images courtesy: Monika Sprueh/Philomene Magers, Cologne, Munich, London.



meaning ['mi:nɪŋ], s. die Bedeutung
(*significance, connotation*); der Sinn.
meaningless ['mi:nɪŋlɪs], *adj.* bedeu-
tungslos.

Above: *Art as Idea (as Idea) Meaning*, 1968. Opposite, above: *Art As Idea (As Ideal, Paragraph)*, 1966. Opposite, below: *Art as Idea (As Idea) Symbol*, 1967. All images courtesy: Monika Sprüth Philomene Magers, Cologne, Munich, London.

dialectical give-and-take between the artwork and the culture from which it emerges and seeks to alter, style is anathema for Kosuth. And he has often been critical of artists who have developed a style of conceptual art, rather than engaging in the process of developing an evolving and self-reflexive practice.

In the early 1980s Kosuth's use of language shifted from the construction of his own propositions to the appropriation of existing texts. Throughout the decade he worked on a number of projects that used Freud's writings. Taking Freud's works out of their 'natural' context, they became tools that helped highlight the ways in which meaning is generated. The goal of these projects was not to develop some new hermeneutical twist on standard interpretations of Freud's works, but to stage and explore how it is that meaning is constructed.

Kosuth has continued to follow this line of enquiry in recent years, using texts by Walter Benjamin and St. Augustine. Last summer, for a project entitled

The Language of Equilibrium, which took place on the island of San Lazzaro as a collateral event to the Venice Biennale, he borrowed the definition of the word 'water' as it appeared in the 1749 Armenian dictionary. The dictionary was compiled by Abbot Mekhitar of Sebastia, the founder of the Mekhitarian Order, a group of monks who, fleeing persecution in Constantinople in the 18th century, ended up living on the island. In a sprawling yellow neon text he juxtaposed the English and Italian counterparts, 'water' and 'acqua', in order to reveal the relationship of language to site and history. In a description that accompanied the project Kosuth wrote: 'Here, in this work, language becomes both an allegory and an actual result...'

This may be a good description of the role played by language throughout Kosuth's work, which has served as both a concrete fact and as a 'stage' through which to explore the production of meaning.

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