

The art of Terence Koh

“Artist’s artist or the most popular artist?”



by Espen Johansen

Master thesis in Art History. University of Bergen. 2011

Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies



Just study me like yoo were a all white pure praying mantis scientist
studying a rare single evolution of dendrophylax lindenii that is me

Terence Koh

Acknowledgements

While working on this thesis I have received kind support, for which I am grateful.

I must start by thanking Terence Koh. During my stay in New York, Koh was accessible and generous with his time, and his openness has been of the utmost importance for my research. Inviting me to his home for an interview and granting me unrestricted access to his archive was incredibly inspiring, and left me with valuable information and extensive photo-documentation.

Thanks to: Javier Peres, who have patiently replied in length to my countless questions during the last year. His dedication has been encouraging. Philip and Shelley Fox Aarons for showing me artworks, catalogs and pamphlets by Terence Koh, and for sharing their thoughts and insights about his art. Tim Steiner, who described his experience working at the exhibition *God* in great detail, and Anneli Kustfält, who sent me a copy of her documentary about Terence Koh, (*Hey Koh Bunny, Hey Koh Bunny!*).

My supervisor, professor Sigrid Lien, has been an invaluable resource during my master degree, and our discussions have been greatly rewarding. Hilde Marie Pedersen kindly volunteered to read and comment my thesis, and her constructive criticism has been a tremendous help. Anett Haukås, for her moral support and comic relief during this process. Helga Nyman deserves my sincere appreciation for all her kindness and good advice during my master years.

My heartfelt gratitude to Irene for all her support.

Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
RESEARCH IN NEW YORK	4
ARTIST BIOGRAPHY	5
ALTER EGOS AND PUBLIC PERSONA	6
EXHIBITION HISTORY	7
PREVIOUS RESEARCH	8
CHAPTER DESCRIPTION	9
1. KOH'S EXHIBITION, <i>FLOWERS FOR BAUDELAIRE</i>	11
2. KOH'S ART – AN OVERVIEW	14
INTERNET AS AN ARTISTIC MEDIUM	14
ASIANPUNKBOY.COM	14
FACEBOOK	16
“I WANT TO BE YOUTUBE”	18
<i>MEIN TOD MEIN TOD</i> – PERES PROJECTS BERLIN	18
<i>GOD</i> – DE PURY & LUXEMBOURG	20
KOH'S PERFORMANCE IN THE GALLERY SPACE	23
<i>TERENCE KOH</i> – KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH	24
<i>TERENCE KOH</i> – WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART	27
A SUMMARY OF KOH'S ARTISTIC PRACTICE	28
3 KOH'S WORKS – AS PRESENTED IN THE CATALOG TEXTS	30
SEXUALITY AND QUEER CULTURE	30
SELF-REFERRING (SECRET) SUBJECT MATTER	33
NOTIONS OF THE SUBLIME	34
DIRECT BODILY EXPERIENCE	35
SYMBOLISM	36
GESAMTKUNSTWERK	37
SUMMARY	37
4 KOH'S WORK IN AN ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT	39
MODERNISM	40
<i>UNTITLED</i> . PREVERBAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH ABSTRACTION	40
THE POWERFUL IMPACT OF THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE	43
INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION, AND EXPRESSING INDIVIDUALITY	46
MINIMALISM	47
POSTMODERNISM	52
APPROPRIATION FROM POPULAR CULTURE	52
ECLECTICISM AND PERFORMANCE ART	55

ROSALIND KRAUSS' ESSAY "SCULPTURE IN THE EXPANDED FIELD"	57
FROM ENVIRONMENT TO INSTALLATION – BEYOND THE EXPANDED FIELD	58
CONCEPT AND OBJECT	60
THE BOWERY SCHOOL	63
SUMMARY	66
<u>5 ROMANTICISM AND EXPERIENCE – KOH'S WORKS IN AN ART THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE</u>	69
ROMANTICISM AS A CONTEMPORARY PHENOMENON – ROCK AESTHETICS	69
"ARTIST'S ARTIST OR THE MOST POPULAR ARTIST?"	70
VULGARITY	71
PANTHEISM	74
SEXUAL EXCESS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF	77
ART AND/OR LIFE	80
STIMULATING PARTICIPATION	80
TERENCE KOH AS AN OBJECT – FUSING ART AND LIFE	82
KOH AS A PASSIONATE SPECTATOR – DISTILLING "THE ETERNAL FROM THE TRANSITORY"	83
EXPERIENTIAL ART AND TRANSCENDENT ESCAPE	85
KOH'S ART AND THE NOTION OF THE SUBLIME	86
TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH TRANSGRESSION – BATAILLEAN AESTHETIC	89
KOH AS A ROMANTIC IDEALIST	95
KOH'S WORKS AS AESTHETIC EDUCATION – FRIEDRICH SCHILLER'S CONCEPT OF THE 'PLAY DRIVE'	95
EXPERIENTIAL AESTHETIC – JOHN DEWEY	99
<u>6 KOH AS A 'SEMIONAUT' – FLOWERS FOR BAUDELAIRE AND ZEN AESTHETIC</u>	102
WABI SABI – AN AESTHETIC OF IMPERMANENCE	102
'SEMIONAUT'	105
SUMMARY	108
<u>PICTURE LIST</u>	112
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	115
<u>NORWEGIAN ABSTRACT – NORSK SAMMENDRAG</u>	119

Introduction

In 2008 I saw the TV-documentary *Hey Koh Bunny, Hey Koh Bunny!*, by Anneli Kustfält for SVT, about the artist Terence Koh. I thought Koh came across as somewhat arrogant and vain, but I experienced his artworks as a stark contrast to the way he presented himself. The artworks were elegant and poetic, and I continued to ponder on his art afterwards. Intrigued by this apparent contrast, and frustrated that I could not really grasp the works, I continued my studies on Koh's work. The more I looked into Koh's universe, which in part exists online at his web pages, the more curious and fascinated I became. I realized that there is more than meets the eye, and that Koh is far more reflected and intelligent than the image of him usually projected in the media indicates. I had trouble finding insightful articles about his art and the ones I did find, almost without exceptions, centered on Koh as a celebrity, a fashion icon or the bad boy of the New York art scene.

In my opinion, Koh's artworks have not received the attention they deserve. Despite having exhibited at numerous prestigious institutions, little has been written about his art. This has fueled me to write a master thesis with an academic approach to a selected number of his exhibitions. Terence Koh considers an exhibition as a narrative,¹ and its constituting artworks can be perceived as interconnected. An exhibition might examine a theme or a concept, and every artwork is displayed in a fashion which is far from arbitrary. Inspired by this, I will largely discuss his exhibitions as totalities, and view the individual artworks in light of their overall exhibition context.

I will not disregard Terence Koh as an artist and a media figure in my approach, as his personality has such a strong presence in his artworks. But unlike the general medias' interest in Koh, mine is rooted in the observation that the way he presents himself might shed some light on how we perceive his art. His works are filled with private references as well as quotes from art history, and in some cases it is difficult to draw a line between where his performances ends, and where his public persona begins. His persona is in my opinion an intricate part of his artistic oeuvre.

¹ Obrist, Hans Ulrich (2009) "Terence Koh interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist", *Terence Koh 1980-2008 Love for Eternity*, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 136

As one of the things I wanted to examine was if, and to what extent, Koh's work and self-representation may be seen in part as a reaction to the New York art scene, I felt it necessary to get some perspective on this scene, by spending some time in New York. I also wanted to make up my own opinion about Koh, one that is not constructed by the media.

The purpose of this thesis is not to entrench Koh's work in a theoretical discourse. Instead I want to propose different strategies for interpretation, and discuss perspectives that can help us get a deeper understanding his artistic oeuvre. I hope to be able to produce some general insights into his artistic production by examining a few chosen exhibitions, with *Flowers for Baudelaire* as a core example. Because there is little available literature on Koh's art, I think it is necessary to begin by establishing a thorough framework for the following discussions. I will therefore examine Koh's art in relation to earlier artistic tendencies quite extensively. Not in order to write him into (art) history, but because by formally establishing his position within an art historical context, I simultaneously hope to reveal recurring elements and outline suitable theoretical topics for the subsequent discussion. Koh's art appear to resist intellectualization, by strongly appealing to emotional and sensuous faculties in the spectator. Koh's work echoes a romantic idealism, and I will examine this implication further by viewing his art in light of romantic theory. Koh's extensive appropriation will be discussed in light of Nicolas Bourriaud's theory about the 'semionaut'.

Research in New York

The density of artists in New York is extraordinary high. The art scene is very vital, and there are hundreds of galleries in the city. During my New York month I went to galleries mainly in the Lower East Side and Chelsea. Terence Koh is often considered to be a part of the Bowery School,² an informal label for a few chosen artists from the Lower East Side area, most of whom display their work in the more prestigious galleries in the Chelsea district or abroad. These two districts differ in how they display the artworks. In Lower East Side, the galleries are usually former shops or small businesses turned into galleries. Hence the exhibition space is normally quite small. In Chelsea the buildings were originally used for storage and

² "The Bowery School" takes its name from Bowery Street in New York. I will write more about this group at a later point in my thesis.

industrial purposes, so the spaces are much larger. The Lower East Side galleries often exhibit less established younger artists, and the atmosphere there is to a large extent based on the youthful hip crowd visiting the openings. There are so many galleries here as well, that people can (and some do) go from opening to opening, seemingly just for the free beer and the good conversations. Each opening is a spectacle, which is hardly exclusive to the Lower East Side. In Chelsea the galleries are more like the institutional white cube, and they don't have the DIY-attitude that one finds in the Lower East Side – even though the openings there are also quite spectacular.

As earlier mentioned, an even more imperative objective for my research was to get in touch with Koh and to interview him. I also wanted to visit his studio archive. Luckily I achieved both of these objectives. Koh sometimes expresses himself in a rather cryptic manner in interviews, and is known for giving contradictory answers. It was important for me to get a personal experience of his self-construction by meeting him in person. Koh was generous with his time, and invited me to his apartment for an interview, as well as to different public events taking place during my visit. His studio archive contains a massive amount of information that I gained access to, including hundreds of interviews he has done, as well as documentation and photography about exhibitions etc. Koh also arranged for me to meet with the art philanthropists Philip and Shelley Fox Aarons, who have followed Koh since the beginning, and own several of his artworks. They willingly shared their knowledge and insight of the art scene in New York, as well as their thoughts about Terence Koh and his art. I am also grateful to Javier Peres, who has enthusiastically corresponded with me per email during this entire process.

Artist Biography

Terence Koh does not always tell the truth. He is especially secretive about his background, and his biographical details are to a large extent unknown. Terence Koh was born in 1978, in Singapore. According to himself, he moved to Canada when he was 13 years old.³ As a child he had always been drawing, and eventually he enrolled at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver. He studied architecture, but had troubles with the mandatory math courses in the program, and he wasn't comfortable working in collaboration with other

³ Obrist, op.cit., 132

people; working under them.⁴ Still in Canada, he started a queer publication in 2001 under the name asianpunkboy, and simultaneously started the webpage www.asianpunkboy.com to promote his magazine. The magazine was handmade, and depicted gay imagery from the Internet, as well as poems and drawings, or to use his own words: “[the pages were] filled with an infusion of gentle surfaces, dissident eruptions, haikus, mapped pictures, dirty illustrations, moist cum, decadent artificial words, love and all manner of faggy filth.”⁵

He contacted his hero, and fellow gay artist, Bruce LaBruce to have him contribute to his magazine, and thus attracted the attention of the art dealer Javier Peres.⁶ Philip Aarons had also been made aware of asianpunkboy, and commissioned Koh’s first work. The idea of this work was originally to produce a book, but instead it ended up as a life-size mirrored coffin, containing a number of small boxes filled with different curious white-painted objects. With the money Koh made from the commissioned work, *untitled (my coffin)*, he was able to move to New York. In 2003 he had his first exhibition at Peres Projects, Javier Peres’ gallery in Los Angeles, called *the Whole Family*. He displayed white sculptures and black and white photographs printed on lavender paper, in an all white space where the floor was completely covered with a thick layer of flour. Koh considers this exhibition the beginning of his artistic career.

Alter egos and public persona

Koh used the alter ego asianpunkboy for *the Whole Family* exhibition in Los Angeles in 2003. He explains his pseudonym simply like this: “I did asianpunkboy because I was still an Asian punk boy.”⁷ Asianpunkboy was also the author of the magazines and the architect behind the elaborate maze-like website, but eventually Koh outgrew the name, and stopped using it. “I didn’t want to be called asianpunkboy at thirty-five or forty. A name is important. I didn’t want people to call me asianpunkboy. I wanted to be called Terence Koh.”⁸ Even though one might say asianpunkboy is more sexually explicit, it is still important to look for the subtleties in the works signed asianpunkboy as well, and one should not exaggerate the distinction between asianpunkboy and Terence Koh.

⁴ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

⁵ Peres Projects, press release for the Whole Family, URL: <http://peresprojects.com/exhibit-press/4/> [12.01.11]

⁶ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010.

⁷ Obrist, op.cit., 149

⁸ *ibid.*, 149

The alter ego kohbunny became asianpunkboy predecessor, but Koh did not use this name as frequent. He created a new webpage, www.kohbunny.com, but it seems that asianpunkboy hijacked it, because on the front page there is a link back to asianpunkboy.com, and a note where asianpunkboy is asking: “will you visit my website www.asianpunkboy.com instead of this one Koh Bunny is EVIL.”⁹ Koh is obviously having fun with these two personas, and this humorous grievance is interesting because it shows Koh constructing different identities and acting them out online.

Terence Koh is frequently in the media. As he himself expresses it, he is “photographed more often than a male model.”¹⁰ Although, as already mentioned, the attention he receives from these magazines is usually for his extravagant lifestyle, extensive wardrobe or his attendance to celebrity parties. It is quite safe to say that Koh loves the glamour and attention, but he treats these magazines and journalists in a seemingly ironic way. As earlier mentioned, it is hard to draw a line where his performance ends and his public persona begins. As he is commonly described as an artist working in accordance to the theory of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, this is a legitimate problem when trying to define his artistic production. He is known for giving cryptic, humorous and sometimes, quite frankly, absurd answers in interviews. He rarely gives personal interviews, and he told Hans Ulrich Obrist that he occasionally answers email interviews in a drunken haze- answering them as quickly as he can.¹¹ If seen in extension to his performance works, one could claim that he is portraying himself, or rather the artist, in an ironic fashion. Maybe fuelled by the myth of the misunderstood (genius) artist, he constructs a facade from which he can hide from the tabloid media, and thus regain control of his media generated image. I will return to this at a later point.

Exhibition History

Koh regards “the Whole Family” exhibition from 2003 the breakthrough of his artistic career. Since then his works have been exhibited at museums, kunsthallen and biennials around the world. To name a few important solo exhibitions: *Gone, Yet Still* (2005) for the Wiener Secession, showed stacked glass vitrines showcasing different white painted objects in a room

⁹ <http://kohbunny.com/> (26.10.2007) [04.11.2010]

¹⁰ N/A (2008) “Terence Koh talks to Tim Steiner”, *God Terence Koh*, De Pury & Luxembourg

¹¹ Obrist, Hans Ulrich – interview with Terence Koh for *Love for Eternity* catalogue, quote not printed in the catalogue, but recorded and published on www.theterencekohshow.com

designed as a living space. Koh had the gallery turned into a space of self-imposed exile, thinking that once inside, he would never leave. His death room was on top of a staircase, with the words “Gone, Yet Still, i lie in bed, watching the stars” written in pencil on the wall.

While Koh was preparing an exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich (2006) and at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2007), he realized that both of them should be thematically connected. Koh regards the Whitney exhibition as an epilogue to the Zürich show. In Zürich Koh displayed all-white artworks, spaciouly installed in six different rooms. Despite the all-white theme, the rooms looked very different. One room was practically empty, containing nothing more than a floor covered with flour and bird droppings as well a small white shelf, while the next room was filled to the brim with 1184 stacked glass vitrines. The epilogue at the Whitney Museum exhibited only a blinding bright light-installation; emitting a 4.000-watt light that made everything and everyone cast long shadows, visible even from the street outside the museum. Next to the blinding light source, a small, hardly visible, lead sculpture resided.

Koh’s exhibition, *God*, at de Pury & Luxembourg in Zürich (2007), consisted of three black rooms, only lit by pulsating strobe lights. The first room contained two sets of twelve sculptures, reminiscence of tall anthills, with human arms reaching out at the top. In the second room a two-faced sculpture on a tall pedestal resided, cast from Koh. The third room housed a sculptural installation, depicting a dark interpretation of the last supper where the feast consisted of two identical men in the mold of Koh.

In 2008, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (MUSAC), held a mid-life retrospect of Terence Koh, titled *Love for Eternity*. This large exhibition included many of the previously mentioned work, such as the vitrines, the upside-down shelves, as well as the last supper-installation from *God*.

Important group exhibitions include the 2004 Whitney Biennial in New York, *USA Today* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (2006), *Materialized: New American Video and...* at Bergen Kunsthall in 2008, the Venice Biennial in 2009 at the Nordic Pavilion, and *Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (2010).

Previous research

Few publications about Koh’s art have been written. Art magazines occasionally write about him, but none of these texts have so far been in-depth articles about his artworks. Very

knowledgeable curators and art historians have however written catalog texts accompanying his exhibitions, and these catalogs form the basis of the literature I am using to describe and analyze the exhibitions. These texts describe Koh's exhibitions, and his extensive use of references from religion, mythology, and (gay-) subculture as well as how he deals with existentialistic topics such as love, life, death, youth and decay. The curators Beatrix Ruf, Shamim M. Momin, and Norman Rosenthal are amongst the most important contributors to the available literature on Terence Koh.

Chapter description

Starting from a description of the exhibition *Flowers for Baudelaire*, I will throughout this thesis try to examine Koh's oeuvre, and to discuss frequently evoked themes and traits of his art. This exhibition is quite symptomatic for Koh's work, and includes recurring elements from his artistic production. The first chapter will consist of a purely formal presentation of this exhibition, as a starting point to raise new questions regarding how we can understand this work.

The second chapter sets out to view *Flowers for Baudelaire* in light of previous exhibitions, highlighting recurring elements and themes. As mentioned, since Koh regards his exhibitions as a narrative, I will focus on the exhibition as a whole, instead of looking at the artworks isolated. The empiric material will be three solo exhibitions: *God* at de Pury & Luxembourg in Zürich, *Terence Koh* at Kunsthalle Zürich and *Terence Koh*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. I will also examine the performance *Mein Tod Mein Tod*, held at Peres Projects in Berlin, and discuss facets of his Internet endeavor, such as the website asianpunkboy.com. These examples were chosen because they give representational view of the wide array of elements and mediums that Koh applies in his art. I think Koh's websites are important because his exploration of the Internet as an artistic medium is highly experimental and pioneering work. Regardless, this aspect of Koh's artistic practice has been largely overlooked.

Chapter three will focus on the catalog texts. Examining how Koh is discussed and presented in the catalogs and which aspects the authors accentuate will be valuable information for the following discussions. Even though there is little available research on Koh's art, the numerous exhibition catalogs contain interesting texts on several subjects.

The fourth chapter will compare Koh's artworks with previous movements, in order to outline how his work can be related to art historical tendencies. This ground for comparison

starts with high modernism or abstract expressionism, an artistic tendency that marks a point when New York advanced as the art capital of the world. Since Koh is a New York-based artist, this seems like a reasonable starting point. Other momentous tendencies that succeeded the abstract expressionists will also be discussed in relation to Koh's production.

Chapter five will examine Koh's work by applying theoretical perspectives, which can give a deeper understanding on his art. I will view Koh's works in light of contemporary romanticism, starting from Robert Pattison's discussion about romanticism and rock aesthetics. By examining the theories of Georges Bataille, Friedrich Schiller and John Dewey, I hope to produce a possible theoretical understanding of the defining traits of Koh's oeuvre.

In the sixth and last chapter, I will attempt to summarize my discussions, and present some final thoughts on *Flowers for Baudelaire* and on Koh's art in general. His extensive appropriation of symbols and cultural references will be discussed using Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the 'Semionaut'.

1. Koh's exhibition, *Flowers for Baudelaire*

In 2008 Koh exhibited 46 paintings in a studio in New York. The paintings were close to being identical, except for difference in scale. They were white, and had a coarse structured surface. The size of the canvases ranged from a square inch to 48" x 60", and they were installed close apart on two white walls. We notice that the artworks are no ordinary paintings. They reveal a process of applying adhesive materials onto the canvas, giving them a flaky surface in random patterns.



Picture 1. Terence Koh. *Untitled (Flowers for Baudelaire) III*. 2008. Sugar and corn syrup on found canvas. 48" x 60"

Courtesy of Peres Projects.

They appear as monochrome moonlike landscapes, and Koh have experimented with this aesthetical approach in all of the 46 untitled works. Through alterations in scale, the works create different visual impacts. The smallest one, of a modest square inch, can be experienced as an item or a commodity. The larger canvases are more inviting, allowing the viewer to examine the vast surface. Reading the material list, we realize that the canvases are coated in corn syrup, confectionary sugar and a titanium-based paint. These are unconventional

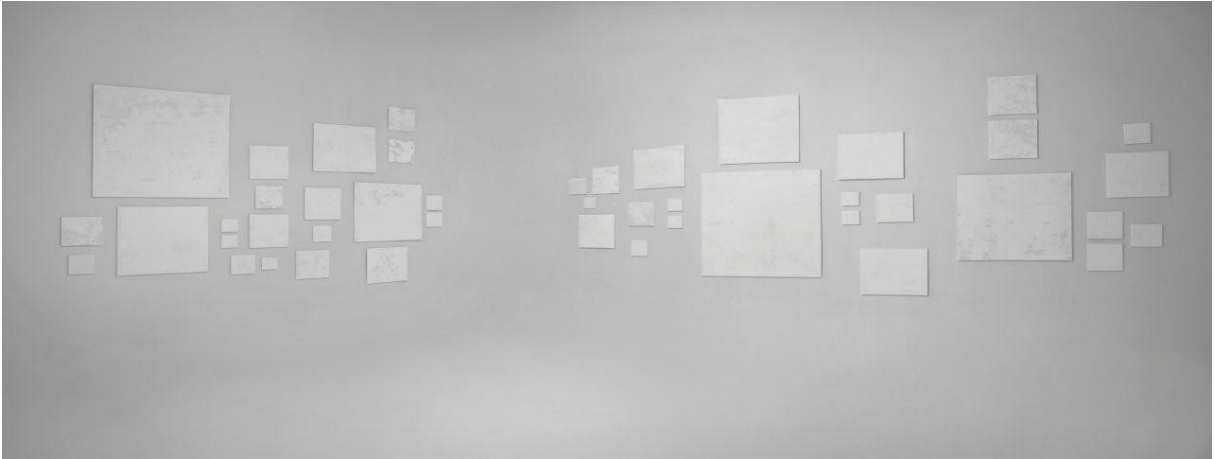
materials in art production, and they will probably not be able to sustain over time. Koh's engagement with non-durable works in a commercial market is interesting, as these will decompose over time, losing more and more of their structured surfaces. Koh revealed to the visiting crowd that the paintings were edible. This statement alters one's perception of the exhibition, as it suggests a direct bodily and sensuous approach to his paintings (over a coolly intellectual interpretation). The comparison to food caused the smallest painting to resemble a caramel.

Still, because of the similarity of the paintings, it is more natural to perceive them as interconnecting elements constituting one installation, rather than as separate artworks. When seen as one, they occupy a large part of one's field of vision, and together they form a visually striking constellation that obeys no apparent logic. The angles between floor and the walls were rounded, suppressing one's sense of space.¹² When erasing the corners in the exhibition space, the white paintings appear to float in nothingness. They emit a kind of calming transcendence, and Koh's request for visitors to remove his or her shoes, helped create an intimate and almost sacred atmosphere in the hazy room.

Although the paintings give an immediate visual impact, they prove harder to decipher. We are left with several questions. What does the exhibition mean? There are numerous ways we can try to interpret the exhibition, and through miniscule gestures, the paintings reveal several layers of references. Perhaps it is sufficient to appreciate them as delightful and beautiful objects, but the title encouraged a more analytical approach. The title *Flowers for Baudelaire* suggests homage to the French poet Charles Baudelaire, being wordplay of the title of his book, *Flowers of Evil* (original title *Les Fleurs Du Mal*) from 1857. We are encouraged to compare Koh and Baudelaire, and the similarities between the two artists are noticeable. Both of them belonged to an urban, bohemian scene, but at the same time they both express some kind of alienation from this environment. Baudelaire treats themes such as prostitution, homosexuality, drug-abuse, love, life and death, in his poems. One might wonder to what extent these themes are relevant for *Flowers for Baudelaire*. The title also alludes that the paintings are flowers. They can be read as white flowers, similar to the water lilies in Monet's large paintings. Koh describes his exhibition like "white paintings floating in a white space, like white perfect lilies floating in a perfect white pond"¹³.

¹² The exhibition space is the deceased photographer Richard Avedon's former studio.

¹³ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010



Picture 2. Terence Koh. Overview of *Flowers for Baudelaire*, showing all forty-six canvases. 2008. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin, Los Angeles.

We are left with many options when we want to pursue the subtle references in Koh's exhibition. A good starting point might be to see *Flowers for Baudelaire* in relation to the rest of his artistic production. In doing so we will be more suited to reveal recurring themes, and we will have a better understanding of Koh's artistic practice. Let us start by looking at a few chosen solo exhibitions.

2. Koh's art – an overview

Internet as an artistic medium

Internet is a strong presence in contemporary society. Most artists, however, have limited their use of Internet professionally to representations online: usually an informative webpage, possibly with a few photos, exhibition history and links to press reviews. Terence Koh is exploring its potential as an artistic (social) medium, and has been for some time. Although he is not the first artist to experiment with the Internet, his engagement is still pioneering work. His artistic Internet enterprise includes several web pages, a series of YouTube-videos as his facebook-account. Since his Internet work to some extent marks the beginning of Koh's artistic career, but still is usually overlooked, I will start by examining this facet of his oeuvre.

Asianpunkboy.com

Terence Koh started the webpage [asianpunkboy.com](http://www.asianpunkboy.com) simultaneously as he published his first magazine, *Asianpunkboy 1 – The Empty City*, in 2001. Though he has not publicized magazines the last years, he still regularly updates his websites. This page can be regarded as an individual project, and not just as an archive of his previous work. It contains much more than republished works and material, and a lot of the things he uploads to his site do not really exist elsewhere.

When entering the site, <http://www.asianpunkboy.com>, one is greeted with an upside-down mirrored bunny, and the handwritten name [asianpunkboy](http://www.asianpunkboy.com)¹⁴. The white logo stands out from the entirely black background. The logo is a link to the content of the page. Two flash animations depicting two black bunnies constructed from smeared paint twirls constantly on either side of the page. The color scheme here is opposite to the first page, black bunnies on a white background. The center is a picture that is changed frequently. Under the picture two links move from right to left on the screen, one says "TODAE IS 88 cookie monster dae", while the other says "pea is for pea soup." The first link is to YouTube, showing the video *Terence Koh Show – 88 pearls*, where Koh and the artist Lady Gaga are doing a performance

¹⁴ Note that my description is dated back to Tuesday 2th of November 2010, and that the webpage frequently changes its layout and content.

counting 88 pearls. The other link leads you to Koh's studio manager's email address. In the upper right corner, the following links are presented in small letters on a light yellow background: "homies", "holes", "peep", "chit", "tour", "shop" and "club."

"Homies" leads back to the starting page. "Holes" leads to a huge selection of links that rearranges itself each time you enter the page. "Peep" shows videos, some from exhibitions or performances, some with seemingly random content. "Chit" shows a picture of a large electrical sex-toy, with the words "something soon soon soon soon soon soon soon" written under it. "Tour" shows posters and invitations to previous exhibitions and shows by Koh, like performances, exhibitions, poetry readings etc. all the way back to 2003 and his *For the Whole Family*-exhibition at Peres Projects. "Shop" shows items for purchase, such as drawings, t-shirts, small limited-edition sculptures as well as his stained underwear. "Club" leads to a forum where people can post comments.

Many artists have a website, and most of these look very much alike. These sites present banners such as biography, exhibition history and press, and normally they don't bear any traces of the artist's involvement (nor any artistic involvement). This is not the case concerning Koh. Much of the layout and content on his website is quite ordinary as well, but his website have a non-professional and more personal look. When browsing through asianpunkboy.com one might get the feeling that Koh does everything himself. This is not necessarily the case, but it becomes evident that this is not just a standardized product. What is quite unordinary on the other hand, is the section "holes." Under this section Koh presents a myriad of links, in no logical order. The site even rearranges the links every time one enters the site, so one get the feeling that there are infinite links to explore. There is no theme in the content either, and the links lead to drawings, notes, personal photographs, catalogue texts, gay pornography as well as his poems. It feels impossible to grasp the content, and by clicking aimlessly at the different links isolated fragments appear. In a voyeuristic manner, you can spy on Koh, and get to know him through the fragments he publishes online. One link shows Koh's shopping budget, another shows pictures of his long-time boyfriend sleeping in their apartment. One link leads to pictures of nude young men, while another reveals a philosophical text by curator Shamim M. Momin. The array of links seems contrasting, mixing high and low culture and public and private pictures. Just when you are about to loose interest you find something exciting, and since the links rearranges itself every time you visit you do not know if you will find it again, and you certainly do not know if you will ever be able to explore the site in its entirety. The title "holes" can refer to rabbit holes, and to the

novel, *Alice in Wonderland*. We are tempted to explore the rabbit holes, curious to where they might lead us.

Koh considers Internet to be an important medium for artists to explore. His website is an experiment and a study of the medium in itself, and appears as a product in process. In an interview, Koh said: “I want to combine my facebook, my twitter and my asianpunkboy into a single website, because I want to be the first 24/7 artist.”¹⁵ He does not only experiment through his webpage, but also with facebook and twitter. Let us view some examples from the rest of his Internet endeavors.

