



VISUAL ARTS

By Koon Yee-wan

We think, therefore we art 智力遊戲

Two very different artists demonstrate how to add the conceptual to the visual

One of the images of Joseph Kosuth's installation at Para/Site



“Art is the definition of bullshit” – 曾建華 (Tsang Kin-wah) declares in his latest

work at Para/Site in Sheung Wan. Tsang, an intense artist, is better known for his William Morris-style text and paper art made of swirls of swear words. His word-art has become his signature and can be found in public commercial spaces such as The Pawn restaurant, as well as more traditional art venues across the world. His previous venture in Hong Kong was in the summer when he was one of a group of young Hong Kong artists in the Louis Vuitton show at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. There was a time when I had hoped to see more experiments outside this oeuvre, but I have come to admire Tsang's persistence and, moreover, recognize how far he has journeyed since he first made his mark with his pattern and text series.

Tsang's current work is pushing new boundaries of words and art, not least because he is in dialogue with Joseph Kosuth, a pioneer of Conceptual Art in the 1970s. Kosuth is the elder statesman of the movement who, in his famous work, *One and Three Chairs* (MOMA in New York), juxtaposed a real chair with a photograph of a chair next to the dictionary definition of the word 'chair.' Conceptual Art was intended to speak with clarity and disrupt the idea of art being special or philosophically dense and difficult to penetrate. However, as with most radical thinking, clarity only leads to more questions, and the encrypted messages and words whisper the presence of a secret. What are we not getting? What are we missing? This ambiguity conjured by words makes us think of the artwork as embodying a key to a way of thinking and of doing things that we have somehow lost.

The title of Tsang and Kosuth's show is *If Someone Calls It Art, It's Kun(s)* and it is the first of a series of collaborations between artists from China and the West at Para/Site Art Space. The title hints at the power of naming. But it also hints at the problem of naming – if something is once named, does it make it so, or could



it be different (by removing or adding an “s”)? In our need to name art, do we turn to the script (the written form being the most concrete of words) as though meaning is embedded within the sequence of letters?

Philosophical dilemmas aside, what Kosuth also achieved in his earlier works was a viewing experience of art that was radically different. The white walls became part of a framing of works that created a hypnotic power as we stared, transfixed by the chair, the photo and the words. Tsang has inherited this ability to hypnotize his audience in his response to Kosuth’s “*L’essence de la rhétorique*

est dans l’allégorie” (Representation/ Interpretation). Opening the darkened doors of the Para/Site Art Space, you enter a room where a pulsating light bulb emits a dim light that goes on and off. A low thudding CD soundtrack adds to the aura of a womb-like space, and for a moment you forget that you are in the middle of Hong Kong.

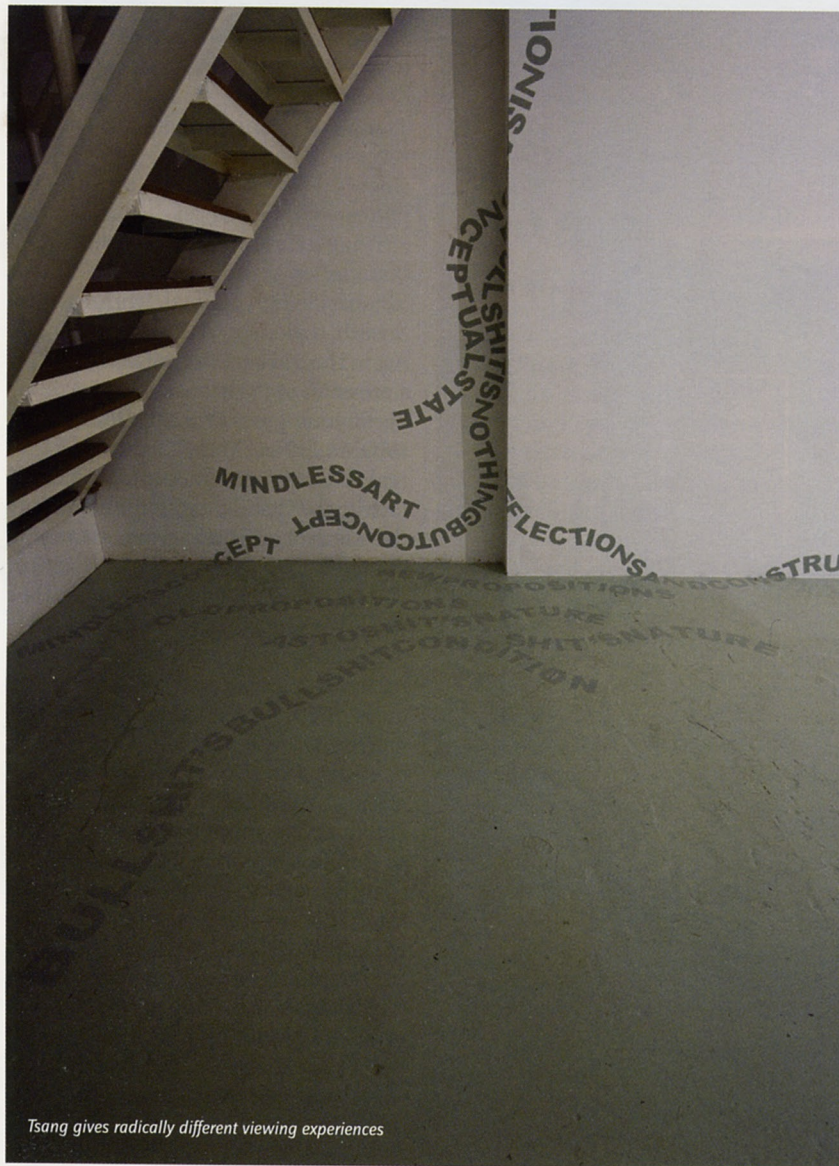
Across the ceiling, the floor and the walls are traces of words that creep like ivy in light grey. They suggest a science-fiction osmosis of round-shaped words creeping out of corners into the bare hard concrete room. The words, as forms, slink with silent

elegance, but as meanings, they are powerfully blunt and cruel – art is mindless, it is bullshit, it is kunt.

At the back of the gallery is a smaller room with silkscreen works by Joseph Kosuth citing words and images by famous writers, cartoonists and philosophers. Moving across silkscreen images of Foucault and then on to Dilbert is a little disconcerting for the viewer (are we reading appropriated words of famous thinkers, or laughing at pictorial abbreviations of life?) But ultimately, these works revisit Kosuth’s exploration of the space between what is language and what is art.

I am not sure if Tsang Kin-wah saw these works before embarking on his own light projection work, but they correspond very well with his own experiments. In one piece, Kosuth cites Theodore Adorno, who wrote about writing in his *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (great title). The passage reads: “The soundness of a conception can be judged by whether it causes one quotation to summon another. Where thought has opened up one cell of reality, it should, without violence by the subject, penetrate the next. It proves its relation to the object as soon as other objects crystallize around it. In the light it casts on its chosen substance, others begin to glow.” Through quoting Adorno, Kosuth has summoned Tsang, and in the transmittance of thought, you cannot help but believe that words have become crystallized as objects that glow.

Tsang Kin-wah, however, has always had a bit of the philosopher in him. His own jottings reveal his fondness for Nietzsche. Although it is easy to scoff at such reflections as affectations of cultural elitism often found in the art world, Tsang’s intense manner and his quiet uprightness bear witness to his genuine spiritual meanderings and goals. Nietzsche is less concerned with the question “What is art?” than with the question “Why art?” Nietzsche’s answer to “Why art?” is based on his view that



Tsang gives radically different viewing experiences

