ALMINE RECH

Joseph Kosuth
Ex Libris J.-F. Champollion

Permanent Installation | Musée Champollion, Place des Ecritures, Figeac, France

'Ex libris J.-F. Champollion', 1991 — A work by Joseph Kosuth

Public commission, 1990 [Ministry of Culture, Delegation for Visual Arts, and City of Figeac].

At the foot of the museum, Joseph Kosuth created the Place des Écritures, whose ground is covered by an immense reproduction of the Rosetta Stone. Kosuth integrates the Rosetta Stone into the city's architecture in a way that evokes writing in its immediate relationship to a language, a city (Rosetta), and its natural environment (a terraced garden planted with papyrus, tamaris, and aromatic plants). This contextualization of language establishes a new relationship with words: here, three scripts — hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek — and two languages are laid out on the ground, giving the text a strange and unprecedented presence through which Kosuth questions the meaning of words and language. A representation of writing in urban space becomes a true metaphor for Champollion's work, who, in his time, dedicated his life to uncovering the hidden meaning of hieroglyphs and understanding their cultural and social context.

The Rosetta Stone (Granite, 196 BC) was discovered in Rashid (Rosetta) in 1799 by Lieutenant François-Xavier Bouchard, during Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798–1801). It was taken as war booty by the English army after the French defeat at Aboukir. Since then, the Rosetta Stone has been kept at the British Museum in London. This bilingual stele bears a decree known as the Decree of "Memphis" promulgated at the end of an assembly of the priests of Egypt. The text confirms the establishment of a cult in honor of the young Pharaoh Ptolemy V Epiphanes, in exchange for privileges granted to the temples. The decree is written in three scripts: hieroglyphs, the traditional script used for sacred and official texts; demotic, a cursive script used for daily transactions; and Greek, the language of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ruled Egypt at the time.

Thanks to his knowledge of Greek and Coptic, Jean-François Champollion was able to identify several signs: he identified the name Ptolemy in the demotic text and deciphered the corresponding hieroglyphic characters, inscribed in a cartouche. His work on the Rosetta Stone marked a key moment in the deciphering of hieroglyphs, but it was only after studying an enormous body of documents from various periods and types that, according to tradition, Champollion exclaimed on September 14, 1822: "I've got it!"

Pioneer of conceptual art and artistic installations, Joseph Kosuth started in the sixties to produce work based on language; creating installations for different approaches to art. His works invariably explore the role and meaning of language. In the course of 30 years, his study of art and language led to several installations, public commissions, and publications in Europe, the US and the Far East.
He has been present at five Documenta and four Venice Biennales where his work was shown in the Hungarian pavilion (1993).