Facebook

Facebook provides effortless communication and helps people stay in touch. It is a means to instantly reach out to whoever follows your page, and this kind of effective mass communication is probably intriguing to Koh. Despite producing very powerful visual works, he is also highly conceptual:

My work is not just that which exists in exhibitions [...] I make my money by exhibiting sculptures and because I sell physical objects. But I feel just as strongly about links that's on my facebook and twitter account, and my asianpunkboy. I wish that it was the case right now – but it's not the case – that the reason I'm existing, would pay for me being able to feed myself, and to put a roof over my head. Not just by selling physical sculptures, and physical things. I don't think I'm the first, because Duchamp and Warhol were able to sell the idea. But to be able to sell your existence; I would like to do that. I want to be able to post something on facebook and for it to be part of my living, and that it would help me pay for my rent, like selling a physical object itself.¹⁶

Koh posts notes, diary pages, poems and pictures on facebook, and people are free to comment. Much of his published material consists of comments and thoughts as well as photographs from of his everyday life. It appears that Koh use facebook simply as something to think with – as can be seen in these two texts, posted the 23rd and 24th of September, 2010:

¹⁵ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010.

¹⁶ Ibid.

```

deer bunny

why dee constant need to self-promote

reveal fav youtube vids

get photographed foo mags

doo 8 interviews a week

update facebook endless

why when i can instead

bee a mystery

bee a mysterious human

or a mysterious alien

or a mysterious bunny

bee bunny ghost angel

luv
tea.23rdsept'10.?

i hereby declare that i am no longer a fame whore

love
tea.24thsept'10.nyc.

```

Picture 3. Posted on Terence Koh's facebook-wall the 23rd September 2010

Picture 4. Posted on Terence Koh's facebook-wall the 24th September 2010.

How people perceive him is an important issue for Koh, and these texts were published during fashion week in New York, where Koh experienced an intense media presence. Koh is a darling to the fashion world, and is often interviewed and photographed in fashion magazines. Another element he posted on facebook, was an excerpt from his calendar.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● threeASFOUR ● MAX KANSAS city Opening/Dinner ● No.6 Anniversary/Rachel Chandler DJ ● AnOther Magazine NYC Dinner & Party ● 10th Anniversary of STYLE 	<p>7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Peggy Noland Fashion Show c/o THE HOLE ● Dinner Chinatown Brasserie 	<p>8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● LANVIN install ● Chanel Store Grand Open Party ● Chanel Dinner ● Boom Boom Room Grand Opening Secret Party 	<p>9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● FIT Karl Lagerfeld Luncheon ● TELFAR S/S2011: FORMale Exhibition ● Terence Koh for LANVIN ● MOMA STORE SOHO hosted by Klaus ● Meet Grace Coddington @Prada ● Dan Colen Dinner @ Balthazzars ● THE HOLE PARTY ● Dasha Zhukova for POP Iggy Pop Party ● Opening Ceremony's Post Flea Dance 	<p>10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Patrik Ervell ● Nicolaus Petrou ● Alexander Wang Show ● United Bamboo? ● Kim Jones Birthday Dinner Party! ● Alexander Wang Party ● Purple Party - Le Bain 	<p>11</p>
<p>14</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Thomas Dozol Opening ● Jeremy Scott Show ● BORTOLAMI Show Opening ● Roman Singner Swiss Institute ● Bortolami Dinner ● Proenza Schouler ● Jeremy Scott Afterparty ● The Last Magazine Party 	<p>15</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jeremy Laing SS11 Runway Show - Thursday September 16 at 11am ● PACE 50 Years ● Whitney of the Future Party ● Pace Dinner On Highline ● Dom Perignon Dinner ● Gwen Stefani's Party 	<p>16</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● New Museum Party i'm hosting? 	<p>17</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hole Opening! ● IO Wright "Breeding" - Solo show at Fuse Gallery 	<p>18</p>	

Picture 5. Excerpt from Koh's calendar, published 14th September 2010, during Fashion Week.

Koh thus exposes fragments of his personal life, granting people a partial access to his world and his thoughts. However, it must be noted that the lines between fact and fiction are not always clearly visible. In one sense we can understand his approach as a democratic gesture, as a way to make art (or the artist) more accessible. But at the same time his approach comes

across as deeply conceptual, as Koh sees his project in continuance of what Duchamp started when he exhibited his ready-made object, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

“I want to be YouTube”

The Terence Koh Show is available online on YouTube as well as on a dedicated website www.theterencekohshow.com. Here, Koh interviews artists, curators, friends etc. Hans Ulrich Obrist, Sir Norman Rosenthal, Marina Abramović and Lady Gaga are some of the people appearing on the show.

“I want to be multimedia. I want to be everything. I want to be YouTube. [...] No one has been able to break like Warhol into cinema, into a pop song. My favorite movies ever are the three-minute screen tests. That’s why I’m doing the talk show. It’s almost like the reverse of the Warhol screen tests. [...] I just wanted to keep it to three five minutes, something you can put on YouTube¹⁷”

An urge to break the barrier between the art world and the real world thus seems to drive Terence Koh, and to fuel his fascination exploring the Internet as an artistic medium. Koh’s experimental work, using Internet as an artistic medium is something most people ignore, possibly because this kind of art production cannot be regarded as a physical artwork. Also since it is somewhat of a pioneering work, maybe most people have not been able to grasp and describe what Koh is actually doing. The implications of Koh’s Internet engagement will be further discussed in the chapter regarding theory of aesthetics.

***Mein Tod Mein Tod* – Peres Projects Berlin**

Mein tod mein tod was a performance at Peres Projects, Berlin in 2005. A white, monolithic sculpture was placed in the middle of the gallery space, underneath a rough lit hole in the ceiling. Engraved in the sculpture was “TERENCE KOH”, “21 AUGUST 1979” and “4 SEPTEMBER 2005”, as well as an engraving at the bottom, almost impossible to see, “finperia tri triciusse.”¹⁸ The performance started when two young boys entered, wearing nothing but white underwear, covered in a white substance. They carried long white staffs, coated with the same icing as the boys. The first boy’s staff had a coral at the end, appearing

¹⁷ Obrist, op.cit., 148

¹⁸ Koh often speak in his own invented language. This text is probably in that language, and it’s meaning remain a secret.

like a cluster of small branches, with bells attached to it, as well as a small knob on the handle. The second boy's staff had an eight-sided shape¹⁹ hanging from a phallic-like protrusion, a knob at the bottom and a small bowl on the handle. Two packs of stuffed bunnies, tied together with thread, were dragged behind the young boys. They walked in silence and slowly positioned themselves next to the sculpture. From the small bowl on the staff, the boy sprinkled the tombstone with a thick white liquid. Six cloaked figures entered, chanting "Koh" over and over. They wore white ponchos with hoods, with a long veil covering their faces. The outfits looked like cross between a bridal dress and something an occult high priest might wear. They walked in single line, eventually stopping behind the tombstone. As they chanted, the two semi-nude boys start to nibble on the tombstone. The tombstone was organic, and chunks were broken off and eaten. The two boys leave, followed by the hooded figures.



Picture 6. Terence Koh. *Mein Tod Mein Tod*, 2005. Mixed media sculpture, wood, sugar, water, icing (for tombstone) Mixed media sculpture, wood, string, metal, paint, dehydrated vegetable matter, coated in sugar and icing (for staffs) 130 x 56 x 30 cm (51.2 x 22 x 11.8 inches) (for tombstone)

After some time, the eight young boys reemerged, this time in their underwear, covered in white icing. The first boy held up a staff, with an attached triangle on it. The other seven boys carried trays of white food, with two white balls hanging from their necks. They stopped in front of the tombstone, kneeled with their food trays, stood up and waited in silence. The DJ started playing a song by Joy Division, "Decades", and the boys left, leaving the food trays behind. The party started.

The performance appeared as a holy ritual, a death ceremony with both religious and sexual connotations. The flyer advertising the event promised, "DJS PERFORMING TILL YOU DIE." The performance did not end when they boys

¹⁹ The octagon is a derivate from the ancient Sumerian word for God. It can also connote the eight-spoke wheel of law from Buddhism, symbolizing the eight-fold path leading to the cessation of suffering and the achievement of self-awakening.

left. The food was left behind for the participants to eat, and the death ceremony continued as a party in the gallery space, where the guests also took bites off the tombstone.

God – de Pury & Luxembourg

Koh's exhibition *God* was displayed at the gallery de Pury & Luxembourg in Zürich in 2007. This exhibition consisted of three rooms, and the entire gallery space was pitch black. Once you entered the gallery space, the total blackness was disrupted by a pulsating strobe light and classical music played loudly over the speakers. Maneuvering in the dark rooms with the flashing light was challenging, and the spectator could not immediately see how to get to the rest of the exhibition. The walls were coated in black plastic.

The first room was filled with 24 sculptures. The sculptures looked organic, and resembled tall anthills, with a blackened hand reaching out of it. The room appeared as a hive or a crypt, and the sculptures could be interpreted as cocoons. It was indeterminate whether they were alive or dead. One might get an eerie feeling that they could spring to life any second, and the strobe light caused an illusion that they vibrated. But at the same time the hands seemed powerless in their desperate attempt to reach out of their entrapment. Their anthropomorphic character was strengthened by the fact that they had approximately the same size as a grown human being. Given the exhibition title, one might wonder; where is their god? Bright light sources at eye-level made the sculptures cast long shadows that hit the plastic on the walls, mirroring them. It was hard to sense the boundaries of the walls in the room, and the installation of sculptures mimicked an enchanted forest. The sculptures were covered in fog from countless incense sticks that were attached to them. The smell was described as incredibly strong; so strong that one's eyes became watery.

Behind a thick plastic curtain, a two-faced sculpture resided. The head, which sat on a high pedestal, had a face front and back, in the mold of Terence Koh. The mouths were wide open, making a tunnel from one to the other. The head had long antennae-like horns from its temples. The title of an exhibition by the artist Dash Snow, Koh's close friend, comes to mind: *God Spoiled a Perfect Asshole When He Put Teeth in Yer Mouth*. This sculpture had no teeth. The sexual connotations were further supported by the material list, which included "Eros lube, artist's saliva, cum of the artist and others."²⁰ In the exhibition catalog, Rosenthal

²⁰ Peres Projects – Terence Koh – Selected works <http://www.peresprojects.com/artist-works/terence-koh/3484/> [16.11.2010]

describes the antennas as arms clutching the head and pulling it upwards,²¹ while Ben Reardon describes them as penises.²² Taking into consideration Koh's fixation with bunnies, they could also be interpreted as long ears.



Picture 7. Terence Koh. 2007. This sculpture, *God*, was placed on a high pedestal and looked like a two-faced figure of Koh, with dramatic alterations in regard to its mouth and ears. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin, Los Angeles.

It is hard not to speculate on the relationship between the stalagmite-like sculptures in the previous room and the two-faced figure, titled *God*. It is not evident whether he is their

²¹ Rosenthal, Norman (2007) "Terence Koh – God", *God Terence Koh*, de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, unnumbered pages

²² Reardon, Ben (2008) "untitled", *God Terence Koh*, de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, unnumbered pages

master, or just another tormented soul. Although seeing as the sculpture is placed on a high pedestal, gives it some authority.

Light was an important element in the third and last room as well. A blinding, flashing light took some getting used to, and after a while an installation appeared. A life-size sculptural installation depicting the last supper became visible. Twelve disciples were sitting next to Jesus on one side of a long table. Similar to how Leonardo da Vinci painted this scene, Koh's installation captured the essence by freezing a single dynamic moment of the feast. The twelve apostles looked like scorched corpses; just skeletons, covered in a thick black substance that could resemble burned flesh, was left of them. Curiously their ears were intact, though blackened. Despite their condition, they were all sitting at the table. Their death must have hit them instantly; similar to how the unsuspecting people of Pompeii were cast in molten lava, Koh's Apostles are petrified in dynamic gestures. Another explanation is that although they were mere bones, they were not necessarily deceased, but continued to exist as living dead. In both cases, they were interacting with each other through their gestures. On and around the table were bottles of cognac, jägermeister, sake, beer, and on the floor one could spot plastic cups, cigarette butts and shattered glass.

The Jesus-figure in the middle was almost entirely hidden underneath a thick layer of tar-like substance. Only his hands were revealed. His chest was pierced, leaving a large hole. Two sculptures were laying on the table, in the mold of Koh's body. Jesus' hands rested on their foreheads, in a gesture that suggest ownership. The naked sculptures on the table had had their groins coarsely chiseled away, leaving nothing but a crater.

The whole installation was very theatrical, especially since the sculptures were life-sized. The theatrical term *mise-en-scène*, a term describing the arrangement of scenery, has frequently been used to describe Koh's installations. It becomes evident why.



Picture 8. Terence Koh. *God*, 2007. Mixed media installation – twelve found human skeletons, wax, sugar, sake, absinthe, cognac, champagne, Eau d'Orange Verte by Hermès, artist's whispers, artist's cum, artist's piss. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin, Los Angeles

An interesting and shocking element in this exhibition that was not easily visible was the fact that Koh used ants in the sculptures. In the material lists it states that ants resided in the Jesus-figure as well as the stalagmite sculptures. The material list triggered the observers to locate the ants, and knowing that they were there changed one's perception of the exhibition. A physical link between the sculpture of Jesus and the two Kohs was known but unseen. An ant colony was placed inside Jesus, so that they could expand and enter the sculpture of the two Koh's, devouring him from within.²³ This emphasized the connection between the three sculptures, and the relation between Jesus and Koh. The ants connote many different and contrasting meanings, and they animated the sculptures they resided in. Ants are societal insects that live in a rigid organized society. They act without question, like Zen-monks, and govern order and harmony. At the same time little is more chaotic than an anthill, and there is something unmistakably repulsive about these insects. They thrive where there is decomposition, and at the same time as they animated the sculptures, they also connote decay. This contrast is equally fascinating as it is eerie. Visitors described that the chaotic atmosphere in the anthill-room, made the last supper-scene seem harmonious and peaceful.²⁴

Koh's performance in the gallery space

In the opening for *God*, masked people dressed in fetishistic uniforms and half-naked people were partying in the first room. During the gallery's closing hours Koh did a performance,

²³ Steiner, Tim email correspondence, 30th of November, 2010

²⁴ N/A (2008) "Terence Koh talks to Tim Steiner", *God Terence Koh*, De Pury & Luxembourg, unnumbered pages.

interacting with the sculptures in the darkness. The performance echoed the bacchanal party that was depicted in the last supper-installation. The dark, plastic coated gallery space changed when the fetishistic performers entered. The gallery ceased to be a gallery, and turned into a darkroom.²⁵ The plastic coating could take any smut and convinced the viewers that the gallery was able and prepared to withstand any kind of perversion happening within.

Koh works repeatedly with homosexuality, which is also evident in *God*. A performance in connection with the exhibition, which was well documented through photography in the catalog, involved sexual intercourse as well as drug abuse. This bacchanal celebration also interacted with the actual artworks. The photographs show the two-faced sculpture, *God*, giving fellatio to two men simultaneously, and Terence Koh, naked, presumably sniffing cocaine from the chest of the sculpture resembling himself. Knowing what has happened in the gallery space alters how one views the exhibition.

Terence Koh – Kunsthalle Zürich

In 2006 Kunsthalle Zürich showed an exhibition titled *Terence Koh*. All the displayed works were white, and the spacious design showed only one artwork in each room. Six rooms, including the foyer and the library were used to display Koh's works. In the library, 28 drawings were displayed, showing an abstract shape made with mixed media such as chocolate, graphite and powder, giving them a voluminous expression. Only a small object, *untitled*, inhabited the space of the foyer: a two-faced upside-down head, in the mold of Terence Koh, hanging from a wire. The eyes were closed, and the mouth was wide open. The mouth looked more like of a fatal wound penetrating the sculpture, so that the observer could see through the mouths like a tunnel. In other words, one got to peek inside Koh's head. The decapitated head was made of bronze, but covered in wax, paint and powder so that the surface was all white. It is hard to describe the expression in the face of the sculpture. The closed eyes seemed peaceful, but the mouth could be interpreted as shrieking in agony. In any case, the all white space looked as it could swallow any sound, because the room could be described as an isolated universe where – like in outer space – no sound can exist.

²⁵ A darkroom can be found in sex clubs, and is a darkened backroom where sexual activity can take place.

In the next room two humongous sculptures resided. The towering sculptures loomed almost four meters in height, occupying a huge portion of the room. With a base of Styrofoam, coated with fiberglass, white chocolate and paint, the sculptures looked like mountains. Chocolate mountains. They also recalled the demolished twin towers, or maybe gigantic candles. The hollow structures were in a ritualistic fashion, “sanctified” by Koh in a secret performance before the opening. Beatrix Ruf, the curator, as the only observer besides a cameraman, describes this performance like this:



Picture 9. Terence Koh. *Untitled (Chocolate Mountains)*, 2006
Mixed media sculpture – Styrofoam, fiberglass, white chocolate, icing. Two parts, each approximately 142” x 71” (350 x 180 cm). Overall dimensions vary with installation. The Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens. Courtesy of Peres Projects.

“Ritual elements from every possible cultural context are used as equally valuable components of an amalgam. Terence Koh often speaks in an incomprehensible secret language that sounds like an imaginary mixture of all the languages of incantation; drugs, excessive movement, and wigs – always in the color of the work, installation, or performance – play central roles.”²⁶

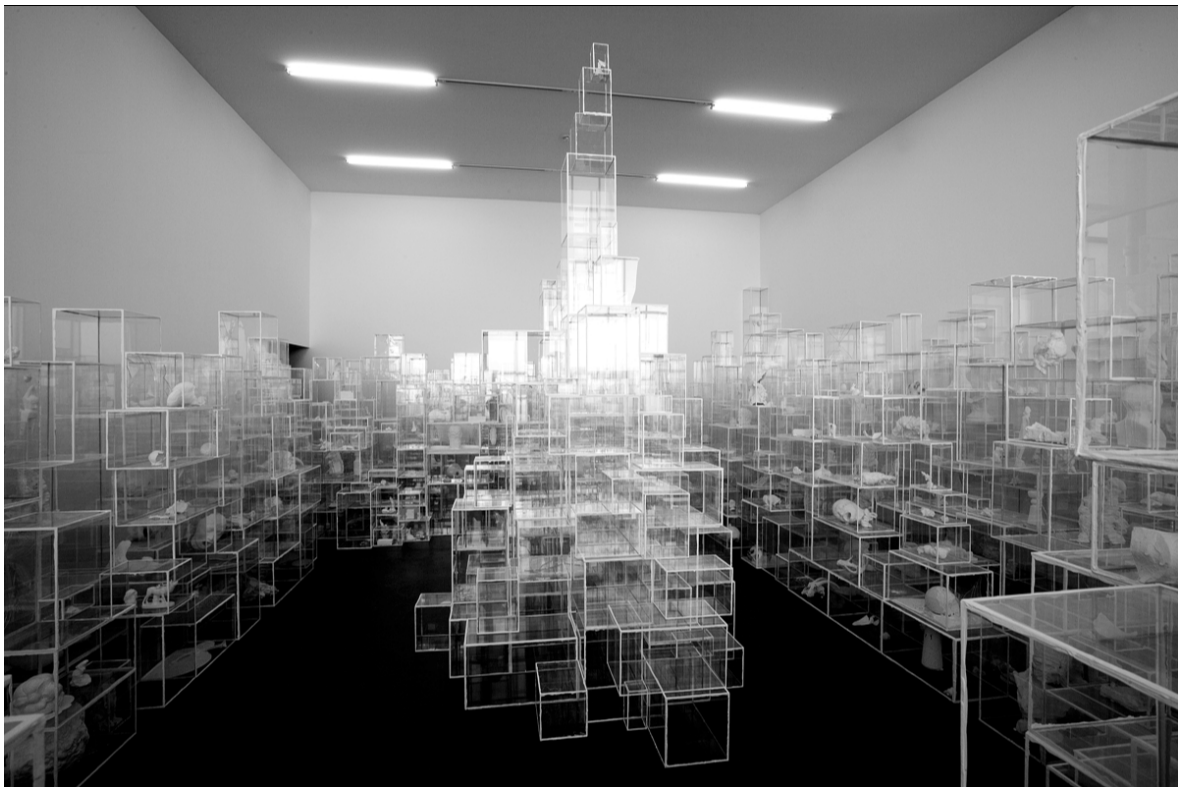
The photo documentation shows a naked Terence Koh, wearing a white wig, climbing inside the hollow structure, imbuing it, as well as him pouring paint and smearing chocolate on the sculpture. Koh helped to finish the sculpture, sealing up the small entrance and making the different joints disappear.

The second room was a large and strangely empty space. One noticed a trail from the entrance to the exit in a field of a fine white powder, as well as a small shelf on one of the walls. Though this clinical clean room is tainted. Birds were allowed to inhabit this space for some time, soiling it, and leaving stains, feathers and birdseeds in its wake. The fine tapioca

²⁶ Ruf, Beatrix (2007) ”Terence Koh – Artist”, *Terence Koh*, Yale University Press, USA, unnumbered pages

flour partially erased the line between material and immaterial, numbed the senses and created an almost dreamlike atmosphere.

The third room was filled with 1184 glass showcases of varying size, containing among other, kitsch objects, sex toys, regular toys, porcelain, tourist souvenirs, art reproductions as well as decaying material and spiders. Koh had the showcases installed almost as a labyrinth. Despite the maze-like feel, the clean look of the stacked vitrines gave it a strict and composed expression. Every item was white; painted or covered with wax. Some of the glass cases were deliberately broken, as were some of the displayed items as well.



Picture 10. Terence Koh – Untitled (vitrines 1-10), at *Terence Koh*, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2006. Mixed media sculpture – glass vitrines with objects of various media, including porcelain, wood, metal, bones, skulls, plastic, bronze, plaster, paint, breaks, shatters, secret messages, thoughts, and desires. Courtesy of Peres Projects.

In fourth and last room, *Gone, Yet Still (power, power)* was displayed. Two spherical lamps hanging from the ceiling, created only a dim light in the otherwise dark room. They remind us of a work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, where he displayed two identical clocks next to each other. It can be tempting to read the two spheres in Koh's work as lovers as well. Ruf suggests that this series of rooms can be read as a venture through Terence Koh's mind and body, starting with the head and ending with his sex organs.

Terence Koh – Whitney Museum of American Art

The vast exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich differed from the later show at Whitney Museum of American Art. They are still related to each other as Koh regards this exhibition as an epilogue. The accompanying catalog describes both exhibitions. At Whitney only one artwork was displayed. Koh's only work consisted of an incredibly bright, 4000 watts, light source as well as a hidden object, barely visible, next to it. The work was displayed in the gallery space next to the lobby, where the light created a rich play of elongated dark shadows, cast from everything in the vicinity of the light source. The shadows from the lobby were clearly visible outside of the museum. Koh described the show like this: "It has my minimalist streak in there. [...] It was my first solo show in New York. It was pretty scary in a sense. People were expecting me to do something baroque. But how did it come out? I can't explain it—it just came out. I wanted to do the fucking brightest light possible in an all-white room."²⁷



Picture 11. Terence Koh. *Untitled*, 2007. Koh's bright light source for his solo exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin, Los Angeles.

It was actually almost impossible to see this work, because it is like staring at the sun. Most people probably never even noticed the tiny sculpture next to the light source. However, what one surely did notice, was the effect of the work. Even from the street, outside the Whitney museum, one could see its effect; spectators turned into shadow puppets. When illuminating the spectator, Koh draws focus to the people in the lobby, as much as to the light source. These people become participants to the artwork.

²⁷ Obrist, op.cit., 161

The small object next to the light is an interesting element. For one thing it is the only material thing one can actually see. Another aspect is that the object acts as some kind of reward for the viewer who studies the artwork long enough. It was a secret Koh only shared with the loyal observer, who stared into the agonizingly bright light for more than a glance.

Unlike the Zürich show, where one could move around and experience the artworks from several angles, the Whitney show was more limiting. Here, the viewer had to see the work from a frontal point of view. This work was restricting in another sense as well, seeing as the blinding light physically hurt the observer. Neither Koh nor the catalog writers gave a clear explanation to why this show should be regarded as an epilogue to the Kunsthalle Zürich exhibition. Shamim M. Momin wrote:

The Whitney installation, Koh's first solo museum presentation in the United States, is in some sense an epilogue to the exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich. Using light as his primary material, Koh transforms the gallery space into a seductive yet inaccessible diorama, creating a psychological interaction that evokes desire and loss, pain and hope. The artist has described it as a collapse and reversal of the more physiological experience laid out like a nonnarrative journey through the space of the Zurich show.²⁸

Momin explained the link between the exhibitions, quoting Koh, suggesting that the Whitney show is like an implosion, because it does not offer a physiological experience as in the former show. Instead she describes it as a psychological interaction. Where one was allowed to enter Koh's mind in Zürich, one got rejected at the Whitney Museum. In such a fashion, one can read the Kunsthalle Zürich exhibition as a *microcosm*, presenting fragments of the artist's persona (like the objects in the vitrines, each representing a story we will never really know). As a counterpart, the Whitney show becomes a *macrocosm*, connoting more transcendental themes. Seeing as the light can be read in a religious sense, as the pearly gates of heaven, or as the sun with the lead ball as an orbiting planet.

A summary of Koh's artistic practice

This chapter has been an attempt to outline some of the different aspects in Koh's art. We see that Koh works with a wide variety of mediums, including photography, video, performance, sculpture, installation, painting, drawing as well as the more conceptual experimentation through Internet. He almost exclusively works with a monochromatic palette, creating all

²⁸ Momin, Shamim (2007) "The Infinite Tear", *Terence Koh*, Yale University Press, USA, unnumbered pages

white or all black works. Light is also a crucial element in his works, as well as light reflecting surfaces such as mirror and gold. Despite the fact that Koh creates powerfully sensuous works, the physical artwork always seems to emit a subtle concept, recurring in the whole exhibitions, as a governing principle or a narrative. In his installations he creates idiosyncratic landscapes that feels like an entire separate micro-universe, existing in a self-confined vacuum. Koh's exhibitions are responsive to the locations, and he creates an all-inclusive theatrical exhibition space. Thus his exhibitions are experienced sensuously. When we enter, we exist inside the exhibition and in relation to the inhabiting artworks. Koh's former training as an architect might explain his remarkable attention to space. When utilizing bright light and strong odors Koh creates an almost sensory overload in the viewer, intensifying this physical experience. Recurring concepts seems to include life and death, youth and decay as well as transcendent themes of philosophical or existentialistic origin. Sex, homosexuality and drugs are also apparent elements in his art, and recalls Baudelaire's themes for *Flowers of Evil*. The execution of these exhibitions justifies labeling Koh's productions as a *gesamtkunstwerk* – meaning that every conceivable element can be regarded as interrelated to the artwork.

We start to see an outline of recurring themes in Koh's oeuvre. The next step will be to consult the available material in the catalogs, to see how these essays present Koh and describe his exhibitions. These texts can help us locate important aspects in Koh's artistic production, and provide us with answers to some of the questions about interpreting the works.

3 Koh's works – as presented in the catalog texts

As we have seen, Koh creates art through various mediums, and his works contain subtle, yet complex references to artists, art history, philosophy, religion, but also to popular culture. In this chapter I will examine the readings of Koh's works that are published in his exhibition catalogs. Their focus and understanding of his works can provide a base for further analysis; how the authors place him in relation to artistic expression and in an art historical context. Since Koh himself refrain from interpreting his own art, and most of his comments on the matter are cryptic, these catalog sources provide the most extensive written material on Koh's art.

They cover several aspects of Koh's artistic production, and present insightful observations as well as previously unknown information about Koh's motives and inspirational sources for some of the works. Most of the texts are short and, because of the format, rarely present any extensive analysis of the exhibitions. What seem to be emphasized are instead the writer's personal experiences of the exhibitions or accounts of their first meetings with Koh. These texts describe Koh as a friend, artists or phenomenon. The texts written by curators are more directly focused on Koh's art – not his persona. However, they do not always provide any thorough argumentation for their readings on his art, since a catalog text does not give room for the same conventions we would apply for an academic essay. Their hands-on experiences with the exhibition and personal relationship with Koh color their texts, something that works well in the catalogs. But an academic thesis requires a different approach. Examining the available catalogs nevertheless reveal insightful observations, and these essays are an invaluable resource.

Sexuality and Queer Culture

Several of catalog texts draw attention to the sexual subject matter in the works of Koh. The *asianpunkboy* magazine appropriates Internet pornography, but sexuality is also a suggested theme in the rest of his production as well, though more subtle. Bruce LaBruce, a friend of Koh, focus on Koh's sexualized theme in *the whole family* exhibition. He writes:

Asianpunkboy is a brat. He is a shit disturber in an era when shit does not like to be disturbed. He will take a seemingly ordinary, innocent found image and somehow find a way to make it seem dirty or

decadent or violent [...] Knowing asianpunkboy as I do, he will fuck any image at any time without regard to propriety or consequence²⁹.

LaBruce reveals that he knows Koh personally, and primarily draws attention to sexual aspects in his art. His text is written for an exhibition Koh originally showed under the pseudonym asianpunkboy, and LaBruce amplifies the punk-aesthetic and the punk persona Koh portrays. He does not write much about the displayed artworks, but comments on a pierced photograph of a young boy, upside-down, stating it is “as if a stray piece of shrapnel from Iraq may have somehow entered the dimension of a cheap porn site on the internet.”³⁰ So, LaBruce suggests death and sex as themes in the artwork.

A sexual aspect is present in the mentioned work, but I personally have difficulties seeing the overall exhibition as overtly sexual, vulgar or violent. LaBruce and Koh met when Koh asked him to contribute to his asianpunkboy website. The website and fanzine are highly sexual, so it is natural that LaBruce suggest reading the exhibition *the whole family* in a sexualized fashion. LaBruce does not mention the artworks such as the strange shelves with objects residing upside-down, the birds that inhabited in the gallery space or the fact that flour covered the entire floor in the basement.

Bruce Benderson was commissioned by Koh to write a specific text for the *Gone, Yet Still* catalog, at Vienna Secession. Koh contacted Benderson, asking him to “write something dirty, I want dirt. I love your dirty writing. Write about how gorgeous and dirty I am without ever having met me...”³¹ Benderson’s text tells how he became curiously attracted to an Internet stranger under the pseudonym kohbunny, and quotes email correspondence between the two of them, never saying anything specific about Koh’s art.

One could however ask what purpose this text have in the catalog. It helps to construct an image of Koh, as an underground homosexual punk-artist. It emphasizes the image of the artist firstly, and the artworks secondly (suggesting a reading based on the artistic persona). In my opinion the exhibition does not radiate vulgarity or anything blatantly sexualized, but rather a quiet, eerie calm made from the all white idiosyncratic environment. These authors exemplify how such sexual connotations can be subtle and, as we see in Benderson’s text, it appears that Koh actively helps to construct his artistic image, as an enfant terrible, amplifying his sexuality.

²⁹ LaBruce, Bruce (N/A) “black hole son”, *The Whole Family Terence Koh*, Peres Projects, unnumbered pages

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Benderson, Bruce (2005) ”Inside Terence Koh”, *Terence Koh. Gone, Yet Still*, Wiener Secession, EU, 9

An essay by Philip Aarons describe the asianpunkboy magazines, presents interesting observations while contextualizing the sexual themes in Koh's publications:

If a major theme of Terence Koh's art is an examination of youthful transcendent, ecstatic oblivion achieved temporarily through sex and permanently through death, then the great achievement of Koh's books is how they work both formally and conceptually to capture this perspective [...] exploring the visual appreciation of transient youthful beauty and its momentary capture by sex or death.³²

This is interesting because Aarons pays serious attention to the highly sexual subject matter many people dismiss as vulgarity (whether they celebrate it or disapprove it). Where some authors focus on sexuality in works that are not overtly sexualized, Aarons pays attention to formal qualities and concepts in artworks that are explicitly sexual, scrutinizing the publications and placing them in a "great tradition of artist book design: the Ruscha, LeWitt mechanically produced perfect bound book exposing one disciplined idea on the one hand, and the great Fluxus assemblers and box makers using diverse, craft based materials to reveal the work of many on the other."³³ He also includes the magazine in Koh's oeuvre, placing the fanzines alongside the more traditional (physical) artworks.³⁴

Bill Arning describes Koh's theatrical elements in relation to queer culture. He gives examples³⁵ of theatrical elements in his art, and writes, "One reason gay men assume a disproportionate number of behind-the-curtain jobs in theater and opera is because, from that point, one experiences both the illusion and the constructedness of the illusion. We like to see the visible reality of that which creates invisible effects in people's heads."³⁶ Arning is suggesting a queer aesthetic, linking theatrical elements and illusionism to homosexuality, as a fruitful entry point for Koh's works. The repression of reality in Koh's work, is his greatest strength according to Arning who, during an art fair, realized that in regard to Koh:

³² Aarons, Philip (2005) "The Books of Terence Koh", *Terence Koh. Gone, Yet Still*, Wiener Secession, EU, 12

³³ *Ibid.*, 12

³⁴ Talking with Philip Aarons, he commented that most people disregard Koh's fanzines and Internet activities from his overall artistic production. (26th September, 2010)

³⁵ Using the Whitney light-installation as an example.

³⁶ Arning, Bill (2009) "Terence Koh against the fascism of the real", *Terence Koh 1980-2008 Love for Eternity*, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 81

Nothing was real. Koh cannot be a success in the real world; his work is too dangerous and subversive. Reading articles in the mainstream press that he makes millions and that collectors prefer to spend more money on the works that are guaranteed to fall apart, I know this has to be Koh's self-created hallucination, which he has somehow, with magic powers, projected outward toward us like-minded souls.³⁷

Arning presumes that for Koh's art to be understood, the spectator needs to be predisposed for his theatrical aesthetics, arguing "If you find reality *believable*, you are likely to find Koh's works *unbelievable*, frauds at your expense."³⁸ Arning claims that Koh's work should be seen in relation to queer (sub-) culture, and that an understanding of the referential framework of queer aesthetic might be necessary to understand and appreciate the artworks; to be like-minded. Other authors³⁹ imply similar conclusions, stating that Koh's art can be understood in relation to his persona, as his works are believed to be full of personal references.

Self-referring (secret) subject matter

How Koh often implement his works with references to himself, to his personal life and childhood is believed to be an important aspect in his art, according to several authors. They believe that to be able to understand the artworks, we must also (at least partially) understand Terence Koh. The works are described as infused with personal references, secret and subtle, or known and evident. *Love for Eternity 1980-2008*, a mid-life retrospect at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (MUSAC) displayed several of Koh's previous works. The catalog includes a text by the curator, Agustín Pérez Rubio, who mentions several interesting aspects, such as the personal subject matter in Koh's art:

"I'm looking at the upside-down objects in your installation *The Whole Family*, which enshrines the mysteries of your youth, of that biography that you never reveal, but that can be inferred from minor details [...] I know that each of these objects is extremely important to you and holds a story about your teenage years. The underlying idea is that the things we have grown up with really shape our identity and make up our family"⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., 95

³⁸ Ibid., 80

³⁹ Such as, amongst other, Rubio, LaBruce, Weinhart and Momin.

⁴⁰ Rubio, Agustín Pérez (2008) "Letter to a bunny in a magician's top hat from the other side of the looking glass" in *Terence Koh Love For Eternity 1980-2008*, Hatje Cantz, Germany, 30

As curator, Pérez Rubio pays close detail to the exhibited artworks in his text, suggesting how we can understand them through self-referential elements, as a direct bodily experience or through art historical references. He implies a personal relationship between himself and Koh, forming the text as a letter addressed to Koh. This rhetorical gesture implies that the artist and the artwork in this case cannot be viewed isolated, and amplifies Koh's personal revelations through his art. He stresses the fact that while we know that these subtle gestures can be of crucial importance for Koh, we do not necessarily have the means to understand their meaning. They can be read as fragments and clues of the artist's pasts, or as sacred relics where we are oblivious to their cultural significance. The authority and aura of these objects are noticeable, because it is evident that Koh made them with the upmost respect, but their symbolism is unclear.

Notions of the sublime

Shamim Momin describes Koh's artistic production in her catalog text "The Infinite Tear" as emotionally powerful: "The work plays on the melancholic beauty and sublime transcendence of emptiness, evocations of darkness that create our isolated worlds, and the intertwining of life and death. [...] Koh's gestures evoke isolation and secrecy, protection and ecstasy."⁴¹ She describes Koh's work at the Whitney Museum, reading the installation as a poetic gesture, connoting sublime and transcendental themes. She elaborates further, drawing comparisons to physics, stating "the Whitney installation might suggest the ultimate obviation, the void wherein everything becomes nothing, and remains and retains everything at the same time."⁴² Momin also uses astrology and mythology to describe how she experiences Koh's light installation, where she refers to Koh's miniscule gesture as oblivion. In another text (for *Gone, Yet Still*), "Swallowing Time: Dark Matter White. Esse Quam Videri (to be, rather than to seem)", Momin draws comparisons between Norse mythology, astronomy and Koh's works. She concludes "empty space itself contains enough repulsive dark energy to blow the universe apart"⁴³ can be compared to the Norse legend of Ragnarok, arguing, "the work of

⁴¹ Momin, (2007) op.cit., unnumbered pages

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Momin, Shamim (2005) "Swallowing Time: Dark Matter White. Esse qua, videri (to be, rather than to seem)", *Terence Koh - Gone, Yet Still*, Secession, EU, 14

Terence Koh [...] can be read through many of the concepts these narratives evoke⁴⁴. She suggests that an interdisciplinary interpretation can be fruitful, and that life's biggest questions can be found in Koh's work.

Direct bodily experience

Pérez Rubio describes walking in the museum during Koh's MUSAC exhibition, and how it affected him in a physical sense: "I can hardly find my way because the light is so white in the entire space that I'm blinded, and it makes me lose my sense of space and time."⁴⁵ The bright white installations were numbing his senses, creating an incomprehensible bodily experience. He continues, writing that the installations are conceptual, but also that they "have a very direct relationship with the body."⁴⁶ Such sensuous experiences are powerful because you can hardly distance yourself from the installations or ignore them, as they radiate a dominating presence. The same effect is described at the Kunsthalle Zürich, where Beatrix Ruf explains the effect of the completely white as such: "the overwhelming negation of the difference between material and immaterial that produces these completely white rooms, causing viewers' senses to numb."⁴⁷ These white rooms cause a powerful impact, and by blurring the boundaries of space, it simultaneously forces the spectator to think of his or her own physicality. Momin acknowledges the same effect at Whitney, writing:

At the Whitney, perhaps you can bear the seductive pain of white light, and start to edge close to the thin string draping elegantly across the entrance. If the light itself wouldn't prevent you, you might be able to crane your neck just so, then squint your eyes to defend yourself against the explosions in your retina, and find something within that void.⁴⁸

Martina Weinhart describes *Captain Buddha* at the Schirn Kunsthalle as such: "This heightened white exceeds all boundaries and robs us of our orientation. It seems to have a kind of transgressive magic that causes all details to disappear. "Snow-blind", we grope our

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14

⁴⁵ Rubio, op.cit., 24

⁴⁶ Ibid., 31

⁴⁷ Ruf, op.cit., unnumbered pages

⁴⁸ Momin, (2007) op.cit., unnumbered pages

way forward.”⁴⁹ The extremely white environments, constructed in numerous exhibitions, have a profound sensory impact on the beholder.

Black is used to provoke the same response in *God*. Ben Reardon describes the intense experience, stating “this isn’t about wandering passively through a gallery experience; this is art as commerce, cultural regurgitation, havoc, beauty, entrapment and a sordid tale of everything in excess, religion, alienation, belonging, self hate.”⁵⁰ It appears that these exhibitions value a physical response over an intellectual one. Usually completely white rooms create this effect in Koh’s exhibitions, sometimes with the original lighting replaced by stronger fluorescent tubes. His artworks are also usually all white, and the symbolism of the color white is discussed by some of the authors.

Symbolism

“The very color white [...] causes our symbolic systems of reference to totter,”⁵¹ writes Beatrix Ruf. We have seen that Koh extensively use the color white in his art, and it is evidently an important color for Koh. It is the source for a powerful sensuous experience in some of his exhibitions, and its vast cultural significance varies in different cultures and religions. Ruf explains, “It is the color that symbolizes innocence and purity in Western culture, but also birth and rebirth; the symbol for the brightness of the grave, the transition to transcendence; the color of death in Asian cultures; the color of [...] snow, white gold, cocaine.”⁵² As Ruf suggest, the color white is laden with symbolic meanings.

In a text for *Flower for Baudelaire*, Norman Rosenthal reads the non-durable paintings as a memento mori, stating, “The paintings in themselves do nothing, except also like the flowers, slowly to disintegrate, which too, is the most essential part of their beauty.”⁵³ Similar to how Rosenthal interprets the paintings as expressions of fragility, Momin describes, as

⁴⁹ Weinhart, Martina (2008) “Captain Buddha – A White Room with Dark Sides”, *Terence Koh Captain Buddha*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Germany, 95

⁵⁰ Reardon, op.cit. unnumbered pages

⁵¹ Ruf, op.cit. unnumbered pages

⁵² Ibid. unnumbered pages

⁵³ Rosenthal, Norman (2008) “White Flowers for Charles, White Flowers for Terence”, *Flowers for Baudelaire*, Iceland, unnumbered pages

mentioned, the Whitney light installation as “a psychological interaction that evokes desire and loss, pain and hope.”⁵⁴

Gesamtkunstwerk

Gesamtkunstwerk is a term frequently used to describe Koh’s artistic production. Koh’s total work of art blurs the boundaries of art and life, creating an artwork that activates all the senses. Max Hollein acknowledges this, writing:

Koh creates works that can be experienced with great physical and psychological intensity, works that create their own cosmos, in which decadence and deliberate transgression reign. In the process, Terence Koh repeatedly places his own personality at the center, in mythologized, perfect self-glorifications – and thus in no time at all, he has made himself the ultimate Gesamtkunstwerk.⁵⁵

An important point, which Hollein stresses, is that Koh himself needs to be included in what we regard as the total work of art. Koh is not just the artist; he is intertwined with his gesamtkunstwerk because of his ongoing performances, frequently interacting with his physical artworks and constantly mystifying his persona. In his magnum opus, Koh reside in the eye of the storm. Weinhart suggests a similarity between Koh’s gesamtkunstwerk and the John Cage’s Buddhist ideology, that, “art should not be distinct from life but should be an action within life.”⁵⁶ AA Bronson writes that Koh, “given the smallest gallery space, and the opportunity for a modest exhibition, he has turned it into an opus, a life work, in fact quite literally a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.”⁵⁷

Summary

Beatrix Ruf concludes her text by summarizing Koh’s recurring themes:

Koh’s themes are always the great themes of humanity: life and death; youth and decay; beauty and sickness; cultural identity and individual personality; sexuality; refinement and the other; things

⁵⁴ Momin (2007) op.cit., unnumbered pages

⁵⁵ Hollein, Max (2008) “foreword”, *Terence Koh – Captain Buddha*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Germany, 89

⁵⁶ Weinhart, op.cit., 93

⁵⁷ Bronson, AA (2005) “Terence Dearest”, *Terence Koh - Gone, Yet Still*, Secession, EU, 6

controlled by the conventions of our culture; and the ideas of Freud's Eros and Thanatos, which run through the most diverse cultures.⁵⁸

These themes are brought to our attention in the other catalogs, and every author seems to agree that Koh's presence in the works is of importance. Sexualized subject matter, intricate symbolism and religious references, inconceivable beauty and notions of the sublime through physical and physiological environments are frequently described in the catalogs. Koh is presented as a highly sensitive artist who works with transcendental themes, often evoked with great sensual and emotional intensity. The authors reveal being awestricken by Koh's engagement to beauty and the sublime, expressed with minimalistic gestures and an understated elegance.

When reading the catalog texts, it appears that most of the authors have a close relationship with Koh. The texts have a personal tone, and many of them interpret the artworks in light of the artist's persona. Some of these texts have a tendency to focus primarily on Terence Koh, and only secondary on the actual artworks. But there are also exceptions. Especially the texts written by curators emphasize several aspects directly related to the physical artworks, and propose possible ways to interpret the exhibitions. They cover aspects such as the sublime and bodily experiences, and present a rich understanding of the symbolism in Koh's works. However, though the texts raise awareness of several interesting aspects, these could be further developed. These provide an interesting entry point for Koh's exhibition, so I will pursue them further at a later point in the thesis.

From an art historical perspective, certain eye-catching references to art historical masterpieces become evident when studying Koh's exhibitions. Koh seem to appropriate elements from artistic tendencies and well-known artists. The catalog contributors just described also draw focus to this. Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys are mentioned in particular, as sources for inspiration. Observing Koh's art through an art historical lens can provide us with a deeper understanding of Koh's art, highlight formal and conceptual characteristics, and simultaneously enable us to apply theories of aesthetics that may illuminate Koh's artistic production.

⁵⁸ Ruf, op.cit., unnumbered pages

4 Koh's work in an art historical context

My starting point in this chapter will be the following question: How does Koh's artistic production relate to general tendencies in postwar and contemporary art? When I asked Koh if he felt part of any artistic movement, he replied that he perceives his own time as the end of *isms*.

There used to be isms, like surrealism and minimalism, but I feel that for the first time, there is no ism. I can't, but I want to say that I'm part of an ism, because I have this romantic vision being part of the Minimalism. I would love to sit on a rooftop talking to Donald, and talking to Carl, and like being in a bar, drinking with them and talking, but I don't have any artists that I know that I can talk with – I wish I did – like this right now. And so maybe this is the first time when there are no isms.⁵⁹

Although Koh mentions minimalism, I do not understand his statement in the sense that he regards himself as a minimalist artist. It rather appears that he feels that artists no longer have a common goal, a unifying manifesto or a collective spirit similar to earlier artistic movements. We can, however, clearly see a minimalist influence in some of Koh's works, such as *Flowers for Baudelaire*, the Whitney light installation and the almost empty floor-room at Kunsthalle Zürich. So, if there are no more isms, to what extent can we compare *Flowers for Baudelaire* with earlier artistic tendencies?

Hal Foster describes minimalism as an “historical crux”⁶⁰ between modernism and postmodernism. Minimalism evolved from modernism, but did not fully incorporate all the elements we normally credit postmodernism. Minimalism can possibly best be described as an intermezzo between the two paradigms, and believe that an understanding of both modernism and postmodernism is essential for discussing minimalism. Now that we are about to view Koh in an art historical context, we can start by comparing his works with the works of artists from high modernism.

⁵⁹ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

⁶⁰ Foster, Hal (1986/1996) “The Crux of Minimalism”, *Minimalism* [2000] James Meyer (ed.), Phaidon, London Press Limited, 273

Modernism

Untitled. Preverbal communication through abstraction

Since the Second World War, New York has been regarded as the art capital of the world. Parts of Europe were in ruins, and several artists and intellectuals fled from prosecution in their native countries to America and New York during the war. While the European art scenes stagnated, the art scene in New York flourished. Since then it has been amongst the most important art centers in the world, and while others have gained and lost momentum, New York has been a stable presence in the art world. Even though New York was not the only place of interest in the post-war era, art historical texts tend to emphasize New York as the backdrop for modernism,⁶¹ and more specifically for *abstract expressionism*. The writings of Clement Greenberg have been the strongest support of this notion. He advocated an artistic movement concerned with self-critical evaluation, which in turn depended on autonomy. Every artistic medium needed to cultivate its own unique qualities so that they were easily distinguishable from each other. For painting this meant flatness, for sculpture it meant three-dimensionality. As Greenberg formulated it in a now often quoted passage: “The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence”⁶².

Terence Koh does not show any attempt to cultivate medium-specificity – neither in my chosen core-example, *Flowers for Baudelaire*, nor in his oeuvre in general. As mentioned, his art is rarely limited to one artistic medium, and usually his works comprise of a variety of different mediums, such as his installations made up from drawings as well as paintings and sculptures. The conception of the *gesamtkunstwerk* is the total opposite of Greenberg’s cry for autonomy, as the artwork cannot be contained within logic boundaries. Still, it is possible to locate similarities between Koh and the abstract expressionists: namely in relation to abstraction, on their views on the spectators experience and how the artworks may emit an existential sincerity. As mentioned, Koh often works with “grand” themes, such as life and

⁶¹ Serge Guilbaut (1983) wrote extensively on how New York claimed modernism for its own in the book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

⁶² Greenberg, Clement (1960) “Modernist Painting”, *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 775

death, or the meaning of our existence, and several of his installations appear to create a strange harmonic calmness. In this respect it seems sensible to view Koh's work in relation to the abstract expressionist painter, Mark Rothko.

Rothko's large signature canvases of soft colored blocks, devoid of any recognizable subject matter, were intended to envelope the viewer through their proportions. Serge Guilbaut writes that political unease after World War 2 fueled abstraction in the arts: "Abstraction, through the avant-garde, made it possible [...] to enter into an active dialogue with the age. It allowed for a militant, committed art that was neither propagandistic nor condescending to its audience"⁶³. Rothko describes his own paintings as such:

"I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however . . . is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon it with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command."⁶⁴

The intended viewer does not just observe Rothko's paintings passively, but experiences them. They are both intimate and intense. The size of the canvas fills one's field of vision, and it appears as something very present, yet somewhat incomprehensible. They are visually striking, but they resist deciphering; they communicate, but they speak to us in a preverbal sense; they are meaningful, but it is impossible to articulate their meaning. Rothko acknowledges this when he writes: "Art is not only a form of action, it is a form of *social* action. For art is a type of communication, and when it enters the environment it produces its effects just as any other form of action does"⁶⁵. In this respect Koh's works are strikingly similar to Rothko's, both in how they can be regarded as a subtle communicative gesture, and how they appear intimate yet simultaneously powerful. As mentioned, it is natural to regard the canvases in *Flowers for Baudelaire* as one totality of works because of their similarity and random pattern. The constellation of paintings filled the spectator's field of vision and appeared to float in the white space they inhabited, creating a visual sensation much like that of Rothko's paintings.

⁶³ Guilbaut, op.cit. 197

⁶⁴ "Mark Rothko", Encyclopedia of Irish and World Art, URL: <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-artists/mark-rothko.htm> [03.01.11]

⁶⁵ Rothko, Mark (2004) *The Artist's Reality – Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, USA, 10

Looking at Rothko's paintings, they emit an indescribable melancholy. They are non-figurative, and they are usually named "untitled." The title makes the paintings resistant to any guided interpretation, but instead opens up for a personal understanding or experience. Similarly, we see in *Flowers for Baudelaire* that the canvases appear to engage the observer in a personal way through their purity and transcendence. Like Rothko, Koh seldom provides explanatory titles for his works. "Untitled" does not provide much information, but this absent of title nevertheless reveals that the artist decided not to use the title as a guided entry point for the work, which in turn encourages a personal interpretation.

Bill Arning describes this kind of sensation brought on by subliminal communication in the catalog essay "Terence Koh against the Fascism of the Real", where he argues that a "literal description" of Koh's light piece at the Whitney Museum "kills all joy." Arning explains this as follows: "in my circle, where people tend to celebrate theatricality when it's smart, everyone was thrilled by the audacity and complex implications of Koh's simple gesture. We saw it not as a one liner, but as an overflowing cornucopia of meanings, critique, and pleasure."⁶⁶ Both Koh's installation at the Whitney Museum and *Flowers for Baudelaire*, communicate in a *preverbal* or subliminal sense, and a literal description can hardly capture the essence of this experience. Such an approach will fall short of describing the active relationship initiated between spectator and work. Such a relationship requires of the viewer to be predisposed emotionally, to give oneself permission to be captivated. Allan Kaprow called this "our talents for 'engagement'"⁶⁷. A cool distanced observation (or literal description) will simply not do. Christopher Rothko, Mark Rothko's son, writes beautifully about his father's work:



Picture 12. Mark Rothko. Untitled. 1968. Synthetic polymer paint on paper, 17 7/8 x 23 7/8" (45.4 x 60.8 cm). Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. © 2011 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

⁶⁶ Arning, op.cit., 80

⁶⁷ Kaprow, Allan (1958) "Notes on the Creation of a Total Art", *Allan Kaprow – Essays on the blurring of art and life* [2003] Jeff Kelley (ed.), University of California Press, USA, 10

“He cannot tell you what his paintings, or anyone else’s are about. You have to experience them. Ultimately, if he could have expressed the truth – the essence of these works – in words, he probably would not have bothered to paint them. As his works exemplify, writing and painting involve different kinds of knowing”⁶⁸.

This insight can easily be adapted to Koh’s works as well. Although, there is an obvious difference in the formal qualities of Koh and Rothko’s respective works, namely their engagement to color. As Rothko used colors as his primary means of expression (besides scale), Koh works with an extremely limited palette. Despite the fact that they rely on different means, their goals are not, however, that different. Rothko’s canvases emit an overwhelming chromatic sensation, and his blurry, vibrating color-fields seem to dematerialize the surface. Space is incredibly important for Koh as well, and his all white environments appear to dissolve the room. The tapioca flour at Kunsthalle Zürich, in heavy lighting, which dematerialized the room, is an example of this effect. An incomprehensible sensual experience is a significant trait in both artists’ works, brought on by subtle nuances of color or surface. There are also other abstract expressionists besides Rothko, who can uncover other interesting aspects in Koh’s art.

The powerful impact of the incomprehensible

The modernist painter Barnett Newman is another artist who worked with aspects and themes similar to those of Koh. Newman created several paintings of huge proportions, paintings which often includes vertical lines against a monochrome background. The visual impact of the artworks is immediate and powerful, and Newman’s paintings can be perceived as hyper-present yet ungraspable. His gigantic *Vir heroicus sublimis* measure 242,2 x 541,7 cm. Discussing the scale, David Hopkins suggests, “Newman’s work [...] implicitly assumes it has a public to address, if only by virtue of its size”⁶⁹.

⁶⁸ Rothko, op.cit., xii

⁶⁹ Hopkins, David (2000) *After Modern Art 1945-2000*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 16



Picture 13. Barnett Newman, *Vir heroicus sublimis*. 1950-51. 7' 11 3/8" x 17' 9 1/4" (242.2 x 541.7 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller. © Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Nonetheless, Newman did not intend for his observers to view the paintings from afar. A handout at one of Newman's exhibitions explains his intention: "There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance."⁷⁰ Thus it was not for didactic reasons that he chose such proportions, but because the large canvas would become incomprehensible to observe in its entirety from a short distance. It would then engage the viewer in a more direct, physical sense (just like Rothko's). But at the same time as the painting envelops the viewer, it may also be seen as excluding him or her, due to its lack of depth. Whereas Rothko's paintings seem to dematerialize the canvas, Newman's paintings appear more like a matte wall. This incomprehensiveness in viewing Newman's painting, which fills one's entire field of vision, creates what may be called a *sublime* experience. Philip Shaw describes the effect as such: "Newman's lightning flash leaves us with a profound sense of its fragility, of a sense of being teetering on the edge of nothingness."⁷¹ Newman never talked openly about his intentions with his art, but he did write a few articles that might better open up for an understanding of his paintings in relation to the notion of the sublime. In Newman's own words: "Man's first expression [...] was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void."⁷² The

⁷⁰ Foster, Hal, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (2004) *Art since 1900*, Thames & Hudson, Singapore, 365

⁷¹ Shaw, Philip (2006) *The Sublime*, Routledge, Great Britain, 122

⁷² Newman, Barnett (1947) "The First Man Was an Artist", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 575

minimal painterly gestures on the gigantic canvas can be read as such an outcry – an immediate and intuitive reaction to his self-awareness.

Newman continues, writing, “Man’s hand traced the stick through the mud to make a line before he learned to throw the stick as a javelin.”⁷³ We find the same poetic gesture of the drawn line in his *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, as in most of his paintings.⁷⁴ These elements arrange the painting, separating nothing from something, and chaos from cosmos. The lines create movements in the painting, and may be read as mimicking the first man’s primitive yet aesthetic exploration. The sublime is a key term for understanding Koh’s work as well, and like Newman, Koh induce notions of the sublime through minimal and subtle gestures.

The theoretical and philosophical discussion about the sublime is vast, and an outline of the term will be presented in the following chapter. For now it is sufficient to recognize the *effect* of the sublime. As mentioned, Newman’s painting, when observed up-close, is difficult to grasp. The immediate response is predominantly intuitive (sensuous or emotional). The painting emits a powerful presence, and its visual impact is both hyper present and incomprehensible. Koh’s *Flowers for Baudelaire* had a similar effect through illusion, because the completely white room seemed to suppress one’s sense of space, causing incongruence between the seen and the known. This notion of the sublime is not exclusive to *Flowers for Baudelaire*, and as mentioned, several of Koh’s exhibitions can be described as such. Bright light and white environments in several of Koh’s exhibitions creates an incomprehensible experience, resulting in a notion of the sublime. But at *God* the effect of the sublime was different. *God* induced the excitement of pain and danger, and the spectators had trouble maneuvering past the strobe lit sculptures, which appeared to vibrate in the otherwise dark room. Since the idea of danger is evoked without any real threat, the thrill can be delighting.

When comparing the reception of the artists during high modernism with the reception of Koh, there appears to be some similarities as well. The focus on the artists Terence Koh, has already been mentioned frequently in the catalogs. This extensive focus on individuality, and on the artist’s persona, was also highly noticeable during modernism.

⁷³ Ibid., 575

⁷⁴ Irving Sandler (1970) presents a thorough analysis of Newman’s works in *A History of Abstract Expressionism*, Harper & Row, New York, 185-191

Individual expression, and expressing individuality

A trademark of the High Modernist painters was the impulsiveness and expressiveness of their works. We find the same spontaneity in some of Koh's work as well. This becomes apparent when we look at the documentation of Koh's artistic process. The process and the resulting work may in some cases be best described as a performance. Sometimes, it is impossible to distinguish the process from the finished product, and the performance and physical object deserve the same acknowledgement. In this respect, the artistic process of the "action painter" Jackson Pollock comes to mind, which became known through the photographs of Hans Namuth. In addition, his paintings clearly reveal the artistic process; how he applied paint with sticks or dripping brushes onto large horizontal canvases. We can trace trails of paint throughout the canvas. Koh painted the walls in one of the rooms in *God* in a spontaneous, automatic fashion. In a state of trance and in complete darkness, he impulsively painted the entire walls in the Janus-room during nightly sessions. This pure act of creation from darkness may be seen as echoing the *Genesis*, which describes how God created everything from darkness.⁷⁵

Pollock's paint dripping is often interpreted as a sexual gesture, expressing the ethos while connoting male ejaculation.⁷⁶ Koh may be mimicking this gesture, in a literal sense, when he frequently lists urine and semen in the material lists for artworks. During modernism, the focus on the artist-subject was very much emphasized. The artist became a hero and a myth, the *creator* of art. Terence Koh may be seen as a contemporary parallel to this emphasis on the artist's image and aura. Even though some regard Koh and his mysterious persona as brilliant, while others think it is a publicity stunt, it is possible to see Koh's public persona in relation to the reception of the artists during post-war years in New York. The myth of the genius-artist had a renaissance during this period. Serge Guilbaut describes the artists as such: "the avant-garde painters were aggressive in their individuality. They each wanted to be different, wanted no part of a school or group."⁷⁷ On a personal level, this overstating of individual freedom was partially a response from the oppression during the Second World War. On a political level this became a key element in the American foreign policy,

⁷⁵ The impact of the pure act of creation can also be seen in Barnett Newman's zips, where they differentiate something from nothing.

⁷⁶ For an interesting historical discussion about sexual (over-) interpretations in art, see Kelly Devine Thomas's article "Say It with Flowers—or Gourds, Goats, Fur Cups, or Fried", *ARTnews*, URL: http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2106 (09.2006) [22.03.2011]

⁷⁷ Guilbaut, op.cit., 198

campaigning American art: “Improving the cultural image of the United States was identified in 1948 as the most important goal for American propaganda [and] avant-garde art [...] could be used as a symbol of the ideology of freedom.”⁷⁸ Koh is naturally aware of the importance of the artist-subject during modernism, and he might very well be mimicking the postwar artist character. If this were the case, he would not be the first to do so.⁷⁹ We do not know why Koh exaggerates his artistic self, but I do not think mimicking the modernist artists is his only reason for doing so. Maybe, to some extent, this can be seen as a reaction against certain tendencies present-day society. I will return to this suggestion at a later point.

“The look of accident was not the only ‘wild’ thing that abstract expressionism first acclimatized and then domesticated in painting; it did the same to emptiness, to the look of the ‘void’.”⁸⁰ These two constituting elements of high modernism that Greenberg here mentions, the impulsive subjectivity as well as to the sublime subject matter of the abstract expressionists, are both noticeable features in Koh’s contemporary production. However, as I see it, Koh also engages these issues from a contemporary standpoint, as I will discuss in the following.

Minimalism

Recalling Koh’s desire to be part of the minimalist movement, we will in the following view his art in relation to minimalism. James Meyer writes that, “All of the artists associated with minimalism rejected the idea that theirs was a coherent movement; there was never a manifesto, they pointed out, only differing or even opposing points of view. They regarded ‘minimalism’ as a catchy label of a fashion-hungry art world in search of new trends.”⁸¹ Minimalism is neither modernism nor postmodernism. Some minimalist artists strived towards high modernistic ideals, while others rejected them. As Donald Judd writes: “The new three-dimensional work doesn’t constitute a movement, school or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater

⁷⁸ Ibid., 193

⁷⁹ Pop artists often used irony to ridicule this accentuation of the individual self, by concealing their own artistic process, mimicking mass- and popular culture. Though Koh does not appear to do this in an ironic fashion.

⁸⁰ Greenberg, Clement (1967) “Recentness of Sculpture”, *Minimalism* [2000] James Meyer (ed.), Phaidon Press Limited, London, 234

⁸¹ Meyer, James (2000) “Survey”, *Minimalism*, [2000] James Meyer (ed.) Phaidon, London Press Limited, 16

than the similarities.”⁸² He also points out that “very few artists receive attention without publicity as a new group”, and that “one person’s work isn’t considered sufficiently important historically to be discussed alone.”⁸³ One should be wary of regarding minimalism as a unified movement, and even though the artworks might bear visual resemblance, the manner the works are executed, and the artists’ intention differed greatly. Still, with these warnings in mind, when we speak of minimal art, we are usually referring to works that implies a reduction of shape, to simple (often repeated) geometrical elements, which bear little or no trace of any artistic process. Such works consist of formal qualities that are allegedly almost instantly understood, and in their presence one tends to immediately perceive them simply as shapes or objects.

When thinking of Koh in relation to the minimalist artist Robert Morris, we can draw attention to how Koh often expresses himself through minimal gestures. However, Koh’s views on art differ from Morris’, as he viewed his own practice in defiance to the transcendental art of the abstract expressionists. Morris rejected the notion of abstract expressionism with his minimal objects, saying “no to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions, historicizing narrative, valuable artifact, intelligent structure, interesting experience.”⁸⁴

Greenberg disapproved of the minimal art, claiming, “there is hardly any aesthetic surprise in Minimal art, only a phenomenal one of the same order as in Novelty art, which is a one-time surprise. Aesthetic surprise hangs on forever – it is still there in Raphael as it is in Pollock – and ideas alone cannot achieve it.”⁸⁵

Morris disagreed with Greenberg’s low regard for minimalism, claiming, “Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience.”⁸⁶ His interest in minimal art was based on the relationship established between the objects and the space, and their

⁸² Judd, Donald (1965) “Specific Objects” *Minimalism* [2000] James Meyer (ed.), Phaidon, London Press Limited, 207

⁸³ Judd, Donald (1969) “Complaints: Part 1”, *Minimalism* [2000] James Meyer (ed.), Phaidon, London Press Limited, 246

⁸⁴ Foster, Krauss, Bois, & H. D. Buchloh, op.cit., 492

⁸⁵ Greenberg (1967) op.cit., 234

⁸⁶ Morris, Robert (1966) “Notes on Sculpture 1-2”, *Minimalism* [2000] James Meyer (ed.), Phaidon, London Press Limited, 218

effect on the spectator.⁸⁷ Fascinated by Gestalt psychology – the studies of how we perceive and process the essence or shape of an entity's complete form – Morris constructed simple forms because he believed these objects produced the strongest Gestalts. Morris thus changed his focus from the artwork to the spectator. There is a strong connection between Morris and Koh in this respect; how a physical effect on the spectator can be induced through artworks of a dominating presence, is examined by both artists.

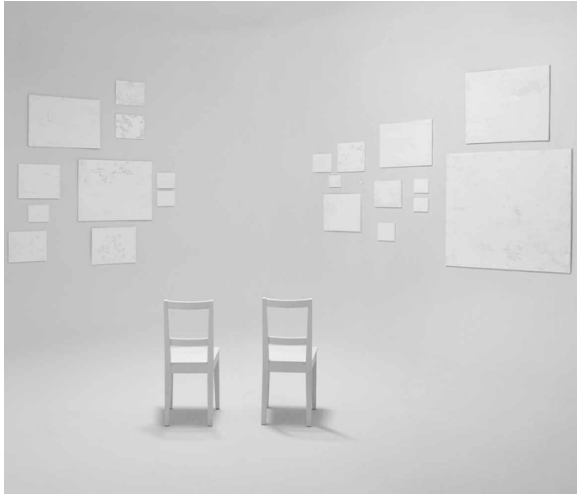
Terence Koh does not, however, share Morris' skepticism towards transcendence or sublimity. Whereas the minimalists used limited gestures to express simple shapes or forms, Koh apply similar poetic gestures to express something completely opposite, something magical and sublime. To give an illustrating example of this, we can see how a similarly executed idea can produce to different results. Morris installed a triangular shaped plywood structure in a corner at Green Gallery in New York in 1964. James Meyer describes its effect as such:

The massive structures occupied the actual physical space of the gallery, forcing the viewer to be aware of his or her position in space in relation to the artworks as well as in relation to the room itself. Untitled (corner piece) fit in to the corner of the gallery. The back and sides of the work disappeared in to the wall. By filling the negative space of the corner, Morris' sculpture made the usually overlooked corner visible as a literal space and altered the room's volume.⁸⁸

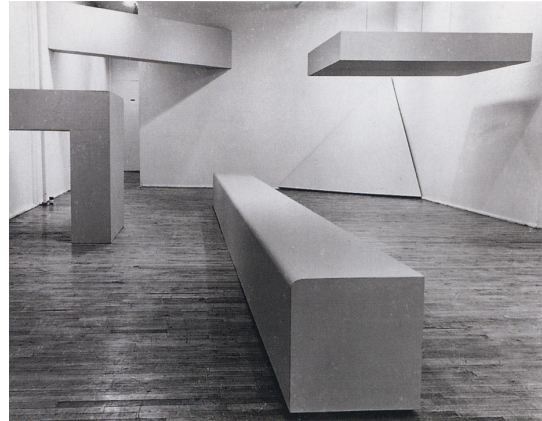
As mentioned, the exhibition space in *Flowers for Baudelaire* had a rounded corner. But in Koh's exhibition in 2009, the effect was completely different. Where Morris accentuated the physical space, the corner in Koh's exhibition space blurred the angle, suppressing the sense of space. The viewer's inadequacy when trying to physically orientate oneself in *Flowers for Baudelaire* can be described as sublime, and the viewer is left in a state of confusion. This lack of orientation forces the viewer to rely on sensation and their own subjectivity. The effect of Morris' sculpture is the opposite, because it makes visible something that is normally overlooked. For Morris, *form* was a process to produce a primitive and immediate object, whereas *formlessness* for Koh is a method for invoking the sublime.

⁸⁷ Donald Judd was very interested in how his works were installed and how it reacted to the space, but he did not pay any close attention to the spectator.

⁸⁸ Meyer, op.cit., 80



Picture 14. Terence Koh. Installation view, *Flowers for Baudelaire*, Richard Avedon's former studio, New York, 2008. Detail of the rounded angles in the exhibition space at *Flowers for Baudelaire*. The seamless corner distorts one's sense of space. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin, Los Angeles.



Picture 15. Robert Morris. 1964. *Untitled (Corner Piece)*. Plywood sculpture. Copyrights © Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Installation view from Morris' exhibition at Green Gallery. The cornered structure clearly accentuates the corner, emitting a dominating physical presence. Photograph courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

A significant trait in Koh's art is his use of a theatrical rhetoric. Such artistic means were strongly criticized during high modernism, especially in the writings of Greenberg's protégé Michael Fried, who claims, "Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre."⁸⁹ Fried was possibly worried that theatre might seduce its spectator, similar to how Greenberg feared kitsch could seduce both artists and viewers, because of the work's refusal to leave the observer alone. Fried was describing *minimalism* (he used the term *literalist art*) when he talked about art's approach to theatre, but one paragraph is quite fitting for Koh's work as well:

Literalist art, too, possesses an audience, though a somewhat special one: that the beholder is confronted by literalist work within a situation that he experiences as *his* means that there is an important sense in which the work in question exists for him *alone*, even if he is not actually alone with the work at the time. [...] Someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to *become* that beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been *waiting for him*.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Fried, Michael (1967) "Art and Objecthood", *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [1998], University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 163

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163

Although this was intended as a harsh critique of minimalist artists, we might use the same description with praise for Koh's work when we no longer feels encumbered by the modernist train of thought. Much of Koh's work has the ability to communicate to its spectator as if nothing else existed, precisely because Koh utilizes theatrical elements to create *idiosyncratic environments*.

In some respect, Terence Koh's works appear as a negative image of the minimal artists. Although some of his artworks bear a visual resemblance to the works of the minimalists, Koh equip minimal elements because they too can be used to express a sense of sublimity.⁹¹ And it should also be noted that, unlike the minimalist rejection of the artist-subject, Koh is, as mentioned, considered to be quite flamboyant as a public figure. Although, it should be noted that there is a difference between idealism and reality, and even though the minimal artists did not want to emphasize their own subjectivity, younger artists criticized them for not producing "a fully materialistic critique of modernist idealism"⁹², thus still attaining some autonomy. Because, as Douglas Crimp observes, "If modern artworks existed in relation to no specific site and were therefore said to be autonomous, homeless, that was also the precondition of their circulation."⁹³ If minimal art did not relate to the actual site, a part of the modernist autonomy was still maintained in the works. A succeeding generation of artists contributed to this materialist critique of art by radicalizing site specificity. With this institutional critique, minimalism moved into a more postmodern phase.

Returning to Foster's definition of minimalism, he writes that, "Minimalism appears as a historical crux in which the formalist autonomy of art is at once achieved and broken up [...] if minimalism breaks with late Modernist art, by the same token it prepares for the Postmodernist art to come."⁹⁴ In the 1960s several new tendencies appeared, and a powerful critique of Greenberg's authoritarian views on autonomy spawned a new way of thinking about art. Several of the elements that constitute modernism and minimalism later reappeared, but they did so in more of an eclectic manner. During the succeeding postmodernism, one radical movement was pop art, where artists appropriated elements from low-culture in their art. Morris connects "the new three-dimensional works" with pop art, writing, "Its referential connections are to manufacture objects and not to previous art. In this respect the work has

⁹¹ Barnett Newman received critique by the Abstract Expressionists, but was eventually acclaimed by the Minimalists. Koh expresses, similar to Newman, the 'void' or the sublime through minimal gestures.

⁹² Crimp, Douglas (1993) "Redefining Site Specificity" *On the Museum's Ruins*, London, Cambridge Mass, 155

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 155

⁹⁴ Foster, *op.cit.*, 273

affinities with Pop art. But the abstract work connects to a different level of the culture.”⁹⁵

Pop art is the exact opposite of Greenberg’s cry for artists to distance themselves from kitsch, as popular culture and consumerism become the most distinct elements in the artworks. As we have seen, we can discern some of the principles that constitute both high modernism and minimalism in Koh’s art, but his oeuvre must also be discussed in relation to postmodern tendencies.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism refers to a reorientation of thought about art. This started in the 1960s, and continued to evolve through the 70s and 80s. The term *postmodernism* suggests a rupture from modernism, but at the same time it is given its identity through its relationship to the former modernism. During this transitional period several artists started examining the conditions of art, and realized that their sphere was not isolated from societal mechanisms, and that these mechanisms also apply to the art sphere through institutions and the market. Postmodernism to a large extent focuses on revealing these mechanisms, and in doing so it is a critical enterprise. Whereas modernism explored internal aspects of art through autonomy, postmodernism explored external aspects such as “psychological, linguistic, institutional, economic, political, and, broadly speaking, cultural conditions that structure our approach to art”⁹⁶.

Appropriation from popular culture

The elevation of everyday objects into art is characterizing for pop art. Such artworks were not judgmental, but rather celebrated consumerism.⁹⁷ Andy Warhol’s famous paintings of soup cans or his sculptures resembling soap pad boxes are well known examples of this. When comparing Koh’s art with works by pop artists, we may also notice some similarities. Koh is unafraid of appropriating kitsch elements in his works. His vitrine piece in Kunsthalle Zürich for instance, was filled with trinkets and toys. His upside-down owl sculpture, with

⁹⁵ Morris, Robert (1967) “Notes on Sculpture 3”, *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell, UK, 820

⁹⁶ Williams, Robert (2004) *Art Theory*, Blackwell Publishing, UK, 224

⁹⁷ The overtly positive attitude after the Second World War might explain the uncritical celebration of progress through technological advances and increased individual wealth and opportunities, seen in the pop art of the 1960s.

plastic diamonds for eyes also connote kitsch. However, Koh's low-culture elements are not ready-mades. Pop artists often imitated consumer culture to the extent that art and commodity became visually inseparable, whereas Koh's objects are always transformed so they cannot be mistaken for something worthless or trivial. Unlike the pop artists, Koh does not comment on consumerism. In the vitrine piece, the collection of commodities is overshadowed by the impact of their archival organization. They appear more like fragments, symbols or memories from childhood or youth, giving them a biographical or mnemonic character.



Picture 16. asianpunkboy – *Untitled 4 (owl)*, 2003. Plastic owl, two 440 carat cubic zirconia stones with engraved text (William), acrylic paint, glue adhesive, flat household paint on wood shelf. 43 1/4 x 24 x 10 1/4 inches. Courtesy of Peres Projects.



Picture 17. Terence Koh. *Big white cock* (2006) 132.1 x 121.9 cm. The title of this neon sign might connote something less innocent than a rooster. Courtesy of Peres Projects.

Big white cock is perhaps the best fitting example by Koh that can be described as pop art in the traditional sense. It is a large neon sign of a rooster, and in a different context it could just as easily been mistaken for a shop sign. The title is humorous considering Koh's frequent appropriation of pornographic elements, but this time the title seemed to refer to a more innocent interpretation. But it is still charged with sexuality. The neon sign can connote seedy shops or gluttony (fried chicken), and allegedly "chicken" is an informal term for a "gay teen or a Chinese prostitute."⁹⁸

Another element in Koh's production that can be linked with the pop art movement is his appropriation of pornography. On several occasions, gay pornographic imagery has been used

⁹⁸ Saatchi Gallery, URL: http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/terence_koh_cock.htm [06.01.11]

in Koh's art, such as in his *asianpunkboy* magazines or the photographs from *The Whole Family*. Pornography is undoubtedly a major part of popular culture, although possibly less openly as it is somewhat tabooed. Koh's sexualized elements are frequently dismissed as shocking in the general media but, as mentioned in the catalog texts, not everyone is so eager to dismiss them as such. Despite a widespread regard of pornography as low culture, it can also connote an aesthetic of transgression, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

I do not think Koh's pop references are comments on consumerism, as was widely thematized in the pop art of the 1960s. With his overall engagement to topics such as life and death, and life's biggest mysteries, his pop references seem rather to suggest a meta-perspective on human desire. Pornography and kitsch can easily be regarded as possible symptoms of escapism, as they offer a false consciousness.⁹⁹ They pretend to give something for nothing and, as Clement Greenberg warns us about, "Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations."¹⁰⁰ Koh's works problematize reality through the construction of alternative microcosms in his exhibitions. His artworks can be interpreted as metaphysical comments on human desire for instant gratification, through fetishizing commodities, sexual fulfillment, or drug abuse. We have seen numerous examples of how Koh's work can be read as deeply conceptual, proposing that his low-cultural references can be interpreted as a kind of metaphysics; as comments on human desires and escapism.

Flowers for Baudelaire can also be interpreted as such. Though not formally linked with traditional pop art, its subject matter evokes these metaphysical aspects on consumer culture. The desire for gratification is evident when viewing the material list for the canvases. They connote something sweet (confectionary sugar), yet simultaneously poisonous (titanium base). When the guests were encouraged to taste the canvas, it created a mischievous bacchanal atmosphere where the art was available for consummation. The fragility of the paintings might echo our own fragile state, in search for fulfillment. Another connotation that links this exhibition to popular culture is that of cocaine. The ultimate escapism is drug-induced.

The pop artists of the 1960s seemingly celebrated the growing consumer culture, but succeeding postmodern artists discussed consumer culture with a larger skepticism. An

⁹⁹ Milan Kundera describes kitsch in the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) as "the witless embrace of cliché as a defense against the weight of human reality."

¹⁰⁰ Greenberg, Clement (1939) "Avant-garde and Kitsch", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 540

example is Barbara Kruger's large silkscreen, *untitled (I shop therefore I am)*, from 1987. It is a powerful critique of consumerism, depicting a grabbing hand, with the text "I shop therefore I am" written in huge white letters on a red square background. Koh's pop references are neither celebratory nor critical, and might best be described as a meta-perspective on popular culture, suggesting its origin in the human psyche.

If pop art defied the creed of Greenberg's modernism and tried to draw focus back onto mass culture instead of devaluating it, it did so without passing judgment. This focus on society, and its governing institutions increased, and several artists used their art as a way of communicating their views on current state of affairs. Thus much art became increasingly politicized during the postmodern era.

Eclecticism and performance art

As we have seen, Koh's art share some formal similarities with modernism, minimalism and pop art. However, as the pop artists, Terence Koh works with a free attitude towards the finished product, and is not limited by medium specificity or claims of autonomy. The hybridization of genres is defining for postmodernism, and Koh's art does, as we have seen, combine elements from painting, drawing, sculpture and installations. These works also regularly serve as props for his performances. Such an unhindered attitude towards artistic mediums is to some extent a result of postmodernism's new way of thinking about art. Koh does not, however, share much of postmodernism's engagement to institution critique.

Koh's performance *Mein tod, mein tod*, was a complex artwork, and can be described in different ways. It is for example impossible to pinpoint where the artwork ends and where everyday life begins. Near the end of the performance, as described, the young boys reappeared, this time bringing with them seven white trays with all-white food. A song by *Joy Division*, "Decades", started to play, and the boys walk out in a single file. Then the party started, and the gallery was suddenly as much a club as it was a gallery. The opening was a *happening*, erasing the boundaries between production and reception. The tombstone was not simply a sculpture but an essential element of the performance as well, and it was permanently altered during this event as the participants ate parts of it. Koh's artistic enterprise seems thus, to some portion, to be dedicated to erasing boundaries. His artworks are always embedded in the very fabric of life. If the performance included the entire party, then the audience became as crucial for the performance as the hired actors, and thus, Koh successfully fused art and life.

In this respect another well known artist comes to mind, Allan Kaprow, who developed the happening, and did pioneering work in performance art:

For most of his career, Allan Kaprow has been working to shift that site [of aesthetic experience] from the specialized zones of art towards the particular places and occasions of everyday life. For him the modernist practice of art is more than the production of artworks; it also involves the artist's disciplined effort to observe, engage, and interpret the processes of living, which are themselves as meaningful as most art, and certainly more grounded in common experience.¹⁰¹

Kaprow tried to create artworks that intertwined with everyday life, in an attempt to narrow the gap between these two domains. Similar to Kaprow, Koh's art also seem to stem from his own life and experiences. When I asked him about his motivations, he replied: "I would keep it as obvious as living; what motivates me is by existing itself; being conscious; dreaming; living; the blueness of the eyes, and the light itself. So, it's an unoriginal answer, but everything motivates me."¹⁰²

Even if both Kaprow and Koh find inspiration from everyday life, it appears that where Kaprow set out to change art, Koh's project is simply to create art. They both orchestrate happenings, but their results and intentions are different. Kaprow was engaged in art theoretical debates, wrote extensively on art, and worked as a professor of Visual Arts at the University of California. Kaprow was a scholar. Koh is an enchanter.

Another similarity between Kaprow and Koh is how they both share an interest in the spectator and their experience. John Dewey writes, "The actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience" and he continues, stating, "When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human condition under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience."¹⁰³ He explains that art and life should be inseparable, and advocates a theory of art that acknowledge this symbiosis. This ends up in a warning; "When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, which esthetic theory deals."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Kelley, Jeff (1992) "introduction", *Allan Kaprow – Essays on the blurring of art and life* [2003] Kelley (ed.), University of California Press, USA, xii

¹⁰² Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

¹⁰³ Dewey, John (2005) *Art as Experience*, Berkeley Publishing Group, USA, 1

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2

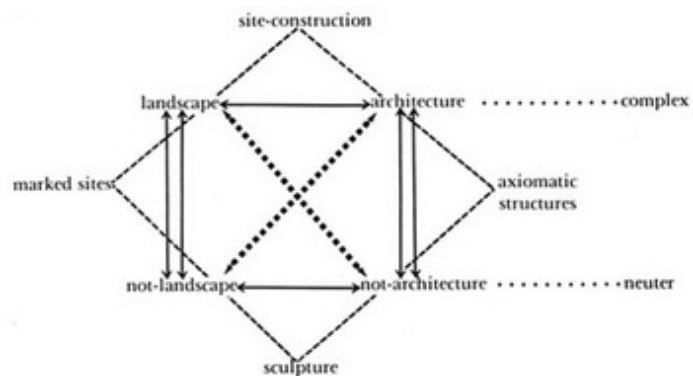
Kaprow was greatly influenced by Dewey’s theory, and tried to bridge the gap between art and life. Koh appears to do the same thing, but without the theoretical articulation that follows Kaprow oeuvre. Koh’s art, and everything he does, can be seen as a life project or life work. Several people have commented this in their discussions on Koh’s and his gesamtkunstwerk. His happenings and performances often distort the boundaries between art and life, but also the boundaries between the artwork and the artist.

During such performances, Koh often employs visual elements that completely transform the exhibition space to better underline the created atmosphere. Such extensive modifications of space were the offspring of minimalism. As Hal Foster argued: “Minimalism breaks with the transcendental space of most Modernist art”, and continues stating that, “The viewer [...] is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site. This is the fundamental reorientation that minimalism inaugurates.”¹⁰⁵

To understand this developing artistic medium, which we know as *installation art*, we must briefly begin with an examination of a groundbreaking article by Rosalind Krauss, which sets out to explain the expanding field of sculpture.

Rosalind Krauss’ essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”

Krauss argues that the term sculpture was being distorted to the point where the term was close to being rendered useless. In her essay, “Sculpture in the expanded field”, she presents a tidy description of the condition of sculpture, suggesting a redefinition of the term. She claims that modernist sculpture after 1950 was “something that was possible to locate only in terms of what it was not.”¹⁰⁶ According to Krauss, sculpture existed as something that was *not-architecture* and *not-landscape*. At the same time, it becomes possible to imagine a



Picture 18. Rosalind Krauss. Her diagram shows how sculpture in the expanded field can fall into four categories: Sculpture, axiomatic structures, site-construction or marked sites.

¹⁰⁵ Foster (1986/1996) op.cit., 270

¹⁰⁶ Krauss, Rosalind (1976) “Sculpture in the expanded field”, *October*, Vol. 8 (spring), 34.

positive definition, claiming that sculpture could be both landscape and architecture. By way of a scientific approach, Krauss created a model envisaging four modes of existence for sculpture in the expanded field.

Further, she argued “the field provides both for an expanded but finite set of related positions for a given artist to occupy and explore.”¹⁰⁷

Krauss essay is an important starting point for understanding the further development of installation art, because it captures the moment when artists were moving beyond the traditional rendering of sculpture.

From environment to installation – beyond the expanded field

Krauss tried to save the term sculpture by opening up for an expanded field, but in the end the artistic engagement to three-dimensional objects went beyond her definition as well. This artistic practice gained momentum in the 1960s, and further developed during the 70s and 80s. For a long time the term *environment*, was used to describe such multi media works, but eventually *installation* became the common term. Installation art is only partially derived from sculpture, and some artists had other starting points, such as painting. Krauss’ model did not fully take into account hybridization of the genres, and installation art quickly gained a central position in contemporary art.

Terence Koh works extensively with installations, and all of the exhibition described in this thesis can be characterized as such. In *Flowers for Baudelaire* a constellation of paintings form the installation, but more commonly they are derived from his sculptures. Julie Reiss defines installation art as follows:

“Installation art can be abstract or pictorial, controlled or spontaneous. Separate object can be included, or no objects at all. There is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer. [...] In creating an installation, the artist treats an entire indoor space (large enough for people to enter) as a single situation.”¹⁰⁸

The definition for installation art covers an array of artistic practices. As a genre it acknowledges the spectator, and to some extent the artwork needs the spectator to fulfill the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁸ Reiss H, Julie (1999) *From Margin to Center – The Spaces of Installation Art*, MIT Press, USA, xiii

work. Thus the spectators *experience* becomes of relevance, which is a key aspect in Koh's production.

In installation art several objects can constitute one artwork, and it opens up for a reading of entire exhibitions as one situation. This is the case with most of Koh's solo-exhibitions. Every artwork displayed is spawned from an overall idea, and together they form a narrative or progression that has a meaning apart from the sum of each individual artwork. Koh acknowledges this when he talks about Kunsthalle Zürich: "one of the toughest spaces was the Kunsthalle Zürich [...] because it was seven humungous rooms. I'm not intimidated by stuff like that, but it was thinking about seven things at once as one piece. [It] works as a narrative. You enter a series of rooms. I always see rooms as narratives."¹⁰⁹ As earlier remarked, his work has on several occasions been described as theatrical. This term is closely related to installation art. Koh has created believable yet surreal environments in the gallery room with his installations. Maybe the most striking example is *God*, where his installation was so physically challenging and spectators had so much trouble moving through the exhibition, that they needed a guide. Tim Steiner who worked at the Pury & Luxembourg during the exhibition gave me the following account of the event:

It wasn't planned to guide people through the show, but because of the strobe you had no sense of depth or distance and people walked into the sculptures (which appeared to be moving in the light), each other, the walls and tripped down the stairs. We had to put an 'Enter at own Risk' sign at the entrance. You also did not know where to go when alone in the show. I started walking with people as a security measure, which in time turned into the guided tours¹¹⁰.

The spectators inside the gallery were overwhelmed by Koh's installation. It had little in common with the typical "white cube" exhibition, and the displayed artworks seemed to react to the gallery space. Koh acknowledges the importance of space, and the relation between artwork and the exhibition space, stating, "I'm definitely very spatial. The only way I can ever do a show is to actually be there, walking about."¹¹¹ In accordance with what Reiss has described, the spectator here *enters* the artwork, meaning that the artwork was not limited to being hung on a wall or placed on the floor, but rather envelops the spectator. However, while

¹⁰⁹ Obrist, op.cit., 136

¹¹⁰ Steiner, Tim email correspondence, 30th of November, 2010

¹¹¹ Obrist, op.cit., 136

creating highly aesthetical and powerful visual works, Koh is also deeply engaged in an underlying idea or *concept*.

Concept and object

One might argue that there is a paradox in calling Koh's works conceptual,¹¹² since they can be at the same time sensuously powerful and visually striking. The artist Sol LeWitt defines conceptual art, writing, "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work [...] all planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art."¹¹³ The form becomes subordinate to the idea, which *is* the artwork – the idea does not even have to be realized for it to be an artwork, LeWitt explains. He elaborates, claiming, "Ideas may also be stated with numbers, photographs, or words or any way the artist chooses, the form being unimportant."¹¹⁴ As the form becomes unimportant, and the *thought* is both the artwork and the medium, presenting a clear definition of conceptual art can be challenging. We may ask ourselves; does this mean that if the form is important, the concept is not? Joseph Kosuth claims, "all art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually."¹¹⁵ When the idea of a concept behind the artwork has been planted in the viewer, and as soon as the observer perceives the art in conceptual terms, any artwork will have trouble resisting such a classification.

A conceptual reading of Koh's art does provide some answers, revealing his commitment to cultivating a narrative in his exhibitions, but at the same time we must keep in mind that a conceptual reading might not provide causal explanations. Since Koh does not offer much help deciphering his work, much is left open to the viewer to decide. When asked about the process from idea to finished product, Koh answered, "It just comes to me when it comes to me, the whole exhibition. I see every single detail of the exhibition. It just pops up in my head. [...] An idea that comes fully formed."¹¹⁶ If Koh sees the entire exhibition

¹¹² I am discussing conceptual art generally, as an artistic medium (not the art historical tendency).

¹¹³ LeWitt, Sol (1967) "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 847

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 847

¹¹⁵ Kosuth, Joseph (1991) *Art After Philosophy*, MIT press, USA, 18

¹¹⁶ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

simultaneously it must be because every element is interconnected, united by a governing idea or concept.

In some cases it makes little sense to give a formal analysis of a conceptual artwork's physical appearance, because the object serve better to be thought of than to be looked at. This was arguably more apparent in the late 1960s and 1970s, when several conceptual artists stressed the concept by underplaying the form, than it is today. Although Koh's artworks are often visually striking, they also serve a conceptual purpose larger than the object itself. Conceptual elements in Koh's work can be uncovered, but they are always subtle.

He treats transcendental themes as objects under scrutiny. Poetic concepts include human existence and our structuring of the world and of ourselves through religious and social rituals, human needs and desires; for acknowledgement, recognition and most importantly, love. These recurring universal concepts are constantly researched. Koh is not an



Picture 19. Terence Koh. 2008. *Installation view from Captain Buddha*, Schirn Kunsthalle, showing: *I am in love with the sound of disco* (back) and *I am guiding myself true an impossible nectarine what then becomes of the camel* (front). Courtesy of Peres Projects.

activist, and does not stress political views and only rarely raise moral issues through his art.

The best example for a work with a possible moralistic meaning might be his Buddhist peace symbol exhibited at Schirn Kunsthalle in Germany. The peace symbol had its connotations forever altered when the Nazis appropriated the swastika. Koh's peace symbol is made up from 55 brass toy soldiers, painted white.¹¹⁷ The duality of peace and terror could be experienced as distressing. This was possibly further enhanced by the fact that it was displayed in Germany, where their historical past is a delicate issue. Placed in front of the peace symbol was a full size Buddhist sculpture sitting in lotus position, in the mold of Koh himself. By recontextualizing the symbol through a

¹¹⁷ According to numerology 55 is related to EL, which is an ancient word for God. E is the fifth, and L is the eleventh letter in the alphabet. $5 \times 11 = 55$.

peaceful gesture and subtle connotations, he thus seemed to welcome contemplation rather than judgment.

In *Terence Koh* at Kunsthalle Zürich and *Flowers for Baudelaire*, his use of organic materials in the works devalue the whole idea of the artwork-as-investment, and thus the work also drew attention towards certain factors in the art market, most notably to the collector or investor. Such artworks that will deteriorate come with a statement from the artist stressing that eventual alterations were part of the artist's intention. One way of seeing Koh's actions might be that he expelled the collector-as-investor client, and created a situation where only emotional conviction can justify such a purchase. This is not entirely true, because even though such artworks can hardly be regarded as an investment, other benefits come from owning them. More cynically they can be regarded as a token of dedication, a proof that the buyer possesses what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *cultural capital*, and thus serve as a means for distinguishing the owner from other collectors. This was not, as I see it, a major concern for Koh, but is nonetheless an interesting repercussion of how the market might react to artworks of unstable durability.

Koh raised another related issue with his installation at Art Basel in Miami in 2006, where he displayed what allegedly were his own gold plated excrements in showcases. Echoing the conceptual artist Piero Manzoni, who sold his canned excrements valued to be priced as gold, Koh's work can be read as a comment on the myth of the artist-genius; as an artistic King Midas with the ability to turn everything into gold/art. However, unlike Manzoni whose work has an unmistakable repulsion over it, Koh actually tried, and succeeded, in making his excrements aesthetically appealing by plating them in gold, and installing them respectfully in showcases. As mentioned, Koh's steep rise to fame was remarkable, and this artwork can be seen as largely self-referential (it is even organically linked with Koh).

In the media however, few possible suggestions for interpretation were presented. The articles covering this work largely focused on reporting, half in shock, the high price Koh was able to sell his installations for. Koh's installations became the eye of the storm in (yet another) debate about what constitutes *art*. This opens up for another concept behind the works, fueling the fire on the topic of authorship and work. Michel Foucault wrote about the relation between author and work, questioning our assumptions on the author, which is just as relevant concerning artists and artwork:

“What [...] is the strange unit designated by the term work?” What is necessary to its composition, if a work is not something written by a person called an ‘author’? [...] If an individual is not an author,

what are we to make of those things he has written or said, left among his papers or communicated to others?”¹¹⁸

If an artist is defined by his ability to create art, then one can assume that everything created by an artist is by definition art. Koh puts such a notion to the test when exhibiting his excrements. He does not exhibit his excrements as a ready-made like Manzoni, but he transforms them artistically, actually succeeding in elevating human waste to a visually and conceptually striking work.¹¹⁹

The Bowery School

The art milieu in downtown New York is vibrant and pluralistic, and the density of artists is high. A very informal term ‘Bowery School’¹²⁰ has been used to describe a constellation of some of these downtown-artists who have fairly recently emerged with great success, including Dan Colen, Nate Lowman, Ryan McGinley, Agathe Snow, Dash Snow, Banks Violette and Terence Koh. The link between these artists (and probably a few more I have not mentioned) as members of the same ‘school’ is a bit dubious. The Bowery School does not necessarily refer so much to a similar artistic expression as it refers to a group of artists who are friends or at least associated with each other. Koh describes the general conception of the Bowery School as such: “You have this idea of these artists, that take pictures of each other, do drugs, and stay together.”¹²¹

It started with the artist Nan Goldin, who created a visual diary consisting of extensive documentation from her life in the Bowery and downtown New York, in the 1980s. Her personal photographs depict her life, and clearly reveal a spontaneity and subjectivity that is honest and real. Her art is raw and unsentimental, but she portrays her friends with love and

¹¹⁸ Foucault, Michel (1969) “What is an author”, *The Art of Art History – a Critical Anthology*, [2009] Donald Preziosi (ed.) Oxford University Press, USA, 323

¹¹⁹ The same aesthetic can be found in Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, where the artist’s urine becomes a highly aestheticized element.

¹²⁰ The Bowery School refers to the Bowery, a small neighborhood in the southern part of Manhattan, New York.

¹²¹ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

affection.¹²² Her art is thus closely linked with the people and places of her everyday life, and the urban scene serves as the backdrop of her artworks.

Even though the mentioned artists who constitute the Bowery School make very different artworks, if we had to try to find a common denominator, I would say that all of them, at least to some extent, deal with an urban aesthetic which incorporates a youthful energy and social alertness filled with subcultural references. However, Terence Koh does not so easily fit in this category. As we have seen, Koh's art seem to point to transcendent themes rather than immanent scenes (such as downtown New York). In his abstracted works, Eastern and Western cultural elements are appropriated with ease within his complex framework of references, and little reveal that he lives within close proximity of the Bowery. Even if Koh's works appear quite different from those of his downtown associates, he shares the energizing creative freedom that is characteristic for many of these artists. One particular installation, *Nest*, by Dan Colen and Dash Snow, deal with similar themes as I have ascribed Koh's idiosyncratic installations.¹²³

In 2007, Snow and Colen filled the gallery space at Deitch Projects with thousands of shredded phone books and trashed the gallery during four overnight sessions, with the help of a group of fellow artists, including Terence Koh, Nate Lowman and Hanna Liden. The extreme Dionysian happening, induced by drugs and alcohol, naturally altered the gallery space, which was exhibited as an installation afterwards.¹²⁴ The raw, spontaneous, creative force is cultivated, and the destruction in their wake remained as a thunderous shout for freedom of expression, while it at the same time can be perceived as a monument of escapism, catharsis or simply heartfelt camaraderie. The physical experience of *Nest*, when standing in the wake of the preceding event, can be compared to Koh's enveloping installations. Spontaneity is characteristic for Koh's wall drawings in *God*, but normally he place

¹²² The photographs by the deceased artist Dash Snow share some similarities with Golding's. But also Koh take personal pictures, and frequently publish them on his web page. These photos are usually of Koh's boyfriend, their cats or apartment, his friends etc. However, these photos remain a marginal part of his artistic production.

¹²³ The two artists had enacted the same concept, *hamster nests*, several times before, outside of the art institutions. Polaroid photographs and video documentation exist from earlier (unauthorized) enactments in hotel rooms.

¹²⁴ As mentioned, as a part of *God*, Koh also held a performance with the public excluded, which clearly invoked a Dionysian celebration with sex and drugs as key ingredients. As with *Nest*, the audience only witnessed the aftermath.

tremendous value on precision (even though his exhibitions follow their own, often-indecipherable logic).¹²⁵

Another characteristic of the Bowery School constituents¹²⁶ is their extensive appropriation of symbols. Appropriation art is not a new phenomenon, but the premises for doing so is different from the previous generations. By juxtaposing symbols in a newly invented context, they construct a fragmented meaning, which the spectator must mentally rearrange into coherence. Thus the viewer becomes a co-producer. Shamim Momin suggests that the relationship between popular culture and art has changed from an appropriation strategy to an unconscious assimilation:

What we see from within Koh stems from the unique position of contemporary artists of this moment, whose relationship to popular/found culture has become internalized, lacking the distance seen even in the work of artists such as Jack Goldstein, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, or Mike Kelley, who more fully elaborated the appropriative strategy, and the true synthesis of high and low (as opposed to the hierarchical, hermetic approach of the Pop artists). The remoteness seen in those precursors reflected the process of pulling away from the modernist position, the objective analysis of forms that was required to create the space in which contemporary artists now work. The earlier artists' purified, remote emotions have been transformed into near-total subjectivity through the process of objective self-awareness without irony.¹²⁷

The process is internalized, and executed without any ironic distance. With the near-total subjectivity Momin refers to, the artist becomes a force to be reckoned with when examining the work, as his or hers subjectivity becomes a possible entry point.¹²⁸ This accentuation of the artist behind the work echoes a romantic view on artistic subjectivity, while the internalized use of appropriated elements is arguably a newly developed phenomenon.

“Collaborations are the end of friendship,” says Koh, possibly half jokingly.¹²⁹ Maybe his statement can be understood because of this near-total subjectivity. Koh rarely collaborate with fellow artists. As mentioned, he explains that his ideas are conceived in their entirety, and he knows exactly how he wants it to turn out. His attention to miniscule details when

¹²⁵ An example of this meticulous precision, is given by Augustín Pérez Rubio, who reveals that at *Love for Eternity*, a burning candle suspended from the ceiling were exactly 132 centimeters from the floor, because this is the same height as Koh's heart (page 39)

¹²⁶ This is by no means an exclusive trait of these artists in particular.

¹²⁷ Momin (2005) op.cit., 19

¹²⁸ Although sometimes it appears that the exaggerated focus on the artists overshadows the artwork.

¹²⁹ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

arranging his narratives would thus easily be compromised in collaboration. Stressing the importance of the unity of his narrative, Koh says, “That’s why I fucking hate art fairs and I fucking hate when you sell things: you see my pieces as separate from anything else. I do these secret performances.”¹³⁰ Koh’s gesamtkunstwerk include every conceivable aspect.

Formally, it is hard to find a clearly distinctive expression for the Bowery School artists. But even if there is little visual evidence that Koh is associated with these artists, he still seem to share an romantic idealism and firm belief in the creative force of the individual. This is maybe the most symptomatic trait of the Bowery School. Recalling Koh statement, that an artist is born an artist, implies that the creativity comes from within rather than external influence.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to discern how Koh’s artistic practice can be related to former artistic tendencies. As we have seen, Koh works in an eclectic manner that cannot easily be categorized. His works are filled with references to art history, artists and artistic tendencies, but his eclectic mixture of these elements results in something entirely different from the previously mentioned categories. Koh’s works are highly aesthetical, and often subliminally evoke an emotional or sensual response in the beholder. His exhibitions seem to be governed by an underlying concept, connecting the separate works in an exhibition with a narrative, apparent or subtle. The idea becomes the machine that makes conceptual art (according to Le Witt) and the body is the medium in performance art. Koh is highly active in both genres, and thus uses his own self, both body and mind, as a possible artistic medium. Any understanding of Koh’s oeuvre must also include the artist himself.

From examining Koh’s art in relation to artistic tendencies in post-war New York, we reveal a number of similarities: It appears that Koh share a similar engagement to transcendence with the abstract expressionists, as Koh’s art evokes a sensation of the sublime through a preverbal communication similar to works by artists such as Rothko or Newman. How Koh’s installations seem to envelope the viewer by emitting a physical presence can be compared to the effect of Newman’s vast and incomprehensible canvases. Koh shows neither concern maintaining autonomy nor any respect for maintaining traditional boundaries of artistic mediums; he is truly multimedia. Exploring every available means of expression, Koh

¹³⁰ Obrist, op.cit., 136

creates hybridizations of sculpture, installation, drawing, painting and performance. His artworks, besides being highly visual, often include powerful odors as well as incredibly bright light or loud music or noise.

Koh often applies minimal gestures in his works, communicating through subtleties. His art is very spatial, and similar to the minimalist artist Robert Morris, Koh includes the spectator in the artwork. His artworks do not behave like static objects on display; passively waiting for inspection. Instead, they seem to revolve around the spectator, resisting a single perspective.

His sometimes-flirtatious attitude towards consumer culture does not seem to comment consumerism. Unlike pop art, his appropriation seems internalized, executed without irony or distance. The concepts he reveals are rather metaphysical or existentialistic, and only rarely does his work seem to comment contemporary political or cultural issues.

Despite of these similarities, none of these comparisons really circle the meaning of Koh's work. When I asked him about influence from other artists, he replied:

I never want to answer that question because then you single out one artist. I don't want to say a single person, because you're born an artist for one thing, and you're part of a circular- almost like a carnation circle. It's not like one ism fighting another; it's like a family, from the very first, I don't know, maybe cave paintings in Lascaux? They are all artists to me.¹³¹

It appears that Koh regard his artistic practice as an almost instinctive process that stem from simply being an artist. Koh's attitude supports Momin's claim that appropriation is now an internalized process. From juxtaposing elements from every conceivable artistic tendency or culture, he creates something original and unique. This revealing attitude was partially born from postmodernism, which is often regarded as the end of a linear (art) history or master narratives. Lyotard argues in the postmodern condition, how, "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy."¹³² Koh appears to be well at peace with relinquishing any grand narrative in favor of the fragmented individual narrative. Although some people have tried to categorize Koh in relation to certain artistic groupings, they fail to do so convincingly. Koh rarely collaborates with other artists, nor is he part of any artistic movement. As earlier

¹³¹ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

¹³² Lyotard, Jean-Francois (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, USA, xxv

quoted, maybe he does work in the end of isms. Regardless whether this is true, it is symptomatic that he feels that way.

Koh's constantly developing gesamtkunstwerk is not satisfactory explained through the discussion in light of art historical tendencies. But from the previous examination, we can now employ a theoretical framework for a deeper understanding of his work.

5 Romanticism and experience – Koh’s works in an art theoretical perspective

Up until now, this thesis has supported the assumption that Koh’s oeuvre is not necessarily best described in light of recently developed art theories. His art, as well as his artistic persona echoes a romantic, poetic and idealistic attitude. In this chapter I will therefore examine to what extent his works can be fruitfully discussed in relation to currents in romanticism. However, it is important to notice that while Koh appropriate aspects of romanticism, he does so well within the confines of contemporary art. As stated in the former chapter, Koh do evoke artistic elements attributed to historical tendencies, but he does so with an eclectic freedom that is symptomatic for our time.

Romanticism as a contemporary phenomenon – Rock aesthetics

So what is romanticism – and how can we understand this historical undercurrent in relation to Koh’s work? Let us first briefly consider romanticism as a historical phenomenon: With the industrial revolution and the development of steam engines and electricity, everyday life in Europe changed rapidly. Factories could produce its goods faster and cheaper, and, by way of mass transportation, deliver them with ease over large distances. The bourgeois middle class experienced economic prosperity, and people migrated to the developing cities. With the urbanization of cities, parts of its populace felt alienated and disconnected to nature.¹³³ According to William Robert, this resulted in an ambivalence on the part of cultivated Europeans to the condition in which they found themselves: as much as they might value the achievements of reason, they also sensed that reason had become oppressive and that something precious was being lost; many longed for simpler modes of being, closer to nature.¹³⁴

Thus, with technological advancements and the urbanization of society, a kind of nostalgia developed, which favored the wild, untamable nature, as a negation of the

¹³³ Friedrich Schiller explains the suppression of individuality in urban society in *Aesthetic Education* (1795), particularly in the sixth letter.

¹³⁴ Williams, op.cit., 93

systematic structures of the city. The notion of the sublime for instance, which is an important element constituting Romanticism, became a distinctive characteristic.

Another important change with Romanticism was the massive increase of artists. Due to the economic prosperity, especially for the bourgeois class, the density of artists increased, which in turn resulted in a greater accentuation of individuality and original genius. “The lives of famous artists were becoming public property; they were becoming ‘celebrities’ in something like the modern understanding of the concept,”¹³⁵ writes Matthew Craske, who states that “the essential concern of the artist should be to express himself or to give physical substance to his ‘imagination’ or personal vision. The ideology of self-expression is held to be *the* defining ideology or aesthetic of the ‘romantic movement’¹³⁶. This resulted in a transition from representation to expression, as the artist’s personal perception became more important.

The notion of Romanticism has however not ever really disappeared, but exists as an undercurrent in contemporary society. Abstract expressionism evoked the romantic tradition, with its romanticized accentuating of the individual genius, who resemble Lord Byron’s character of a misunderstood loner, who breaks free of the stale conventions formed by society and follows his own inspiration conscientiously.

“Artist’s artist or the most popular artist?”

The media frequently portray Koh as an ‘enfant terrible’ of the art world, attributing him rock star characteristics. His celebrity status does not conform to the artist norm, and artists who enter the glitzy celebrity sphere are frequently criticized for being commercial. Koh does not hide his delight for glamour.

Pondering whether he is an artist’s artists or the most popular artists, it appears that Koh views the two as exclusive. Does the rock persona hold any truth, and to what extent are these labels useful for this thesis? We are going to start by establishing the

A screenshot of a Facebook post by Terence Koh. The text of the post is: "i wake up every morning and ask myself doo i want to be an artist's artist or the most popular artist? love tea 17th sept'10.nyc". The text is in a simple, lowercase, monospaced font, typical of a text-based social media post.

Picture 20. Terence Koh. Published on his facebook.

¹³⁵ Craske, Matthew (1997) *Art in Europe – 1700-1830*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 28

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36

term romanticism in our own time, based on an examination of Robert Pattison's *The Triumph of Vulgarly*, where he argues how rock music can be seen in elongation of romanticism. Pattison presents several interesting observations, and some of these arguments can be adapted to Koh's oeuvre. Pattison's subject of research is not rock as music, but rock as an idea. Several aspects of Koh's work opens up for an understanding in line with rock 'as an idea'.¹³⁷ His apparent fascination for vulgar excess and the romantic myths of the artist, and its inherent accentuation of subjectivity, could be mentioned in relation to this. Pattison suspects that "ours is a more homogeneous culture than we generally allow, in which elite and popular cultures subscribe to a single set of ideas."¹³⁸ Koh is tellingly enough part of a milieu where the boundaries between the art-, music- and fashion scenes are not necessarily clearly defined. Trying to discern these sets of ideas, which evoke romanticism, I will start by reviewing the key aspects of contemporary romanticism as proposed by Pattison, and discuss their potential relevance in relation to Koh's art.

Rock is, as Pattison sees it, vulgarized Romanticism. It is also pantheistic, and deals with (sexual) excess and the mythical construction of self. These three aspects will serve as the starting point for the discussion.

Vulgarity

Romanticism encourages vulgarity, which is arguably the most defining aspect of rock music, writes Pattison. Vulgarity is "the absence of cultivation,"¹³⁹ and its qualities are "common, noisy, and gross, but above all, vulgarity is untranscendent."¹⁴⁰ Vulgarity is the characteristic of the unrestrained simpleton, who is governed by passion, not reason. "The cultivated man thinks, speaks, and acts with reasoned restraint. The furthest remove from vulgarity is perfect silence."¹⁴¹ One is born vulgar, and only through cultivation and refinements can vulgarity become unlearned. This makes Pattison reach a conclusion that most people are vulgar. There is something spontaneous and passionate about the vulgar, and his definition implies that

¹³⁷ I do not aim to prove that Koh is inspired by rock music, which in turn is inspired by Romanticism. Rather I want to research how Koh's art can be understood as evoking a romantic idealism (similar to how rock is derivative, in part, from Romanticism).

¹³⁸ Pattison, Robert (1987), *The Triumph of Vulgarly*, Oxford University Press, USA, xi

¹³⁹ Ibid., 5

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 6

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 5

being vulgar is inherently being free, primitive and direct; i.e. the natural state of all men. To elaborate; the ‘vulgarian’ does not know that he or she is vulgar. It is not a question of good or bad taste. It is simply the complete lack thereof. “Vulgar is not a word in the vulgarian’s lexicon”, because the vulgarian does not have the ability to “transcend ordinary experience.”¹⁴²

Distinguishing high and low culture, Pattison suspects that both elite and popular culture share the same foundation, but elite culture is unwilling “to embrace the vulgarity inherent in its own premises.”¹⁴³ So, as I understand Pattison, the vulgarian lacks the ability to act with restraint and hide ones vulgarity, because this ability is a product of cultivation. Instead, the vulgar is doomed to a dismal fate by Pattison, who claims, “The vulgar can hardly aspire to be individual, because individuality requires the tranquil development of the will.”¹⁴⁴

Vulgarity is the key term throughout Pattison’s book, but does this term have the same meaning in Koh’s oeuvre as it allegedly does in rock? First of all, it is necessary to comment on the fact that Pattison seemingly makes no real distinction between being unconsciously vulgar and appearing vulgar as a strategy to act according to a certain image. The Sex Pistols for instance, are not tasteless. The vulgarian is indifferent to fashion, writes Pattison: “In his [the classical vulgarian] clothing or his paintings, one color is as good as another, and let them come in what order they will.”¹⁴⁵ Sex Pistols became fashion icons in the punk subculture with their outfits created by the renowned designer Vivienne Westwood. Instead of being indifferent, I would argue that their outfits were consciously chosen because they accentuated the image of the band. Thus they actively seize control of their image. Pattison’s description of the vulgar should be further nuanced, including a discussion of the strategy of consciously appropriating vulgarity. I will only briefly comment Pattison’s arguments now, and instead return with a more thorough discussion after Pattison’s three key aspects are presented.

Returning to Terence Koh, and the attempt to place him in a contemporary romantic tradition, a question arises: is Koh’s art vulgar? One might be tempted to call some of Koh’s works vulgar because they appear to resist intellectualization, and some of them are sexually explicit. The opposite of cultivation and rationalism is sensuality and passion. The vulgar man

¹⁴² Ibid., 7

¹⁴³ Ibid., xi

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 6

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 7

relies on his senses rather than his intellect, which is, as already proposed, not a bad approach to Koh's art. However, Koh's art is not vulgar. Despite elements that can possibly be labeled vulgar, these works always contain something indefinable that reveals an artistic process. If vulgar is the negation of any transcendence, using vulgar in relation to Koh becomes problematic. As earlier proposed, much of Koh's art seem to evolve around grand transcendental themes of existence and humanity. This is not to say that a discussion about vulgarity is irrelevant for Koh's art, but I would claim that if the works appear vulgar, they do so because of a conscious decision. Vulgar is clearly a word in Koh's lexicon. I disagree, however, with Pattison who claims that vulgarity and transcendence are mutually exclusive.

At this point presenting a clearer definition of transcendence becomes necessary. Transcendence is often used in a religious context, referring to an existence beyond the physical world.¹⁴⁶ The term is not, however, inseparable from religion, and can refer to an activity surpassing the range of merely physical human experience. Immanuel Kant defines it as such: "I apply the term transcendental to all knowledge which is not so much occupied with objects as with the mode of our cognition of these objects, so far as this mode of cognition is possible a priori."¹⁴⁷ The term transcendental, in Kantian philosophy, refers to knowledge in a metaphysical sense; knowledge concerned with our ability to gain and structure knowledge prior to experience. When describing transcendental themes in Koh's artistic production, I do not aim to entrench the artworks in a religious context, but instead to suggest the possibility of perceiving the works as subtle references to transcendent philosophical topics, connoting enlightenment through contemplation.

Consciously evoking vulgarity is not the same as being vulgar (i.e. uncultivated). Some of Koh's work deals with vulgarity similar to the way pop art deal with consumer culture. This does not mean that Pop art *is* consumer culture, or that Koh's art is vulgar. Vulgarity in Koh's art is always a means, not an end, and the explicitly sexual elements can also allude to a grander conceptual scheme in tune with the recurring themes of Koh's oeuvre.

If Koh occasionally include vulgar elements at will, then we must ask what purpose these elements serve. One might regard them as a democratic gesture,¹⁴⁸ suggesting a sensuous approach. Invoking narcissism and hedonism can be experienced as delightfully

¹⁴⁶ Pattison does not give a clear definition of transcendence, but through numerous discussions concerning the term, it appears he regards transcendence to be intertwined with the belief of a metaphysical mode of existence and religion, and the embrace of non-empirical, a priori knowledge.

¹⁴⁷ Kant, Immanuel (1899) *Critique of pure reason*, Wiley Book Company, New York, 39

¹⁴⁸ Similar to the way rock gained such a massive appeal.

contagious and liberating, and in *Flowers for Baudelaire* the canvases were even edible. The sometimes-excessive sexual content in Koh's art is celebrated in a Dionysian fashion, stripped from all moralism; maybe even cathartic in a sense.¹⁴⁹ Koh's publication *Orpheus* is an example where vulgarity can allude to something else. The pamphlet consists of 18 images of naked boys looking at themselves in the mirror. By recalling the myth of Orpheus, the reader is permitted to perceive the images in a different context than originally intended.¹⁵⁰ Naturally, one is still free to perceive them as gay porn in a curiously printed pamphlet and nothing else, because Koh makes no attempt to recontextualizing them in a specific way; they are celebrated for what they are and little else. Still, through the formal subtleties, of the elegant format and layout for example, the thread bound pamphlet is subject to alternate readings.¹⁵¹

The sexually explicit can also be understood as an expression of the human psyche, where sexuality (often mistaken for vulgarity), can serve as the base for deep philosophical queries into existential topics. Discussing Georges Bataille's theories on eroticism and aesthetic transgression, will exemplify this claim. Another approach to fuse romantic aesthetic experience with transcendence and enlightenment can be found in the theories of Friedrich Schiller, who writes that contemplation of art is a key aspect for human development. We will return to Schiller's theories at a later point.

Pantheism

The second key aspect constituting rock romanticism in Pattison book is pantheism. Pantheism, according to Pattison, "is a garbage-pail philosophy, indiscriminately mixing scraps of everything. Fine distinctions between right and wrong, high and low, true and false, the worthy and unworthy, disappear in pantheism's tolerant and eclectic one that refuses to scorn any particular of the many."¹⁵² A more modest definition describes pantheism as, "a doctrine that identifies God with the universe, or regards the universe as a manifestation of

¹⁴⁹ If elite culture, as Pattison claims, only restrains vulgarity, emotional relief through a cathartic experience might become a necessity.

¹⁵⁰ The pictures were copied from gay porn sites.

¹⁵¹ As mentioned, Philip Aarons explains how the pornographic fanzines can be seen in elongation to Koh's apparent project concerning conceptual and philosophical query into transcendent subject matters.

¹⁵² Pattison, op.cit., 23

God.”¹⁵³ A pantheistic belief means the rejection of a supernatural deity existing beyond the physical world, but believes that god is instead fully manifested *in* the world.¹⁵⁴ In reality it is often difficult to distinguish atheism from pantheism.¹⁵⁵ The pantheist concept of god is not similar to the Christian conception of god as their almighty creator. Pantheism can also be compared to relative atheism or monism.¹⁵⁶ Although, Pattison makes a clear distinction between monism and pantheism, stating, “The monist retains in his refined philosophy all the categories, like tragedy, morality, art, religion, and politics, that depend on transcendent values and therefore would have been obliterated in pure pantheism.”¹⁵⁷ Pantheism is, according to Pattison, similarly characterized with the same unrestrained, primitive freedom as vulgarity, since his pantheist is completely tolerant of all religions and beliefs. “Pantheism is necessarily vulgar because it rejects the transcendence from which refinement springs, because it delights in the noisy confusion of life, and because it sacrifices discrimination to eclecticism.”¹⁵⁸ Pantheism is vulgar, Pattison’s claims, since it only finds pleasure in the physical world, and never attempts to transcend ordinary experience. The near total eclecticism renders the pantheist to “professing no one religion, he accepts and rejects them all.”¹⁵⁹

“Vulgar pantheism is abysmally indiscriminate – or said another way, it is infinitely tolerant. [...] Vulgar pantheism acknowledges as neutral fact what so many have been at pains to condemn as sybaritic narcissism: that we live in a universe of sensual experience of which I am the center and infinite circumference.”¹⁶⁰

Pantheism’s infinite tolerance must be appealing for Pattison romantic system, because it presents the vulgarian with a belief system that supports self-indulgent narcissism without ever passing moral judgment. According to Pattison, the pleasure of pantheism is the ability to find happiness in the present, where “the man of refinement suffers the constant misery of

¹⁵³ New Oxford American Dictionary, software for Mac, ‘pantheism’

¹⁵⁴ The word pantheism is derived from the Greek words pan, meaning all, and theos, meaning god.

¹⁵⁵ Atheism completely rejects the notion of a deity, while pantheism claims that god is manifest in all things.

¹⁵⁶ Monism is a doctrine that denies the existence of a duality between god and the world.

¹⁵⁷ Pattison, op.cit., 24

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 24

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 24

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 27

unrealized idealism.”¹⁶¹ Rock is a close to perfect manifestation of pantheism, assimilating its elements of easy-going narcissism, turning this ideology into compelling noise.

Romantic pantheism is an interesting contribution for our discussion about the art of Terence Koh. His refusal to moralize his subject matter evokes similar tendencies as Pattison describes for the pantheist. “I’m not religious. I’m not even spiritual. Maybe I’m sensual,”¹⁶² says Koh. This statement certainly evokes the pantheist creed, as described by Pattison. Similarly as pantheism’s practicing of religious eclecticism, we find a strong fascination for religious symbols and rituals in the works of Koh. He does not favor any one religion, but appropriate different religious elements for his own purpose. Invoking Buddhist or Christian symbols and rituals also evoke the mysticism inherent in the religions; a mysticism that Koh reconstructs in his art. The sensuous impact of his works are an important trait, however, his art is not exhausted by the direct physical experience. His immersive installations propose solitary contemplation, and offers transcendent escape. Again, Pattison’s total exclusion of transcendence becomes a problem. He states, “The pantheist may be fascinated or bemused by the castes, religions, and ethics of a various world, but he denies to each in turn transcendent validity.”¹⁶³ This description does not so easily adapt to Koh’s artistic production. He is arguably fascinated by religion, but he does not, however, appear to deny them transcendence. Pattison also writes, “In its most essential points it rejects the transcendent separation of religion and ordinary activity.”¹⁶⁴ This is an interesting claim, and is more suited to describe Koh’s art, because, rather than rejecting the possibility of transcendence, Koh appears to view everyday activity and religious rites in the same high regard.¹⁶⁵ Instead of devaluating transcendence altogether, maybe Koh sees the same possible source of transcendence in everyday life as he sees in various religious rites. Some of his artworks mimic religious rituals and symbols, such as *mein tod mein tod*, or *god*. Other works are made from low-value trinkets, arranged and presented with the upmost respect. These items, such as the content in the vitrine pieces, appear almost like relics.

It is not necessary to label Koh one thing or the other. Koh might very well be researching pantheism as he does any other religion- simply with an open mind. Koh is not

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 26

¹⁶² Obrist, op.cit., 136

¹⁶³ Pattison, op.cit., 23

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 28

¹⁶⁵ As earlier quoted, Koh finds motivation and inspiration in everything, simply by existing.

essentially more of a pantheist than he is a Buddhist or a Christian. His art evoke elements from all of these religions, and they all seem to share an origin in his romantic idealism.

Sexual excess and the construction of self

Sexual excess is a romantic convention that aims to break the barriers of decency, writes Pattison. “Rock looks like a reduction of sublime Romantic energy to the status of popular pornography.”¹⁶⁶ The possibly provocative way rock deals with the sex drive is straight to the point, without any obscuring metaphors. The sex drive is perfectly natural, and the instinct to sexually reproduce exists in most animals; humans are no exception. Regardless of these obvious facts, it is still thought of as a highly private matter in modern society. For the rocker, sexual excess is both a celebration of the primitive carnal urges of man, and an attempt to break the self-imposed barrier of decency. “Sexual excess is by now a Romantic convention”, claims Pattison, defining romanticism as a “period in which the sexual excesses of artists have become an extension of their art.”¹⁶⁷ As mentioned, the renowned romantic artists were considered celebrities, and their eccentricity (real or constructed) often became trademarks. In this respect, sexual excess becomes an intricate part of the constructed image of the artists. The explicit sexuality is not about sex per se, but a “romantic ritual of venerating the instinctual,” explains Pattison.¹⁶⁸ Excessive behavior is interconnected with narcissism and the non-conformist attitude that is typical for rock. “Romanticism and rock share protocols for a heroism of excess. Their heroes need not be brave or loyal or good. They are those whose emotions have broken out of prescribed limits, who have accomplished the highest degree of novelty, whose selves have achieved bizarre and unexpected definition.”¹⁶⁹ So, the celebration of primitivism is a key aspect in all the three interconnecting elements we have mentioned; aspects that shape and constitute the self.

Artistic subjectivity and individuality became crucial features for the romantic period. Pattison’s rockers reanimate the same idealism, and willingly play the part. Despite the freedom and tolerance implied in the rock term, as established by Pattison, highly visible conventions apply for these artists. The failure to comply with the rock aesthetic, distinguished by qualities such as an, “immediate lyricism stripped of artifice” and governed

¹⁶⁶ Pattison, op.cit., 113

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 118

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 115

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 122

by an, “unspoken principle that the music must be fun,”¹⁷⁰ will likely be deemed pretentious. This does not fully comply with Pattison’s description of total inclusion and tolerance amongst the pantheist rockers, and suggests that distinguishing mechanisms of identification and are consciously upheld. The importance of these conventions results in an attitude that favors the myth to any fact.

It is reasonable to describe some of Koh’s work as sexually excessive, but this aspect does not describe the majority of his oeuvre. Sex and lavish fashion have, however, been a frequent topic for discussion in several interviews with the tabloid media, and his *image* is highly sexualized.¹⁷¹ His earlier artworks as asianpunkboy are more sexually explicit than later works. As mentioned, the fanzines were described as “faggy filth”. These handmade magazines clearly evoke the reduction from sublime romantic energy to pornography Pattison describes. In spite of their pornographic character, they still reveal subtle hints of a sublime romantic energy, because of their elegant and personal manner of execution.¹⁷²

Other artworks by Koh might be understood as excessiveness and expressions of self-gratification, such as the edible paintings from *Flowers for Baudelaire* or the chocolate mountains from Kunsthalle Zürich. Still, the works are so visually appealing that this connotation is likely to be overshadowed by other qualities such as their impermanent and fragile character. Excess and sexual transgression does occur as topics in Koh’s oeuvre, but the sexual content is always executed in a celebratory and tolerating manner, which is neither judgmental nor moralizing. This unrestrained sexual attitude is similar to that of the romantic rocker.

Despite a similar attitude, the results are highly different. Pattison explains that rock “destroy the distance necessary for contemplation and transcendence”, using the following metaphor: “The spontaneity of the telephone quashes the contemplation of the letter.”¹⁷³ This is a good example of the differences between the romantic expression in rock and in art. The lingering aesthetic experience of Koh’s artworks permit quiet contemplation, whereas rock is

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 208

¹⁷¹ As I described in “Sexuality and queer culture”, several catalog texts helps to construct and uphold this image.

¹⁷² Interestingly enough, this is a reversal of what Pattison described. Koh’s magazines are pornography turned into romantic energy, rather than romantic energy reduced to pornography.

¹⁷³ Pattison, op.cit., 134

performed and experienced at break-neck speed, reducing the capacity of mental reflection to a minimum.

Koh's art reveals an impeccable engagement to beauty, and the immersive environment welcomes contemplation. The enchantment of the artworks remains as an afterthought, because one can never fully exhaust the work. Rock aesthetic, according to Pattison is all about the immediate impact. It must be noted that while Koh is surely interested in the instantaneous effect of his artworks, this is just one out of several defining characteristics of his art.

The myth is an important facet of Koh's oeuvre. He does not reveal his true age, and sometimes reveals conflicting details about his background. Martina Weinhart writes, "Terence Koh does not grow older. And the year of his birth is magically suited to his unassailable youth."¹⁷⁴ He creates a myth, which is as favorable as any truth, and to query Koh's biographical details would probably not yield any new insights. The fact that he does create such a mystic persona is in itself interesting.

The pseudonym asianpunkboy can be compared to Pattison's rocker. As mentioned, Koh stopped using the alter ego because he did not want to be perceived as an Asian punk boy anymore. It seems Koh is attuned to the romantic ideal and construction of self, but that he outgrew the notion of constant rebirth and of the ferocious rebelliousness implied in the punk boy persona. Expressions of youthfulness are still found in his artworks, but his romantic expression is too subtle and complex to be compared to any rock aesthetic.

The image of Koh today, with his partially clouded background, is more of a quiet sensitive thinker who writes poetry and creates complex conceptual works. This persona has more in common with a Zen monk than with the rock star. The ritual is still an important aspect of Koh's artistic production. The rocker loathes ennui. Maybe asianpunkboy did too. Now, Terence Koh seems to welcome silence and nothingness as a place for contemplation. The influence from Zen Buddhism that made John Cage and Allan Kaprow appreciate the smaller things of everyday life seems like a familiar thought for Koh as well. The romantic notion is present and, even though Koh chose a different path than the vulgar rocker, his art still radiate the passionate idealism that helped define Romanticism.

Koh is clearly fascinated by celebrity culture and the distinction between the art world and the real world: "I really want to be the first artists in the twenty-first who shifts society,

¹⁷⁴ Weinhart, op.cit., 91

which is what Warhol did.”¹⁷⁵ This fascination of his is often frowned upon, and devaluated as ridiculous vanity. It can also be seen in relation to his continuing engagement for the total work of art. There lies a democratic gesture¹⁷⁶ in this quest; breaching the barrier surrounding the marginalized art world, and spilling into society as a whole: “I really do it because I want to go beyond just the art world. My biggest goal is to change history, not just change art history, but to change what society could be.”¹⁷⁷ This idealism echoes romantic philosophy, which will return to at a later point.

Establishing romanticism in a contemporary sense, supported by the framework of Pattison’s book, highlights important characteristics. The contemporary rock romanticism described by Pattison, fail to capture central characteristics of Koh’s art. The poetic expression of Koh’s work and the notion of the sublime, which is a crucial term for romanticism, are not covered by Pattison’s discussions. Pattison’s arguments about rock romanticism are sharply formulated *as* rock. Some of his conclusions are lacking necessary depth, and the definition of romanticism need to be further elaborated for our use. In the following I will try to develop a more nuanced definition of romanticism, in order to explain important aspects of Koh’s art. One concern is the need to moderate Pattison’s blunt exclusion of transcendence from sensuous experience. But before we go on to examine the transcendent character in Koh’s art, I want to examine the gap between art and life in Koh’s oeuvre.

Art and/or life

Stimulating participation

Koh’s installations immerse the spectator, curtail intimacy and remove the possibility of a single perspective for the static viewer. The viewer is activated, and becomes a participant in the immersive artworks. These idiosyncratic environments evoke escapism through solitude, and become a place of almost spiritual value. The exhibitions seem to mute the outside world, and keeps the viewer preoccupied with a sensuous delight.

¹⁷⁵ Obrist, op.cit., 148

¹⁷⁶ As already discussed under the header “I want to be YouTube”, Koh was quoted revealing that he wanted to fully exploit the new technological mediums, such as the Internet, to be truly multimedia.

¹⁷⁷ Obrist, op.cit., 156

Koh's light installation at the Whitney Museum was painfully bright, and maneuvering in the strobe lit rooms at de Pury & Luxembourg was a challenge. In *Mein Tod* at Peres Projects, the spectators were transformed into participants as the white food was served and the party started. Bill Arning called the Whitney show theatrical. That is to say that they are dynamic, and that the striking visual elements employed create believable, yet surreal surroundings. Koh employs a rhetoric that captivates the observer through appealing to all the senses. Sight, smell and sound, but also taste and touch are significant elements in Koh's work, creating an experience that does not exclusively rely on a visual impact. Adam Jasper began his review of *Terence Koh* at Kunsthalle Zürich like this: "The first and most palpable thing that hits you (and this is on opening night) is the smell. Sickly sweet, like that of a feverish child's bedroom, this smell emanates from two alpine monsters standing in the center of the entry hall"¹⁷⁸. Tim Steiner explains about *God*:

"I'm insistent that during gallery hours the incense are burning to an extent that tears run down your face, because that's the effect it needs to have. And the music needs to be loud and it needs to be full blackness, complete darkness. Then when people come in I close all the doors, I pull out all the light plugs and really, really let them feel it."¹⁷⁹

The total engagement of the senses are refined and deployed for maximum effect, and the overwhelming stimuli create a powerful physical experience. Knowing Koh's art, and how he often includes significant yet miniscule gestures that can only be uncovered by scrutiny, invites the spectator to inspect the works diligently. The material lists, which often reveal unconventional elements, also contribute to activating the observer. The works are perceived in a mist of rumors, which Bill Arning believes is a cause for participation, resulting in a "fact-finding mission":

Because the 'real' is constructed out of rumor – taking the checklist as a written rumor as much as a planted story in a gossip column – I would suggest that no participant's pleasure is made more intense by their ability to prove the presence of cum, piss, and ants, and that a suspension of disbelief

¹⁷⁸ Jasper, Adam (2006) "Terence Koh Review Kunsthalle Zürich" *Art Review*, November 1, URL <http://www.peresprojects.com/artist-press-kit-image/52/197/> [13.01.2011]

¹⁷⁹ N/A (2008) "Terence Koh talks to Tim Steiner", *God Terence Koh*, De Pury & Luxembourg, unnumbered pages.

interwoven with doubt is very much desired by the artist and the curators and publics who attempt to approach and comprehend Koh's works.¹⁸⁰

The physical experience of the enveloping installations produces a sensory delight and a kind of narcissistic pleasure in the beholder. Koh's exhibition at the Zürich Kunsthalle created a soothing, dreamlike environment, a place of solitude. Although the exhibition was highly aesthetic, it still supported a contemplative withdrawal.¹⁸¹ The powerful effect of Koh's installations is so successful because he deals with nuances. Instead of shocking his (media-saturated) audience, he activates his spectators and turns them into protagonists in his synthetic idiosyncratic dream worlds. Their uncanny effect is hard to shake off, and stem from the familiar-yet-foreign atmosphere he creates. At the same time, due to the lack of orientation and suppression of reason in the hazy landscape, the spectator must rely on his or hers sensory faculties for stimulation, which produce a mixture of sensory and narcissistic pleasure offered to the viewer.¹⁸² In a conversation, Koh revealed that he wishes he could some day sell his dreams, picturing dreams as a new artistic medium, broadcasted through electrodes from the brain. This futuristic vision is an interesting anecdote when discussing his installations, which reflect the desire to materialize dreamscapes.

Terence Koh as an object – fusing art and life

Self-expression and the individuality of the artist are important traits, adding momentum to the myth of the genius-artist. Koh becomes inseparable from, and a considerable size, in his gesamtkunstwerk. The artworks; physical, conceptual, digital or performed, can be seen as additions to this life's work. Koh himself helms this magnum opus, because he is an intricate entity when seeing his artistic production under one. Thus Terence Koh can be felt as a *phantom* in his own works, imbued in the artworks through his secret performances.¹⁸³ His performances does not always have a clear beginning or end, and his very distinct public persona can be seen as an elongation of his more recognizable performances (recognized as

¹⁸⁰ Arning, op.cit., 77

¹⁸¹ Also, *Gone, Yet Still*, *The Whole Family*, *Captain Buddha* and to an extent, *Flowers for Baudelaire* can be said to have this effect.

¹⁸² Oliveira, Nicolas De, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry (2003) *installation art in the new millennium*, Thames & Hudson, China, 49

¹⁸³ This sense is enhanced by photo-documentation that is often available in the catalogs. He is even physically present in a sense, if we include his bodily fluids that are listed as material, in descriptions.

being performances). Koh stands out from the crowd when out in public. He seems fascinated by celebrity culture, and he appears to be quietly and rigorously researching this phenomenon. He talks about the almost-unsurpassable fame of Andy Warhol, stating, “No one [...] can go out in public like Warhol. Besides Salvador Dalí, he’s the only artist who could walk out in public and be an object.”¹⁸⁴ Koh also discusses fame in another interview, telling, “A singer or a movie star simply cannot walk down the street. I would like to have achieved as an artist; that sense of popularity.”¹⁸⁵ Talking about the collaborative project with the singer Lady Gaga, Koh explains that, “I don’t think that in a long time that there has been this conversation, between the pop world and the art world.”¹⁸⁶ This interest in celebrity culture, fame and glamour is often dismissed as vanity. “99% of the people think that I’m just superficial,” says Koh.¹⁸⁷

The thought of becoming an object is interesting, because achieving this would in a sense fulfill his magnum opus – a seamless transfusion between artist and artwork, in perfect symbiosis. In conceptual art one treats the thought as the artwork. In performance art one treats the body as the artwork. Deeply engaged in both mediums Koh is clearly using himself, both body and mind, as a base to create art. Becoming an object would also necessarily mean abolishing the individual. Koh’s public persona comes with the ability to hide in plain sight. Thus an incongruity occurs between artist and work, because where the artworks are very personal and honest, his public persona can seem frivolous and illusory. “We become voyeurs who are not permitted access to this strange persona,” writes Martina Weinhart when describing a video work at *Captain Buddha*.¹⁸⁸ The same thing can be said about his public persona. Terence Koh the celebrity might just be a product of Terence Koh the artist, along with asianpunkboy and kohbunny.

Koh as a passionate spectator – Distilling “the eternal from the transitory”

Reading the writings of Charles Baudelaire can help us to develop a more wholesome perspective on Romanticism, and will add interesting aspects to the discussion of Koh’s art. In Baudelaire’s description of the artistry of “Monsieur C. G.” (Constantin Guys), he appraises the

¹⁸⁴ Obrist, op.cit., 143

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ N/A (2008) “Terence Koh talks to Tim Steiner”, *God Terence Koh*, De Pury & Luxembourg.

¹⁸⁸ Weinhart, op.cit., 95

qualities of a modern/romantic artist.¹⁸⁹ Several of these traits can be attributed Koh as well. Baudelaire begins by stressing the importance of a passionate curiosity, the ability to become “pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil of thought that surrounds him.”¹⁹⁰ Curiosity, Baudelaire writes, is the mainspring of genius, because it permits the artist to return to childhood. “Genius is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered* at will.”¹⁹¹ Through a childlike approach, the genius artist succeeds in capturing the wondrous essence of things, by pretending everything is unfamiliar. This reveals details that are normally overlooked because one is so accustomed to them. “The child is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial.”¹⁹² As we know, Koh states that his motivation comes from simply existing, from everyday life experience. While Koh’s joyous approach to the mundane is sometimes dismissed as naivety, it also evokes the important attribute of Baudelaire’s genius.

The romantic artist feels at home in the vibrant city,¹⁹³ and “the crowd is his element.”¹⁹⁴ In the midst of the crowd, the artist becomes a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.”¹⁹⁵ Koh’s art appears to evolve from a similar starting point. I claimed that little in Koh’s art express any urban aesthetic. That is not to say that urbanity is absent from his art. Life in contemporary society and the themes evoked by mental and emotional modes of being are recurrently being dealt with in his works. Kaprow realized that, “when you do life consciously, however, life becomes pretty strange – paying attention changes the thing attended to.”¹⁹⁶ This could very well be exactly what Koh does, carefully observing the world from behind his reflexive shades.

¹⁸⁹ Every age has its modernity, explains Baudelaire, and the modernity of his own time is romanticism.

¹⁹⁰ Baudelaire, Charles (1995) “The Painter of Modern Life”, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Phaidon, London, 7

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 8

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 7

¹⁹³ This is arguably also a defining trait for the Bowery School artists.

¹⁹⁴ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, 9

¹⁹⁵ Baudelaire, Charles (1995) “The Painter of Modern Life”, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Phaidon, London, 9

¹⁹⁶ Kaprow, *op.cit.*, 195

Baudelaire clearly states that artists need to choose their motifs from modern life. However, depicting scenes from contemporary society is not enough. ‘Modernity’ is, according to Baudelaire, “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”¹⁹⁷ The artistic project of modernity¹⁹⁸ is to “distill the eternal from the transitory.”¹⁹⁹ From a chosen motif of present-day beauty, the artist should extract from it a universal essence, and express the immutable. Thus representation becomes subordinate to the artistic ‘distillation’.²⁰⁰ The eternal element in romantic art is the transcendent component in romanticism. Koh’s artworks fit this description exceedingly well. His artworks always appear to originate from his own modernity (thematically, not necessarily visually) while dealing the great transcendent themes of humanity.²⁰¹

Baudelaire’s advocacy of this duality of art is oppositional to the romanticism described by Pattison.²⁰² Having reached this point, assuming romanticism is constructed from two components, one transitory and one eternal, we need to discuss the eternal, or transcendent component in Koh’s art.

Experiential art and transcendent escape

As proposed, a direct physical experience does not necessarily exclude contemplation and transcendence. The notion of the sublime is interconnected with the transcendent, and in Koh’s work this effect originates from the sensuous experience of the enveloping artworks.

¹⁹⁷ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, 13

¹⁹⁸ Baudelaire does not speak exclusively of his modernity, but of every age’s modernity.

¹⁹⁹ Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, 12

²⁰⁰ Though we should not acclaim Baudelaire for advocating total abstraction. Non-figurative art was never on his mind.

²⁰¹ Sure, it is possible to argue that much of the philosophical topics raised in Koh’s art were first formulated centuries ago, and do not constitute our modernity. Regardless, these philosophical queries are still highly relevant. To give an example of how similar themes reoccur in time, an artistic expression developing in the 1990s, relational aesthetic, seeks to oppose alienation in urban society by producing sociality. Romantic art developed, partially, as a response to the same societal issue, 150 years earlier.

²⁰² For Pattison, rock is always and only about the transitory. Speed and dynamic are key components in rock.

Koh's art and the notion of the sublime

In the presence of a work by Koh, the notion of the incomprehensible sublime comes to mind, usually radiating from the eerie environments he creates. Several authors since ancient Greece have tried to define the effect of the *sublime*. Focusing on its definition from a contemporary, general, perspective, I will briefly discuss excerpt from different contributors, such as Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and Jean-François Lyotard.²⁰³ Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was an important contribution on the discussion of sublime, published in 1757. Burke defines the sublime as such:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling [...]
When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.²⁰⁴

The powerful impact of the sublime lies in the fact that while it connotes danger; it does so without any immanent threat. When facing danger from a safe distance, we realize the idea of freedom and of safety, which produce pleasure. In Burke's time, a *Grand Tour* through Europe served as a kind of educational rite for those who could afford it, and travelers vividly described the wild nature. The Swiss Alps for instance, were described as sublime. This is an interesting realization when discussing the works of Terence Koh, namely in regard to the two looming mountain-like sculptures Koh exhibited in Switzerland. *Untitled (Chocolate Mountains)* evoke the notion of the sublime because of its dominating presence in the cramped space, which can be experienced as somewhat threatening.²⁰⁵ The thick organic coating makes them appear unstable; they are neither monuments nor ordinary sculptures. The

²⁰³ The origin and evolution of the term 'sublime' is by far too extensive to be discussed here. For a full length discussion about the sublime, see Philip Shaw's *The Sublime* (2006).

²⁰⁴ Burke, Edmund (2008) *A Philosophical Inquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful*, Routledge, Great Britain, 39-40

²⁰⁵ Their threatening effect stems, in part, from the fact that these gigantic looming sculptures could crush you if they were to fall. And they did appear unstable. This dominating effect is not unlike Richard Serra's sheet-metal constructions.

pungent smell suggests this as well.²⁰⁶ They were installed in the middle of the room so that it was necessary to pass them to proceed to the rest of the show. The connotation from displaying sublime sculptures in Zürich that mimics the Swiss Alps is surely not incidental. The sculptures can be understood as a source of the sublime in another sense as well, as it connotes the countless images of the crumbling Twin Towers in New York. The sublime is intertwined with the conception of terror, because dreadful acts exceed our ability to supply a concept and “one must phrase the event in such a way that it remains open to future determinations since to do otherwise would be to assume that one has already understood the event and thus consumed it as an object of knowledge.”²⁰⁷ Koh’s sculptures, though abstracted, recall the terror on 9/11, but without any explicit determination.

Visitors at the exhibition, *God*, also described a sensation of sublimity when they entered the strobe lit rooms. The dark stalagmite-sculptures appeared to be vibrating in the pulsating light, and it was hard to get a clear perspective of space in the darkened room. Burke’s description of a delightful thrill is fitting for the experience constructed in this exhibition.

Immanuel Kant also examines the notion of the sublime in his *Critique of Judgment*, relating it to the incomprehensible and infinite. Kant argues that “Infinity [...] cannot be grasped in sensible intuition, but we can at least think of it as an idea of reason.”²⁰⁸ One realizes that the idea of infinity surpasses what we can experience, thus the mind proves more powerful than nature. The sublime does not reside in any object, but in our own minds. Thus it can be thought of as a means, allowing us to access what lies beyond reason. I will leave Kant’s remark on the sublime suspended, and instead show how the theoretician Jean-François Lyotard uses Kant to form a postmodern understanding on the sublime. Lyotard agrees with Kant, stating: “We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to ‘make visible’ this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible.”²⁰⁹ Maybe the melancholy we find in both Rothko, Newman and Koh’s work stem from such a realization. The artworks are sublime because they set out to show us something that can be

²⁰⁶ According to Burke, even smell and taste can become sources of the sublime, p 85.

²⁰⁷ Shaw, op.cit.,129

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 81

²⁰⁹ Lyotard, op.cit., 78

conceived, but never fully presented. Lyotard elaborates how modern art is devoted to prove the existence of the unrepresentable, reading this quote with Koh in mind, is greatly rewarding:

To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: this is what is at stake in the modern painting. But how to make visible that there is something which cannot be seen? Kant himself shows the way when he names “formlessness, the absence of form,” as a possible index to the unrepresentable. He also says of the empty “abstraction” which the imagination experiences when in search for a presentation of the infinite (another unrepresentable): this abstraction itself is like a presentation of the infinite, its “negative presentation.” He cites the commandment, “Thou shalt not make graven images” (Exodus), as the most sublime passage in the Bible in that it forbids all presentation of the Absolute. Little needs to be added to those observations to outline an aesthetic of sublime paintings. As painting, it will of course “present” something though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation. It will be “white” like one of Malevich’s squares; it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain.²¹⁰

Malevich’s white paintings are an obvious ground for comparison with Koh’s white canvases in *Flowers for Baudelaire*.²¹¹ Koh shows us infinity, and through simple expressive gestures, he evokes the unrepresentable sublime. As mentioned, *Flowers for Baudelaire* can also be perceived as one installation. If so, the constellation of white paintings can reasonably be compared to Rothko and Newman paintings, since they evoke the sublime by becoming incomprehensible through scale. Reading Kant realization of the Commandment as a source for the sublime is interesting, thinking of Koh’s meticulous engagement with religious and spiritual symbols, both concrete and abstract. The cultural significance of god-like deities is a topic Koh have scrutinized on several accounts, which is interconnected with the notion of sublimity at the Zürich exhibition, *God*. The divine is inherently sublime because the definition of the divine is, according to Bataille, something that “denies the law of reason.”²¹²

Negative presentations of the unrepresentable, achieved by lack of representation, are also visible in other of Koh’s works, and numerous examples reveal this. Koh described his painfully bright light at the Whitney Museum as “something you can’t see in sight but that catches in the heart.”²¹³ This statement recalls Kant and Lyotard’s definition of the sublime.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 78

²¹¹ Norman Rosenthal makes this connection in the *Flowers for Baudelaire* catalog

²¹² Bataille, Georges (1989) *The Tears of Eros*, City Light Books, Hong Kong, 71

²¹³ Momin (2007) op.cit., unnumbered pages

Another example is the white room at Zürich, where flour and excessive lighting dematerialized space. Our senses and reasoning provide us with contrasting information: despite realizing that we are inside the room, defining the room itself and its boundaries is challenging. The notion of the sublime is a key feature in Koh's work and is interconnected with an experiential aesthetic. This effect is enhanced by the utilization of different strategies in order to produce an almost sensory overload, provoking sensuous or emotional responses from the viewers.

Transcendence through transgression – Bataillean aesthetic

Excess in rock, according to Pattison is a platform for self-gratification, and sexuality is expressed raw and direct. Georges Bataille, in his dark romantic theory, argues that through sexual ecstasy one can successfully (though only fleetingly) reach a different state of being. By discussing Bataille's theories on *eroticism*, we add another dimension to the romantic expression of sexuality.

“In his writings, Bataille was a master of crimes of the imagination as is Terence Koh in his art”, writes Norman Rosenthal.²¹⁴ As we have seen, sexuality and death are recurring themes in Koh's art, and transgression and taboo are present throughout his oeuvre. Georges Bataille gives a thorough explanation of how eroticism and death are interrelated, and a reading of Bataille's thoughts on eroticism might shed some new light on the sublime works²¹⁵ of Terence Koh, simultaneously as it fuses the sexual aspects in Koh's works with a long-standing philosophical discussion.

Bataille argues that eroticism is fundamentally linked with death, based on his realization that all human beings exist in isolation and discontinuity. “Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children.”²¹⁶ But more than that, eroticism can be of an emotional, physical or religious origin. It is important to realize that eroticism is not just sex,²¹⁷ and that religious

²¹⁴ Rosenthal (2007) op.cit., unnumbered pages

²¹⁵ There is a strong connection between sublimity and Bataille's theories on eroticism, because eroticism stem from an incomprehensible yet incredibly strong human urge.

²¹⁶ Bataille, Georges (1986) *Erotism Death & Sexuality*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 11

²¹⁷ Sexual ecstasy is a way to feel continuity through physical eroticism.

eroticism is not meant in a blasphemous way.²¹⁸ Religious eroticism “is concerned with the fusion of beings with a world beyond everyday reality”²¹⁹ explains Bataille.

”Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity.”²²⁰ Maybe Koh has come to a similar realization, as his art seem to echo this melancholic thought. This is particularly evident in *Gone, Yet Still*. According to Bataille, we all attempt to escape this miserable faith: “What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain.”²²¹ Reaching this state of continuity can only be done through the abolishment of the individual self, permanently through death or temporary through eroticism. Bataille claims that sex is closely associated with violence, and because, “only violence can bring everything to a state of flux,”²²² eroticism holds the promise of a temporary escape from isolation.

Thus in Bataille’s theories, like in Koh’s art, sex is more than the selfish quest for gratification. Eroticism’s “concern is to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a feeling of profound continuity”²²³ because, the “transition from normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity.”²²⁴ Eroticism creates a temporary, yet powerful, symbiosis, enabling the destruction of “the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.”²²⁵ Through sexual ecstasy, the participants violently ceases to exist as separate individuals, and instead form a temporal bond of continuity; they become, for a brief time, one. Koh’s *Untitled (power power)* is a close to perfect manifestation of the Bataillean conception of eroticism and the desire for continuity. Two fluorescent spheres hang from the ceiling, barely touching. Their gentle glow is aesthetically pleasing, in the otherwise dark

²¹⁸ The reason I elaborate this is so that I will portray neither Bataille nor Koh as sacrilegious. As Bataille’s concept of religious eroticism is not blasphemous in nature, nor is Koh’s artworks that blend sexual and religious elements necessarily blasphemous.

²¹⁹ Bataille, (1986) op.cit., 18

²²⁰ Ibid., 12

²²¹ Ibid., 19

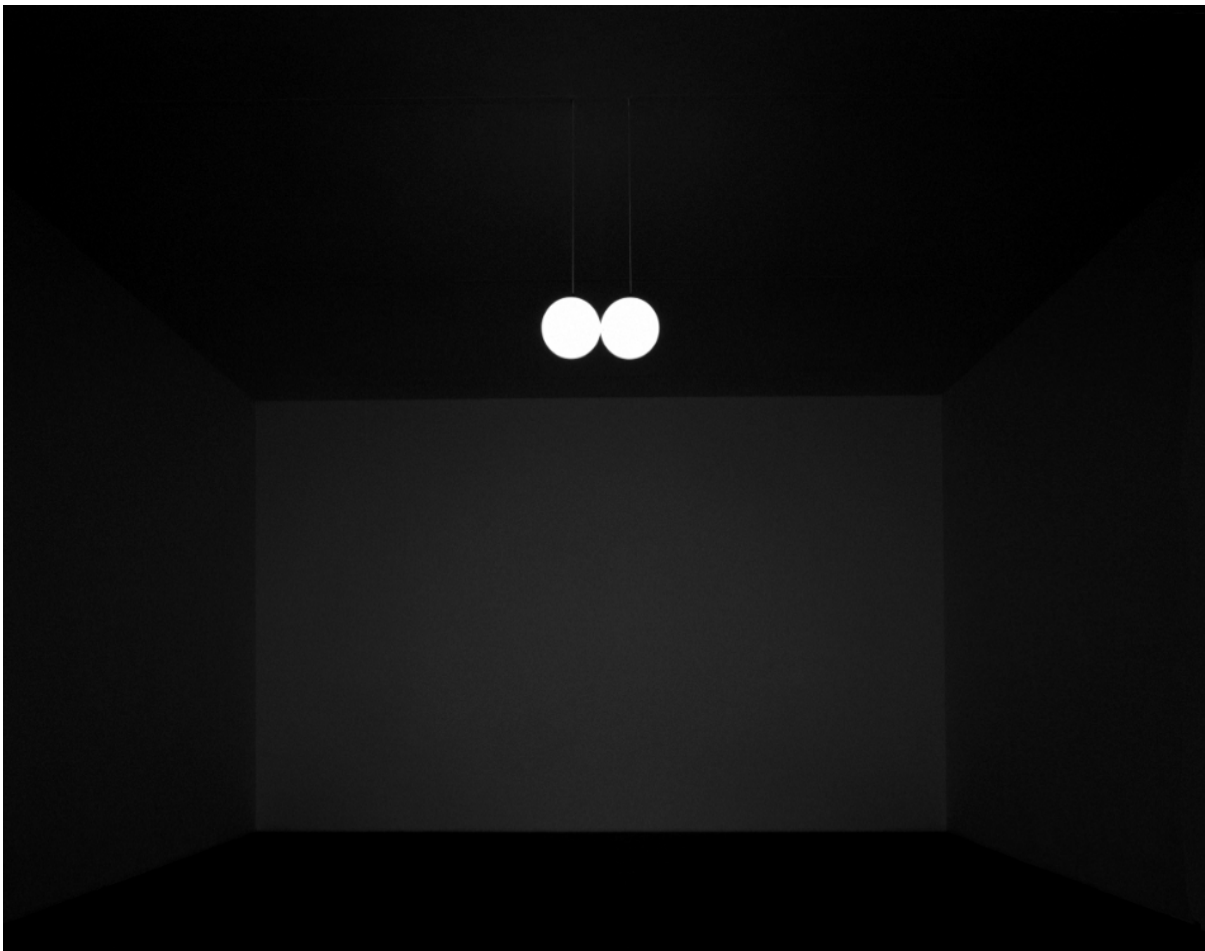
²²² Ibid., 17

²²³ Ibid., 15

²²⁴ Ibid., 17

²²⁵ Ibid., 17

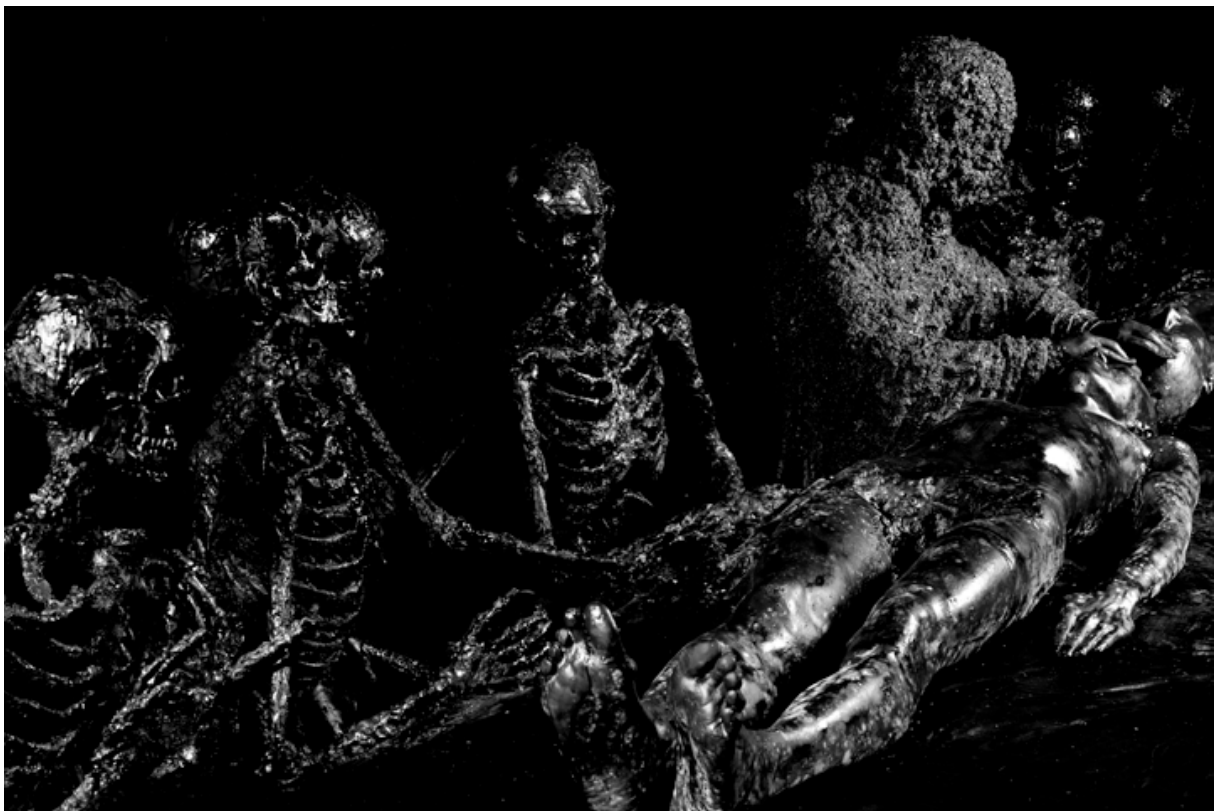
room. The sexual connotations are poetic and subtle, but they are there. Invoking Bataille's description of *transient* continuity through physical eroticism, these two entities are for the moment one. But, as Bataille explains, we yearn for a *permanent* continuity. Together Koh's spheres form the symbol of infinity, ∞ . Thus, the austere simplicity of the work can be seen as an expression of sublime melancholy, invoking both the transient sexual ecstasy, and the permanent relief through death. At the same time we might find some comfort in their togetherness. Koh is arguably deeply engaged in existentialistic questions, and it becomes evident that the sexual elements in Koh's art should not be easily dismissed as vulgarity.



Picture 21. Terence Koh. *Untitled (power power)*, 2006. The two fluorescent spheres in the last room at Kunsthalle Zürich, can connote both transient intimacy and eternal love. Courtesy of Peres Projects.

Interpreting the exhibition *God* in terms of the themes Bataille discusses is greatly rewarding. The installation depicting the last supper in particular, crystallize a link between sex, death and religious sacrifice. The two sculptures cast from Koh's body on the table, with their genitals brutally removed, coarsely chiseled or possibly gnawed away, invokes Bataillean

themes.²²⁶ Koh portrayed himself as the human sacrifice, possibly eaten by the skeletal disciples (after all, it is a scene from the last *supper*). Because sex and violence can disrupt the state of discontinuity, “the most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous beings.”²²⁷ Bataille describes sensual pleasure as a ‘little death’²²⁸. This is the purpose of the human sacrifice, according to Bataille; to produce the same ecstasy evoked by eroticism, “A violent death disrupts the creature’s discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one.”²²⁹ The violent carnal sacrifice of the two Kohs, collectively executed, would, according to Bataille, temporarily free its participants from isolation.



Picture 22. Terence Koh. Detail of *God*, 2007. Notice how the genitals have been violently removed from the sculptural cast of Koh. Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin, Los Angeles

²²⁶ ‘Castration anxiety’ is a well-known term by Sigmund Freud, who argues that the penis is central for gaining narcissistic value, and that this anxiety refers to the fear of being emasculated, dominated or made insignificant.

²²⁷ Bataille (1986) op.cit., 17

²²⁸ The possibility of birth through the sexual act results in a loss when the woman is not impregnated.

²²⁹ Bataille (1986) op.cit., 22

Seeing as the faces of the two Kohs have a peaceful expression, we might suspect that they willingly accepted their faith.²³⁰ If so, the persons who were sacrificed were the active protagonists, and not passive victims. Not knowing the events leading up to the point we see depicted in the installation is unsettling. Another passage in Bataille *Eroticism* might provide a partial answer: “The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals [...] This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite.”²³¹ In an existentialistic sense, one might view their violent demise as a flux from physicality and discontinuity into a transcendental state of permanent continuity. Simultaneously, like a spirit taking possession in the participants, this powerful event leaves an imprint on its spectators. This horrifying faith naturally connotes how Jesus sacrificed himself in order to save mankind, thus suggest a comparison between Koh and Jesus, but it also holds a promise of immortality since continuity of existence is finally achieved. Bataille writes, “Death is a sign of life, a way into the infinite.”²³² The perfect self-realization is achieved only through self-annihilation.

Life is a door into existence: life may be doomed but the continuity of existence is not. The nearness of this continuity and its heady quality are more powerful than the thought of death. To begin with, the first turbulent surge of erotic feeling overwhelms all else, so that gloomy considerations of the fate in store for our discontinuous selves are forgotten. And then, beyond the intoxication of youth, we achieve the power to look death in the face and to perceive in death the pathway into the unknowable and incomprehensible continuity – that path is the secret of eroticism and eroticism alone can reveal it.²³³

The sacrifice in *God* can be described as a depiction of the ultimately sublime, showing a Dionysian²³⁴ celebration or ritual, fusing sex, religion and death through human sacrifice. The installation expresses the, “ultimate pain and the unbearable joy.”²³⁵ The powerful and familiar imagery invites a personal interpretation, and since it is highly likely that the spectator have a connection to the symbolism, their cultural and personal starting point will

²³⁰ In the plays by Friedrich Schiller (whom I will discuss shortly) the protagonist who willingly sacrifices himself for a greater good is often perceived as a source of the sublime.

²³¹ Bataille (1986) op.cit., 22

²³² Ibid., 91

²³³ Ibid., 24

²³⁴ Bataille describes Dionysus as the “the god of religious transgression [...] whose divine essence is madness”, Bataille (1989) op.cit., 71

²³⁵ Bataille (1989) op.cit., 20

cloud their perception of the installation. Thus, ultimately, to give an exhaustive interpretation is futile.

God is possibly Koh's darkest, most sinister exhibition, but not everyone understood it as a depiction of cruelty²³⁶. Tim Steiner, in an interview with Terence Koh, described "two people who believe and they said they felt the intensity of *God* the second they left the gallery. Because of this intense atmosphere, once they come out into the world again that's when they have their association, their relationship to *God*."²³⁷ This is interesting, because it suggests that the boundary for the artwork is not necessarily limited to the gallery space, but that the concept may continue to haunt the spectator. The philosopher Antony Savile writes that a, "work of art can have a deep sense for us only if it exercises its force when we are no longer in its presence, if it modifies our dispositions to think, to feel, and ultimately to act."²³⁸ The thought-provoking art by Terence Koh might have this effect.

Another ground for comparison between Koh and Bataille, is how Koh's mantra, 'Love for Eternity', evokes ideas similar to Bataille's. Love (or emotional eroticism), is regarded by both as an incredibly powerful force. "For the lover, the beloved makes the world transparent"²³⁹, writes Bataille. Koh explains his slogan, stating that love is the strongest feeling, it surpasses everything else, and that it came to him when he pondered on what he would want *forever*.²⁴⁰ Bataille believes that the power of emotional eroticism stem from its ability to produce clarity, "Change may will it that through that being, the world's complexities laid aside, the lover may perceive the true deeps of existence and their simplicity"²⁴¹. Koh's artworks, clearly evoke similar conceptions on love as Bataille articulates, fusing it with the transcendence and enlightenment.

A Bataillean reading of Koh's art convincingly link his recurring fixation for sexuality, love, religion, escapism and death, and places these themes in a philosophical context, seeing his works as expressions of transcendence and the human psyche. As I have claimed on numerous accounts, Koh's art often have an immediate sensuous effect on the viewer, one that does not necessarily require an understanding of any theoretical discourse.

²³⁶ Ben Reardon describes it, in the *God* catalog, as hellish and evil.

²³⁷ N/A (2008) "Terence Koh talks to Tim Steiner", *God Terence Koh*, De Pury & Luxembourg, unnumbered pages.

²³⁸ Savile, Anthony (2006) "Imagination and aesthetic value", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46, 248

²³⁹ Bataille (1986) op.cit., 21

²⁴⁰ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

²⁴¹ Bataille (1986) op.cit., 21

To allow the work to enter into a dialogue is often enough. It becomes important to stress that similarly, Bataille's theory requires no precursory knowledge. The distress, which comes from discontinuity, is universal, even though one may not realize it. From primitive man, the same desire to suppress isolation exists.²⁴²

Koh as a romantic idealist

As mentioned, when Koh talks about changing the world through art, the idealistic romanticism philosophy comes to mind. His artworks can cause powerful experiences, and often evokes physical as well as emotional responses on the beholder. The works do not openly advocate any art theoretical discourse, but rather deal with existential and universal topics. As it seems, his art does not favor intellectualism, but instead seek to uncover aspects of human condition, inviting a personal interpretation. There is little expressed moral concern in his art, but they do seem to communicate a subtle idealism. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens claims, "Art can give us a sense of our shared humanity in a special way [...] and in doing this it relates us to each other."²⁴³ The meaning and value of art need not be propagated for it to give meaning, as we realize from examining the miniscule gestures in Koh's oeuvre.

Koh's works as aesthetic education – Friedrich Schiller's concept of the 'play drive'

"It is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom," writes Schiller.²⁴⁴

Formulated as a series of letters, he presents a thorough philosophical inquiry concerning the educational value of aesthetics. He formulates his theory from the realization that mankind, and thus also society, is subject to mental restraint. "Reason does indeed demand unity; but Nature demands multiplicity; and both these kinds of law make their claim upon man."²⁴⁵

These two diametrically opposite forces both exercise limitation as long as one law dominates the other. In order to abolish this state of being, one must strive towards a *wholeness* of

²⁴² Bataille discuss the cave paintings in Lascaux, believing the scenes depict ritualistic sacrifice and expiation.

²⁴³ Goldie, Peter & Elisabeth Schellekens (2010) *Who is afraid of conceptual art*, Routledge, USA, 134

²⁴⁴ Schiller, Friedrich (1795) *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* [1967] Oxford University Press, Great Britain,

9

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19

character, which to be “removed alike from uniformity and from confusion.”²⁴⁶ Uniformity must be challenged by reception, and confusion needs to be resolved through determination.

An individual is made up form two components – a person, and its condition. “As long as he has neither perceptions nor sensations, he is nothing but form and empty potential,” explains Schiller, picturing a person without a condition.²⁴⁷ Similarly, describing a condition separate from the person, Schiller writes: “True, it is his Sensuous Nature alone which can turn this potential into actual power; but it is only his Personality which makes all his actual activity into something which is inalienably his own.”²⁴⁸ Experience comes from perception, but these impressions need to be processed by the intellect, in order to gain value. Thus these two impelling, contradictory forces constitute a human being.

The first component, Schiller calls *the sensuous drive*. “Its business is to set him within the limits of time, and to turn him into matter – not to provide him with matter, since that, of course, would presuppose a free activity [...] This state, which is nothing but time occupied by content, is called sensation, and it is through this alone that physical existence makes itself known.”²⁴⁹ This drive is only concerned with the presence, and, “since everything that exists in time exists as a *succession*, the very fact of something existing at all means that everything else is excluded.”²⁵⁰ This means, that when this drive is dominating, we inevitably find the highest degree of limitation, because we lack the ability to transcend the presence. The individual self is incapacitated, unable to freely construct cognitive structures from his or hers perceptions.²⁵¹ “Man in this state is nothing but a unit of quantity, an occupied moment of time – or rather, *he* is not at all, for his Personality is suspended as long as he is ruled by sensation, and wept along by the flux of time.”²⁵² “With indestructible chains it binds the ever-soaring spirit to the world of sense, and summons abstraction from its most unfettered excursions into the Infinite back to the limitations of the Present.”²⁵³

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 19

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 77

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 77

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 79

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 79

²⁵¹ Recalling Pattison’s ‘vulgarian’, we notice a clear influence from Schiller.

²⁵² Schiller, op.cit., 79

²⁵³ Ibid, 81

The second of the two drives, Schiller names *the formal drive*. This drive “proceeds from the absolute existence of man,”²⁵⁴ and, Schiller explains, only produce laws or unconditional truths. The formal drive²⁵⁵ is not concerned with the present, and but instead abolish time altogether. When formal drive holds sway, “we are no longer in time; time, with its whole never-ending succession, is in us. We are no longer individuals; we are species. The judgments of all minds is expressed through our own, the choice of all hearts is represented by our action.”²⁵⁶ These two drives appear diametrically opposed. Either drive, when operating exclusively, doom mankind to a miserable fate: the sensuous drive reduces mankind to an empty shell of unused potential, while the formal drive forcefully sentence mankind to obliterate the individual self for the transcendent. Because of their reciprocal relation, one drive will dominate the other, and from this subordination disharmony will be maintained.²⁵⁷ The only way to reconcile these two forces is through art, Schiller explains:

To watch over these, and secure for each of these two drives its proper frontiers, is the task of *culture* [...] *first*, to preserving the life of Sense against the encroachments of Freedom; and *second*, to secure the Personality against the forces of Sensation. The former it achieves by developing our capacity for feeling, the latter by developing our capacity for reason.²⁵⁸

Evolution of the self depends upon the development of both the faculty for reception and determination, without one of them dominating the other. By balancing feeling and reason, the individual becomes capable of utilizing their symbiosis to better oneself: “If we are to become compassionate, helpful, effective human beings, feeling and character must unite, even as wide-open senses must combine with vigor of intellect if we are to acquire experience.”²⁵⁹ This twofold experience needs to occur *simultaneously*, so that the individual is both conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence. In such a state, one is balanced and harmonious, and a third drive is activated; *the play drive*. This force, “will exert upon the psyche at once a moral and a physical constraint; it will, therefore, since it annuls all

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 83

²⁵⁵ Schiller’s formal drive invokes Kant’s discussion on a priori knowledge (as briefly mentioned earlier when discussing vulgarity), but also the later writings of Baudelaire, who distinguish the eternal from the transitory.

²⁵⁶ Schiller, op.cit., 83

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 85

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 87

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 87

contingency, annul all constraints too, and set man free both physically and morally.”²⁶⁰ This is the gift of humanity itself because, Schiller explains; only through aesthetic contemplation can the human being reclaim its freedom:

Through aesthetic modulation of the psyche, then, the autonomy of reason is already opened up within the domain of sense itself, the dominion of sensation already broken within its own frontiers, and physical man refined to the point where spiritual man only needs to start developing out of the physical according to the laws of freedom.²⁶¹

The arts in themselves must refrain from giving the psyche any definite bias. Instead, Schiller gives the following advice to the artist: “Impart to the world you would influence a *direction* towards the good, and the quiet rhythm of time will bring it to fulfillment.”²⁶² The artwork in itself is not the catalyst of opinion, but the aesthetic contemplation is the prerequisite tool which enables the beholder to evolve. Without this the contemplative aid of aesthetics however, mankind would forever be restrained. From this realization, Schiller formulates the following conclusion toward the end of his philosophical journey: “Beauty alone makes the whole world happy, and each and every being forgets its limitations while under its spell.”²⁶³

Schiller’s idealistic attitude toward the educational value of aesthetic can also be traced in Koh’s oeuvre. Koh’s art seem to subordinate any clearly articulated meaning in favor of an enticing visual aesthetic. His works usually contain a governing conceptual element, which in turn is communicated to its viewer in a preverbal or subliminal language. The communication that can arise is not first and foremost verbal, and the viewer need not even be conscious to the aesthetic rhetoric at play. Thus, no political agenda is openly expressed in his works, but we may suspect a subtler aesthetic agenda. If so, such an agenda would surely bear some resemblance to Schiller’s romantic philosophy. The intertwining of art and life, and the concept of constantly producing art, even post mortem, echo an elevated idealism concerning art.

Maybe Koh’s contribution, in the light of Schiller’s aesthetic education, is that in our fast-paced, media-saturated world, Koh’s sensuously numbing artworks creates a shift, where

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 97

²⁶¹ Ibid., 163

²⁶² Ibid., 59

²⁶³ Ibid., 217

the spectator is jolted from his or her mode of being, and transported to a parallel universe. Entering his exhibitions can be experienced as tumbling down the rabbit hole; finding oneself in wonderland. The spectator becomes a participant and a producer. His artworks partially resist intellectualization because they appeal so strongly to the senses. The viewer must co-produce the situation, and the immersive experience of the artwork may cause his or hers subjective awareness to merge with the artwork, so as to create a sensation of a new, more powerful, experience of totality.²⁶⁴ A bond between the artist, to the extent he remains a phantom in his work, and the beholder, who is forced to co-produce the narrative, may be forged. If such a communication occurs, it will be subliminal and result in a personal experience, because such a language does not have an objective correlate.

To further understand the aesthetic value of Koh's experiential art, we shall consult the writings of John Dewey.

Experiential aesthetic – John Dewey

As mentioned, Koh's exhibitions are often vividly described as a powerful and intense experience. The relationship established between artwork and spectator, has been topic for many theoretical discussions. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey discuss how art theory "isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing"²⁶⁵. Dewey explains that art and aesthetic experience used to be infused in the very fabric of society and an essential part of everyday life. Isolating art from its original domain, "Deeply affects the practice of living, driving away esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness, or reducing them to the level of compensating transient pleasurable excitations."²⁶⁶ Dewey clearly regards aesthetic pleasure to be of the highest importance, ascribing it as a source of happiness. He explains, "Happiness and delight [...] come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being – on that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence."²⁶⁷ The reason Dewey's theories are interesting in this case is because Koh seem to cultivate a distinct aesthetic that moves clear of a stale intellectual understanding by engaging its spectator in physical sense,

²⁶⁴ Oliveira, Nicolas De, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry, op.cit., 49 (Ina Blom uses the term "immersive mode" to describe artworks that produce a mixture of sensory and narcissistic pleasure.)

²⁶⁵ Dewey, op.cit., 9

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 8

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 16

acting as a source of contemplative delight while suggesting existential themes. As mentioned, Koh's exhibitions can be described as idiosyncratic environments, emitting a strange harmonic calmness. They can be experienced as isolated, hermetic universes, a feeling that suppress everything outside of the enveloping artwork. Dewey places tremendous value in this feeling, writing:

We do not enjoy the present because we subordinate it to that which is absent. Because of the frequency of this abandonment of the present to the past and future, the happy periods of an experience that is now complete because it absorbs into itself memories of the past and anticipations of the future, come to constitute an esthetic ideal. Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive.²⁶⁸

By intensifying this experience, Koh's art can be ascribed a source of happiness and harmony, according to Dewey claims. Sharpening one's senses to acknowledge the present, only to what exists right there and then, Koh's art is poetical and moving. This effect has infinite potential because, as the notion of the sublime is incomprehensible, it cannot be depleted. Describing a small room at *Gone, Yet Still*, AA Bronson writes that it has "a sense of isolation from the rest of the building" and that inside the room, "one feels complete"²⁶⁹. The same peacefulness can be found in *Flowers for Baudelaire*. As already quoted, Koh describe the works as "white paintings floating in a white space, like white perfect lilies floating in a perfect white pond."²⁷⁰

The origin of this aesthetic pleasure, according to Dewey, stem from the fact that life itself is not harmonious. "Where everything is already complete, there is no fulfillment. We envisage with pleasure Nirvana and a uniform heavenly bliss only because they are projected upon the background of our present world of stress and conflict [...] the moment of passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life."²⁷¹ Again, it appears that the pleasure of the arts can associated with a form of escapism. As I understand Dewey, he seems to be

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 17

²⁶⁹ Bronson, op.cit., 6

²⁷⁰ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

²⁷¹ Dewey, op.cit., 16

claiming that the intensity and pleasure of such an aesthetic experience originates in a form of temporary suppression of reality.²⁷²

In the course of this discussion, I have tried to use romanticism as a term to envelop some of the most distinguishable elements in Koh's production. His immersive installations, and the escape they seem to offer, is more than a limited relief from everyday struggle or a kind of meaningless stimulating relief (i.e. pornography).

Describing a tendency in contemporary art, Nicolas Bourriaud claims, "In generating behaviors and potential reuses, art challenges passive culture, composed of merchandise and consumers. It makes the forms and cultural objects of our daily lives *function*."²⁷³ Bourriaud's implications will be discussed in the following chapter.

²⁷² Dewey describes how life is a constant struggle against the environment, writing, "If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies" (13).

²⁷³ Bourriaud, Nicolas (2002) *Postproduction*, Lukas & Steinberg, Berlin, 20

6 Koh as a ‘semionaut’ – Flowers for Baudelaire and Zen aesthetic

Throughout Koh’s oeuvre, we see an extensive use and reuse of existing symbols. Even though it is challenging to construct a pattern amongst these references, it appears that they to some extent deal with the construction of identity. Imperative components that Koh examines meticulously include ethnicity, religion and sexuality. In interviews we can find several examples where he accentuates his sexuality. The incorporation of Zen aesthetic in *Flowers for Baudelaire* can be seen in as an examination in religious concepts, just as in *Captain Buddha* or *God*. By appropriating cultural symbols with Asian origin, he also accentuates his own ethnicity. Especially Zen Buddhism is frequently evoked through Koh’s art, and deserves a closer examination.

Wabi Sabi – an aesthetic of impermanence

Numerous references to Zen Buddhism are evident throughout Koh’s artistic production. As with Baudelaire’s genius, Koh appears to have the ability to perceive the world with childlike wonder, and appropriates elements from religious rites and philosophy. The references to Buddhism and ascetic Zen philosophy appear so frequently that they require commentary. As earlier suggested, Koh approaches Buddhism with a humble curiosity, and it seems he extracts elements that can help him realize his *gesamtkunstwerk*. Allan Kaprow writes that the notion of a total work of art needs to originate from nature:

If we bypass “art” and take nature itself as a model or point of departure, we may be able to devise a different kind of art by first putting together a molecule out of the sensory stuff of ordinary life: the green of a leaf, the sound of a bird, the rough pebbles under one’s feet, the fluttering past of a butterfly. Each of these occurs in time and space and is perfectly natural and infinitely flexible. From such a rudimentary yet wonderful event, a principle of the materials and organization of a creative form can be built.²⁷⁴

Koh does not appear to be alien to this though. His continuing exploration of unconventional, fragile components in his art can be seen as an exercise in Zen Buddhism, in the aesthetical

²⁷⁴ Kaprow, op.cit., 10

tradition of *Wabi Sabi*. This theory is deeply rooted in Japanese culture and Zen philosophy. Starting with an excerpt from Andrew Juniper's book *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, he describes it as such:

As the artistic mouthpiece of the Zen movement, wabi sabi art embodies the lives of the monks and is built upon precepts of simplicity, humility, restraint, naturalness, joy, and melancholy as well as the defining element of impermanence. Wabi Sabi art challenges us to unlearn our views of beauty and to rediscover the intimate beauty to be found in the smallest details of nature's artistry.²⁷⁵

Juniper elaborates, stating that, "the term wabi sabi suggests such qualities as impermanence, humility, asymmetry and imperfection."²⁷⁶ It embodies the melancholic appeal of the impermanent while it at the same time expresses an understated celebration of life's state of flux, by advocating the natural beauty of imperfection. Fusing life, art and philosophy is to develop a *gesamtkunstwerk*.

By looking at nature's artistry, transience, asymmetry, flaws and even decay is given aesthetic value. Such traits are implemented in several of Koh's works. As mentioned, the fragility of the canvases in *Flowers for Baudelaire* echoes the fragility of a flower. The canvases eventually become flaky, but their flaws still offers aesthetic delight. With their flaws, they accentuate the process and the rich variations in the surface, which possibly makes them more delightfully aesthetic. After all, the paintings would be visually boring if they were all white on a smooth surface. These artworks oppose the common conception that art should last forever. The impermanence of Koh's art becomes an aesthetic trait. Their slow, inevitable demise is melancholic, and they turn into reminders of our own mortality. *Memento mori*.

Acknowledging the importance of the ritual is as crucial for understanding Koh's art, as it is to understand Zen philosophy. Koh cultivates the ritual, partially inspired from Zen Buddhism.²⁷⁷ The seemingly mundane is elevated through Koh's simple gestures. Before the skeletal sculptures for *God* was displayed, Koh performed a ritual (known through photography), whispering into their ears (as mentioned, the scorched skeletons had their ears intact). What he whispered is unknown. But it is still an important part of the work.²⁷⁸ By whispering to the sculptures, Koh gives them a tremendous value. This action implies that

²⁷⁵ Juniper, Andrew (2003) *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, Tuttle Publishing, USA, ix

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2

²⁷⁷ Koh also appropriate elements from everything from Christianity to occult magical rites and voodoo.

²⁷⁸ The whispers are even included in the material list of the work.

they have a consciousness, which separates them from static artworks.²⁷⁹ Other performances also evolve from rituals, such as *Mein tod mein tod*, which is enacted as a burial rite.

Comparing the aesthetic of Romanticism with that of the wabi sabi is interesting. Even though they are fundamentally opposite, since Zen tries to abolish the conception of self while Romanticism cherish individual genius above all, one can still find similar traits. It is important to notice however, that when discussing Terence Koh, he actually evoke both Romanticism and Zen Buddhism. During the heyday of Romanticisms, the increase of artists made it necessary to for them to become visible public figures, and eccentricity amongst the artists flourished. Koh, as a public figure, evoke the Romantic myth of the misunderstood genius artist. But he does so by evoking the humble asceticism of a Zen monk, which in his milieu in New York of 2011 can be perceived quite eccentric.

Beauty and the sublime are important for both Romanticism and wabi sabi. The sublime is a central feature for Zen aesthetic. As mentioned, through sublimity, it becomes possible to express the inconceivable. Wabi sabi aesthetic sets out to reducing what is depicted to its bare essence, leaving as much as possible open for interpretation. The word is of limited value in Zen philosophy, because its practitioners have come to realize that, “words tend to tie us to intellectual thought.”²⁸⁰ I feel it is safe to assume that Koh is of a similar understanding, as he always leaves the unexplainable unexplained. Zen art and poetry is “used as a means for the transmission of delicate and deep feelings that normal language cannot hope to adequately convey. Poetry can express undefined feelings and unvoiced thoughts. The Japanese poet will use a bare minimum of expression to provoke the greatest emotional response.”²⁸¹ This description summarizes a major trait in Koh’s oeuvre, as his artworks have an understated elegance that can hardly be articulated.²⁸²

Zen philosophy has a similar conception of the sublime as in the Western world. Both conceptions consider contemplation to be the key to mental development. Much romantic philosophy award art the ability to enhance its spectator’s moral fiber through aesthetic education. Zen philosophy claims, “Experiencing wabi sabi expressions can engender a peaceful contemplation of the transience of all things.”²⁸³ Contemplation in turn is the road to enlightenment. Zen art is characterized by simple spontaneous expressiveness, which only

²⁷⁹ It can also imply reanimation.

²⁸⁰ Juniper, op.cit., 73

²⁸¹ Ibid., 74

²⁸² I will return to this aspect in the summary.

²⁸³ Juniper, op.cit., 27

sets out to capture the essence of what is being portrayed. This has nothing to do with the subjective expressiveness of Romanticism, but when not taking the fundamentals of Zen philosophy into consideration, and instead compares them visually, one might deem them similar.

This is not to say that Koh primarily is a practitioner of wabi sabi aesthetic. He is not. But as shown, the theory of the wabi sabi explains several facets of Koh's works, but maybe more so, it exemplifies Koh's eclectic attitude toward (art) history, religion and spirituality, and show how he appropriates elements from every conceivable culture. Despite Koh's extensive evocation of exotic cultures, he is unmistakably positioned within the contemporary art scene. Nearing the end of this discussion, I think it is fitting to examine his appropriation from a contemporary point of view. This extensive appropriation can be viewed in the light of Bourriaud's conception of the 'semionaut'.

'Semionaut'

To locate a pattern amongst the apparently random elements appropriated from religion, art history, popular culture, seedy pornography and conceptual topics from existential philosophy, can seem challenging.²⁸⁴ The uniting element is, in my opinion, simple: Terence Koh. Koh's artistic alteration is the common denominator. Recalling how Baudelaire described genius as the ability to invoke a childlike fascination, Koh shuffles the cultural signs and creates something entirely new by appropriating elements at will. Koh recombines references, objects and rituals in a new way that does not follow any visible logic besides his own. The result is an eclectic mixture of signs, which obtain a different meaning due to their combination. A good example of this can be found under the banner 'holes' on his web page,²⁸⁵ where the constantly rearranging links create a different narrative each time.²⁸⁶

Nicolas Bourriaud describes the phenomenon of restructuring cultural signs into something different in *Postproduction*, using the term 'semionaut' to describe its practitioners:

The activities of DJs, Web surfers, and postproduction artists imply a similar configuration of knowledge, which is characterized by the invention of paths through culture. All three are "semionauts"

²⁸⁴ I briefly brought up the subject when examining the Bowery School, and the internalization of appropriation.

²⁸⁵ <http://www.asianpunkboy.com/holes/index.php?pagename=holelist> [25.04.2011]

²⁸⁶ Koh clearly distinguishes his website from typical blogs, where the entries are presented chronologically.

who produce original pathways through signs. Every work is issued from a script that the artist projects onto culture, considered the framework of a narrative that in turn projects new possible scripts, endlessly. The DJ activates the history of music by copying and pasting together loops of sound, placing recorded products in relation with each other. Artists actively inhabit cultural and social forms. The Internet user may create his or her own site or homepage and constantly reshuffle the information obtained, inventing paths that can be bookmarked and reproduced at will. When we start a search engine in pursuit of a name or a subject, a mass of information issued from a labyrinth of databanks is inscribed on the screen. The "semionaut" imagines the links, the likely relations between disparate sites.²⁸⁷

It must be noted that in this case, I view 'semionaut' partially isolated from the rest of Bourriaud's conclusions in *Postproduction*. Some of his arguments advocate a relational aesthetic, which I do not think is easily applicable to our discussion of Koh. Koh's artistic production does not appear to be primarily concerned about construction social space. Instead his art radiate an individual expression in the search for self-realization (on both the beholder and Koh himself). Koh's installations do not produce social space; rather they seem to suggest contemplative withdrawal through desolation and sensuous delight. Bourriaud explains in the introduction, that a principal concern in his book is to, "try to show that artists' intuitive relationship with art history is now going beyond what we call "the art of appropriation," which naturally infers an ideology of ownership, and moving toward a culture of the use of forms, a culture of constant activity of signs based on a collective ideal: sharing."²⁸⁸ This is an interesting assumption, and his theory on the semionaut can serve as a guide for us, helping to establish a pattern in Koh's cultural references,²⁸⁹ or possibly to accept the lack thereof.²⁹⁰ Momin is discussing the same topic, when she writes that appropriation is now internalized. Attempting to establish a pattern in Koh's art will reveal that most of his work connotes a pursuit of enlightenment through contemplation, and frequently examine transcendent themes of humanity and existentialism. But in the end, their clearest connection is that Koh chose them. This can also mean an enhanced focus on the artist, who is the subjective mastermind behind the juxtaposed symbols. The artwork becomes a kaleidoscope of cultural signs which holds a narrative. But because of its multifaceted character, the viewer needs to help form a

²⁸⁷ Bourriaud, op.cit., 18

²⁸⁸ Ibid., III

²⁸⁹ As earlier quoted, Koh sees all artists as members of the same family.

²⁹⁰ There *is* a pattern, but since the pattern is simply that Koh chose it, it is likely that the viewer will need to reconstruct it based on his or hers own assumptions.

connection, meaning that he or she becomes a protagonists and a co-producer. Thus it is more correct to speak of *narratives*, instead of giving the impression that there is such a thing as the one narrative; which holds more truth than any other. Koh acknowledge this, when he says, “For me – because it’s a completely selfish thing – I couldn’t give a fuck about what you see as the end result: the projection. You see the projection, and I see what I hope to put into the projection. It’s a refraction, not a reflection; there’s a very big difference.”²⁹¹ The unknown background of this exotic artist inspires the viewer to start a fact-finding mission, as Bill Arning claims. We see several miniscule elements that we are led to believe is of grave importance; telling us a secret. The signs are not arbitrary, and I firmly believe Koh actually do disclose his innermost secrets in his art. But since we are oblivious to their meaning, we have to construct our own narrative. The ‘projection’ is ours. Momin describes Koh’s showcases as a,

wunderkammer of a single individual, though it seems to matter little who that might be specifically, just that he/she exists or has existed. The sense of the personal is not autobiographical self-absorption, but a way to connect to the ephemeral nature of the individual, holding as the artist has said, “the idea of death around them.”²⁹²

The vitrines hold objects of unknown origin, referring to an individual. It may very well refer to Koh, it makes sense since he is including self-portraits in his art, and the vitrines even hold “secret messages, thoughts, and desires” according to the material list. But we cannot be certain what meaning these symbols are meant to have. Either way, what is interesting is that the spectator needs to make the connection, thus co-produce the narrative. Bourriaud writes:

The artwork functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives. Each exhibition encloses within it the script of another; each work may be inserted into different programs and used for multiple scenarios. The artwork is no longer an end point but a simple moment in an infinite chain of contributions.²⁹³

By being a moment in an infinite chain, the artwork itself becomes infinite. The individual viewer helps complete the work, and thus expands its boundaries. “We really are, for the first

²⁹¹ Obrist, op.cit., 136

²⁹² Momin (2005) op.cit., 14

²⁹³ Bourriaud, op.cit., 18

time, in the Internet Age,” says Koh.²⁹⁴ Maybe the Internet is one of the reasons Momin and Bourriaud now feel appropriation has become internalized. In Koh’s case, it is apparent that appropriating is not a point in itself; it is not fueled by an attempt to question artistic originality or challenge the boundaries of art. The distribution/redistribution and construction/reconstruction of digital material can be executed at the speed of light, and suffer few geographical limitations. The internalization of appropriation might be a response to this fact, which is evident through the lack of distance and irony in the artworks.

Koh wants to become the first 24/7 artist, and he envisions creating art for eternity, even beyond death. Death is also liberation. Koh is free to disclose all his intimate secrets in the works, knowing we only see the projection. He can still chose to keep us in the dark. If the desire for meaning and answers fuels our interest, then the works will forever remain enticing because the revelation is forever postponed. Koh must be aware that as soon as a secret is revealed, the magic is gone. And just as quickly we desire another. Regardless, the sincerity and honesty in his art, however subliminal, gives the works an intensity that can be experienced both physically and psychological.

The *literal* death of the author implies relinquishing control. Koh reveals a desire producing art post mortem, saying, “Even when I’m sleeping I want to be making art; all the time, even after I die, and even a thousand years from now. I want to create the idea of always making art, every single moment, for the rest of eternity.”²⁹⁵ The concept involves an agent; perhaps a designed computer program or something similar, because restructuring existing symbols would probably be the principal concern. Even if we live in the Internet age, no one has yet managed to utilize Internet’s full potential as an artistic medium, explained Koh in 2008.²⁹⁶ This concept would certainly come close to maximizing the potential of the Internet as a medium, just as it would fulfill the concept of the semionaut.

Summary

Koh does not entirely fit the semionaut-description either. The appropriation in Koh’s art is, as Momin writes, internalized. Lacking distance and irony, Koh rearrange any conceivable symbol at will, producing artworks based on his own logic. But, if the semionaut or the

²⁹⁴ Obrist, op.cit., 149

²⁹⁵ Interview with Terence Koh, New York, 09.24.2010

²⁹⁶ Obrist, op.cit., 149

postproduction artists first and foremost reuse signs, then the term does not do justice to Koh's oeuvre. Yes, the juxtaposed signs are evident in his artistic process, but the *act of creation* is still an important trait of his oeuvre, revealing a strong subjective presence. Eclecticism, fragility, impermanence, sexuality and existentialism, are frequently evoked in his art. The sensitive subject matter has a universal meaning, regardless of their cultural origin, and through painstaking beauty, a *memento mori* appears in much of his production. Through their sensuous character, they can be perceived as democratic in a sense. But they are also demanding, requiring a certain predisposition; a desire to venture down the rabbit hole into Koh's to idiosyncratic microcosm.

A theoretical framework is not necessary for appreciating Koh's work, and his exhibitions can be enjoyed on a completely sensory level. However, many facets of his art would surely be overlooked with such an approach. By examining and discussing Koh's work in relation to theory of aesthetic, we become better suited to articulate their meaning and effect on us. As John Dewey explains, "Flowers can be enjoyed without knowing about the interactions of soil, air, moisture, and seeds of which they are the result. But they cannot be understood without taking just these interactions into account – and theory is a matter of understanding."²⁹⁷

By placing Koh's art alongside artistic tendencies and theories, we see that no one approach is close to exhaust the essence of his art. I think his art has a deeply personal origin, telling us his secrets in an unknown language.²⁹⁸ These elements are discretely implemented in his artworks, reanimating them. Sometimes this phenomenon stems from his inclusion of organic materials, such as living ants or spiders, or his own semen, blood or urine. Other elements include his whispers, thoughts, desires or even a part of his soul. Such components do not submit to the conception of a postproduction artist, as they these signs are unique and personal. Their intended meaning is unknown, but through the manner of execution we sense that they are of the utmost importance. Shamim Momin writes,

Magic has always had rules and frameworks to let us get our way, provided we are privy to the right spells, incantations, and secret ingredients. As we know so well from innumerable stories, however, its invocations are precarious and rarely successful. Koh's version never fails to let us know that the secret interiors of things—whether flesh, glass coffins, black holes, or one's heart, cloaked in perfect, often

²⁹⁷ Dewey, op.cit., 11

²⁹⁸ As mentioned, he has his own language that no one else knows. Sometimes he speaks it during performances.

heartbreakingly empty beauty—can almost never be obtained. But it is enough that he reminds us so well why we all keep trying.²⁹⁹

As I implied earlier, there seems to be an essence in Koh's art, that runs through all the exhibitions I have described, which is very difficult to articulate.³⁰⁰ As with Zen aesthetic, Koh communicates through subtleties, leaving much open for interpretation. His artworks can incite intense sensuous and emotional responses, but because of the subliminal origin of this effect, the responses are highly personal.

The earliest experience of art must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual. (Cf. the paintings in the caves at Lascaux [...] etc) The earliest theory of art that of the Greek philosophers, proposed that art was mimesis, imitations of reality. It is at this point that the peculiar question of the value of art arose. For the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself.³⁰¹

This is the first paragraph of Susan Sontag's essay, "Against Interpretation." Sontag's claim is simple, yet of the highest importance: Art existed long before art theory. Her observation is a suitable contribution to this discussion. Koh's art *is* an instrument of the ritual.

As I hope to have exemplified, viewing Koh's art through an academic lens can be rewarding, but one should keep in mind that no one theory of aesthetic can circle all the defining facets of an artwork. I have not attempted to 'justify' Koh's art through art theory, as Sontag writes, but instead tried to suggest a few perspectives that can help us gain a deeper understanding of Koh's art. Here, at the end of my discussion, I am unable to produce any conclusions.

Because of his young age and eclectic attitude, I have been cautiously avoiding pinning him down. I have attempted to apply terms and categories only as an aid to understand his art, not to clearly define his oeuvre.

²⁹⁹ Momin (2007) op.cit., unnumbered pages

³⁰⁰ I must elaborate, so as to not come off as too idealistic, that although the artworks do resist intellectualization, they are graspable from an art theoretical standpoint. What I mean is that one should be aware of the inadequacy of words when trying to articulate personal sensuous and emotional responses, and that such insistence might neglect the important nuances. To recite Koh's description of the Whitney show, he explained the work as, "something you can't see in sight but that catches in the heart." This is symptomatic for his oeuvre.

³⁰¹ Sontag, Susan (1967) "Against interpretation", *Against interpretation and other essays*, Farrar, Strais & Giroux, New York, 3

“None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it *said* because one knew (or thought one knew) what it *did*,”³⁰² writes Susan Sontag. When examining Koh art, we might wonder if Koh is out to reclaim art’s innocence. Maybe this is his gift to us.

I end my thesis with the words of Georges Bataille, which articulates a salient essence of Koh’s art.

“Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism – to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea.”³⁰³

³⁰² Ibid., 4-5

³⁰³ Bataille (1986) op.cit., 24

Picture list

0. **Terence Koh** – *Untitled (Double-sided Head)* at *Terence Koh*, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2006. Sculpture – bronze, paint, powder, wax, wire. Overall dimensions vary with installation.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.

1. **Terence Koh** – *III Untitled (Flowers for Baudelaire)*, Richard Avedon’s former studio, New York, 2008. Sugar and corn syrup on found canvas. 46” x 60”.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.

2. **Terence Koh** – Installation view of *Flowers for Baudelaire*, Richard Avedon’s former studio, New York, 2008. Forty-six paintings – sugar and corn syrup on found canvas. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.

3. **Terence Koh** – Note posted on Facebook, URL:
<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090#!/photo.php?fbid=1600158648977&set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090&type=1&theater> (09.23.2010) [05.15.2011]

4. **Terence Koh** – Note posted on Facebook, URL:
<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090#!/photo.php?fbid=1601355038886&set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090&type=1&theater> (09.24.2010) [05.15.2011]

5. **Terence Koh** – Note posted on Facebook, URL:
<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090#!/photo.php?fbid=1588923328101&set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090&type=1&theater> (09.15.2010) [05.15.2011]

6. **Terence Koh** - *Mein Tod Mein Tod*, Peres Projects Berlin, 2005.
Mixed media sculpture, wood, sugar, water, icing (for tombstone) Mixed media sculpture, wood, string, metal, paint, dehydrated vegetable matter, coated in sugar and icing (for staffs) 130 x 56 x 30 cm (51.2 x 22 x 11.8 inches) (for tombstone).
Courtesy of Peres Projects.

7. **Terence Koh** – *God*, at de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, 2007.
Mixed media sculpture accompanied by certificate of authenticity – plaster, wood, wax, paint, Eros lube, artist’s saliva, cum from the artist and other. 72 x 10 x 10 in. (186 x 26 x 26 cm).
Courtesy of Peres Projects.

8. **Terence Koh** – *God*, at de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, 2007.
Mixed media installation – twelve found human skeletons, wax, sugar, sake, absinthe, cognac, champagne, Eau d'Orange Verte by Hermès, artist's whispers, artist's cum, artist's piss. Overall dimensions vary with installations.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.
9. **Terence Koh** – *Untitled (Chocolate Mountains)*, at *Terence Koh*, Kunsthalle Zürich 2006
Mixed media sculpture – Styrofoam, fiberglass, white chocolate, icing. Two parts, each approximately 142" x 71" (350 x 180 cm). Overall dimensions vary with installation. The Dakis Joannou Collection, Athens.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.
10. **Terence Koh** – *Untitled (vitrines 1-10)*, at *Terence Koh*, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2006.
Mixed media sculpture – glass vitrines with objects of various media, including porcelain, wood, metal, bones, skulls, plastic, bronze, plaster, paint, breaks, shatters, secret messages, thoughts, and desires.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.
11. **Terence Koh** – *Untitled*, at *Terence Koh*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2007.
Mixed media sculpture – light on custom metal stand, custom lead sphere with secret content, string.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.
12. **Mark Rothko** – *Untitled*, 1968.
Synthetic polymer paint on paper. 17 7/8 x 23 7/8" (45.4 x 60.8 cm).
Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc. © 2011 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Photograph courtesy of MOMA. http://www.moma.org/collection_images/resized/248/w500h420/CRI_7248.jpg
13. **Barnett Newman** – *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51.
Oil on canvas. 7' 11 3/8" x 17' 9 1/4" (242.2 x 541.7 cm).
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller. © Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Photograph courtesy of MOMA.
http://www.moma.org/collection_images/resized/107/w500h420/CRI_182107.jpg
14. **Terence Koh** – Installation view *Flowers for Baudelaire*, Richard Avedon's former studio, New York, 2008.
Forty-five paintings – sugar and corn syrup on found canvas. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of Peres Projects.
15. **Robert Morris** – Installation view of *Untitled (Corner Piece)* at Green Gallery, New York, 1964.
Plywood sculpture. Copyrights © Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Photograph courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

16. **asianpunkboy** – *Untitled 4 (owl)*, 2003

Plastic owl, two 440 carat cubic zirconia stones with engraved text (William), acrylic paint, glue adhesive, flat household paint on wood shelf. 43 1/4 x 24 x 10 1/4 inches.

Courtesy of Peres Projects.

17. **Terence Koh** – *Big White Cock*, 2006

Mixed media sculpture – neon fixtures. 52 x 48 in. (132.1 x 121.9 cm).

Courtesy of Peres Projects.

18. **Rosalind Krauss** – model for sculpture in the expanded field, 1979

October, Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979), page 38 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778224>

19. **Terence Koh** – Installation view from *Captain Buddha* at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 2008.

I am in love with the sound of disco, 2008, (Swastika) 55 brass soldiers, each figure 11 x 12 x 4 cm, overall dimensions, 135 x 135 x 12 cm.

I am guiding myself true an impossible nectarine what then becomes of the camel, 2008, (Buddha with vitrine), Sculpture: Glass, steal, tinted foil, white marble staff, Buddha figure: 95 x 81 x 53 cm. Vitrine: 41 x 38 x 189 cm.

Courtesy of Peres Projects.

20. **Terence Koh** – Note posted on Facebook, URL:

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090#!/photo.php?fbid=1592336253422&set=a.1267522293276.2041142.1386360090&type=1&theater> (09.17.2010) [05.15.2011]

21. **Terence Koh** – *Untitled (power power)* at Terence Koh, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2006.

Two glass globes with fluorescent bulbs Approximately 11,8” (30 cm) in diameter each. Overall dimensions vary with installation.

Courtesy of Peres Projects.

22. **Terence Koh** – Detail of *God*, de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, 2007

Mixed media installation – twelve found human skeletons, wax, sugar, sake, absinthe, cognac, champagne, Eau d’Orange Verte by Hermès, artist’s whispers, artist’s cum, artist’s piss

Overall dimensions vary with installations.

Courtesy of Peres Projects.

Bibliography

- Aarons, Philip. "The Books of Terence Koh", *Gone, Yet Still*, Wiener Secession, EU, 2005
- Arning, Bill. "Terence Koh against the fascism of the real", *Terence Koh 1980-2008: Love for Eternity*, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 2009
- Bataille, Georges. *Erotism Death & Sexuality*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1986
- _____ *The Tears of Eros*, City Light Books, San Francisco, 1989
- Benderson, Bruce. "Inside Terence Koh", *Terence Koh: Gone, Yet Still*, Wiener Secession, EU, 2005
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Postproduction*, Lukas & Steinberg, Berlin, 2002
- Bronson, AA. "Terence Dearest", *Terence Koh - Gone, Yet Still*, Secession, EU, 2005
- Baudelaire, Charles. "The Painter of Modern Life", *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Phaidon Limited Press, London, 1995
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful*, Routledge, Great Britain, 2008
- Craske, Matthew. *Art in Europe – 1700-1830*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1997
- Crimp, Douglas. "Redefining Site Specificity" *On the Museum's Ruins*, London, Cambridge Mass. 1993
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*, Berkeley Publishing Group, USA, 2005
- Foster, Hal. "The Crux of Minimalism", *Minimalism* [2000] Meyer (red), Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1986/1996
- Foster, Hal, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. *Art since 1900*, Thames & Hudson, Singapore, 2004
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an author", *The Art of Art History – a Critical Anthology*, [2009] Donald Preziosi (ed.) Oxford University Press, USA, 1969
- Fried, Michael. "Art and Objecthood", *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* [1998], University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967
- Goldie, Peter & Elisabeth Schellekens. *Who is afraid of conceptual art*, Routledge, USA, 2010

- Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-garde and Kitsch", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 1939
- Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting" *Art in theory, 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 1960
- Greenberg, Clement. "Recentness of Sculpture", *Minimalism* [2000] James Meyer (ed.), Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1967
- Guilbaut, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983
- Hollein, Max. "foreword", *Terence Koh – Captain Buddha*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Germany, 2008
- Hopkins, David. *After Modern Art 1945-2000*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 2000
- Irving Sandler. presents a thorough analysis of Newman's works in *A History of Abstract Expressionism*, Harper & Row, New York, 1970
- Jasper, Adam. "Terence Koh Review Kunsthalle Zürich" *Art Review*, November 1, 2006. URL <http://www.peresprojects.com/artist-press-kit-image/52/197/> [13.01.2011]
- Judd, Donald. "Specific Objects" *Minimalism* [2000] Meyer (ed.), Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1965
- _____ "Complaints: Part 1" *Minimalism* [2000] Meyer (ed.), Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1969
- Juniper, Andrew. *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*, Tuttle Publishing, USA, 2003
- Kant, Immanuel (1899) *Critique of Pure Reason*, Wiley Book Company, New York
- Kaprow, Allan. "Notes on the Creation of a Total Art", *Allan Kaprow – Essays on the blurring of art and life* [2003] Kelley (ed.), University of California Press, USA, 1958
- Kelley, Jeff. "introduction", *Allan Kaprow – Essays on the blurring of art and life* [2003] Kelley (ed.), University of California Press, USA, 1992
- Kosuth, Joseph. *Art After Philosophy*, MIT press, USA, 1991
- Krauss, Rosalind "Sculpture in the expanded field", *October*, 1979 Vol. 8 (spring), pp 30-44M <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778224>
- LaBruce, Bruce "black hole son", *The Whole Family Terence Koh*, Peres Projects, 2008

- LeWitt, Sol. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 1967
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester University Press, USA, 1984
- Meyer, James. "Survey", *Minimalism*, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 2000
- Momin, Shamim. "Swallowing Time: Dark Matter White. Esse qua, videri (to be, rather than to seem)", *Terence Koh - Gone, Yet Still*, Secession, EU, 2005
- _____ "The Infinite Tear", *Terence Koh*, Yale University Press, USA, 2007
- Morris, Robert. "Notes on Sculpture 1-2", *Minimalism* [2000] Meyer (ed.), Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1966
- Morris, Robert. "Notes on Sculpture 3", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 1967
- Newman, Barnett. "The First Man Was an Artist", *Art in theory 1900 - 2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, [2003] Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (ed.) Wiley Blackwell Publishing, UK, 1947
- Obrist, Hans Ulrich "Terence Koh interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist", *Terence Koh 1980-2008 Love for Eternity*, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 2009
- Oliveira, Nicolas De, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry. *Installation art in the new millennium*, Thames & Hudson, China, 2003
- Pattison, Robert. *The Triumph of Vulgarly*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1987
- Reardon, Ben. "untitled", *God Terence Koh*, de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, 2008
- Reiss H, Julie. "From Margin to Center – The Spaces of Installation Art", MIT Press, USA, 1999
- Rosenthal, Norman. "Terence Koh – God", *God Terence Koh*, de Pury & Luxembourg, Zürich, 2007
- Rosenthal, Norman. "White Flowers for Charles, White Flowers for Terence", *Flowers for Baudelaire*, Iceland, 2008
- Rothko, Mark. *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, USA, 2004
- Rubio, Augustín Pérez. "Letter to a bunny in a magician's top hat from the other side of the looking glass", *Terence Koh Love For Eternity 1980-2008*, Hatje Cantz, Germany, 2008
- Ruff, Beatrix. "Terence Koh – Artist", *Terence Koh*, Yale University Press, USA, 2007

Savile, Anthony. "Imagination and aesthetic value", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2006, 46

Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Oxford University Press, Great Britain, 1967

Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*, Routledge, Great Britain, 2006

Sontag, Susan. "Against interpretation", *Against interpretation and other essays*, Farrar, Strais & Giroux, New York, 1967

Thomas, Kelly Devine. "Say It with Flowers—or Gourds, Goats, Fur Cups, or Fried", *ARTnews*, 2006 URL: http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2106 (09.2006) [22.03.2011]

Williams, Robert. *Art Theory*, Blackwell Publishing, UK, 2004

Weinhart, Martina. "Captain Buddha – A White Room with Dark Sides", *Terence Koh Captain Buddha*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Germany, 2008

N/A (2008) "Terence Koh talks to Tim Steiner", *God Terence Koh*, De Pury & Luxembourg

Internet sources and other:

Peres Projects, press release for the Whole Family, URL: <http://peresprojects.com/exhibit-press/4/> [12.01.11]

<http://kohbunny.com/> (26.10.2007) [04.11.2010]

Encyclopedia of Irish and World Art, "Mark Rothko", URL: <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/famous-artists/mark-rothko.htm> [03.01.11]

Saatchi Gallery, URL: http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/artpages/terence_koh_cock.htm [06.01.11]

Koh, Terence. Email-correspondence

Peres, Javier. Email-correspondence

Steiner, Tim. Email-correspondence

Norwegian abstract – norsk sammendrag

I denne masteravhandlingen ønsker jeg og presentere en nærlesning av utvalgte utstillinger og verk av kunstneren Terence Koh, som på påfallende kort tid har blitt internasjonalt anerkjent. Siden hans første utstilling i 2003 (*The Whole Family*) på galleriet Peres Projects in Los Angeles, har verkene hans blitt vist på museer og kunsthaller over hele verden. Til tross for disse utstillingene, finnes det kun et fåtall publikasjoner som tar for seg Kohs kunstnerskap. Derimot finnes det uttallige artikler om Koh i moteblader, internettaviser og hippe kunstblogger. Her blir Koh tidvis framstilt som en eksentrisk kunstner som lever en jet set tilværelse blant sosieteten, og kunstverkene hans gis ikke den oppmerksomheten de fortjener.

Koh arbeider svært allsidig og multimedialt, og tar ofte i bruk ukonvensjonelle og ubestendige materialer som for eksempel sjokolade. Flere av verkene hans er erfaringsbaserte, hvor betrakteren utsettes for overveldende sanselig stimuli, eksempelvis fra høy lyd, sterke (pulserende) lyskilder eller intens lukt fra parfyme eller røkelse. Hans idiosynkratiske installasjoner framstår som drømmeaktige universer som inviterer til kontemplasjon. Gesamtkunstwerk blir et sentralt begrep i denne forbindelse. Tematisk synes Koh å arbeide gjennomgående med store filosofiske spørsmål knyttet til eksistensialisme og den menneskelige psyke, med tallrike referanser til religion, filosofi og mytologi.

I denne avhandlingen redegjør jeg for ulike aspekter ved Kohs kunstnerskap. Med utgangspunkt i *Flowers for Baudelaire* (New York, 2008) som kjerneeksempel, presenteres dernest hans eksperimentelle internettkunst (asianpunkboy.com), performansen *Mein Tod Mein Tod* (Berlin, 2005) og utstillingene *Terence Koh* (Zürich, 2006), *Terence Koh*, (New York, 2007), og *God* (Zürich, 2007). På bakgrunn av disse lesningene, forsøker jeg og plassere Koh i en kunsthistorisk kontekst, for slik å kunne avgjøre hvilke kunstteoretiske perspektiver som best kan lede til en dypere forståelse av verkene. Romantikkbegrepet forener flere sentrale aspekter ved hans kunstnerskap, for eksempel aksentueringen av kunstner-subjektet og hvordan det sublime og poetiske uttrykket inviterer til fredsommelig kontemplasjon. Avslutningsvis diskuterer jeg hans gjennomgående og omfattende appropriering av religiøse symboler og (kunst-) historiske referanser i lys av Nicolas Bourriauds *semionaut*-begrep.