

# GREY ART NYU GALLERY

For Immediate Release  
January 15, 2015

Contact: Ally Mintz  
ally.mintz@nyu.edu or 212/998-6782

## ***Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera***

**Nationwide tour opens at NYU on April 21, 2015**

**Provocative, performative photographs  
by one of downtown New York's most intriguing artists**

The Grey Art Gallery at New York University announces the first major museum retrospective of works by Tseng Kwong Chi (1950–1990), a prolific artist and key documentarian of Manhattan's downtown scene in the 1980s. On view April 21 through July 11, 2015, the exhibition features over 80 photo-based works alongside archival materials by the Hong Kong-born Canadian artist, who died in 1990 at the age of 39 from AIDS-related complications. In addition to twelve works from the artist's best-known East Meets West and Expeditionary series, as well as nine images of his close friend Keith Haring's drawings in New York city subways, *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* presents over 60 examples from less well-known bodies of work. These include *Costumes at the Met*; photographs of South Jersey lifeguards and partying beachgoers at Jacob Riis Park; his biting critique of the politically conservative Moral Majority; "It's a Reagan World!," a commission from *Soho Weekly News*; portraits of notable artists; group portraits of East Village denizens; rubber-stamped Polaroid photomontages; and digitized snapshots of the artist's fellow night-clubbers. *Performing for the Camera* is co-organized by NYU's Grey Art Gallery and the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia. Amy Brandt, McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Chrysler, curated the show, which is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated publication featuring four essays that illuminate the many facets of Tseng's work, his all-too-brief life, and his influence on younger artists.



Tseng Kwong Chi. *New York, New York* (Brooklyn Bridge), 1979, from the East Meets West series. Gelatin silver print, printed 2014. Courtesy Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York

In combining photography with performance, personal identity with global politics, and satire with farce, Tseng created a compelling body of work whose complexity is belied by its easy humor and grace. Tseng's inclusion in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*, on view May 7–August 16, 2015, will help to contextualize his

work's relation to fashion and identity politics. That show will address the Chinese splendor in Western imagery, exploring the cultural issues inherent in "East Meets West" that Tseng tackled in his work. "Until now, the critical understanding of Tseng's multifaceted oeuvre has been limited by the few works, mostly from the East Meets West series, that have been on public view," notes Brandt. "Art audiences have not had the opportunity to take in the full scope of Tseng's powerful imagery, with its striking social, political, and philosophical implications, nor to appreciate his impact on younger generations of artists. The exhibition's subtitle, *Performing for the Camera*, emphasizes the aspects of masquerade, theatricality, and performance at the root of his conceptual photographic practice. With this exhibition, we are proud to carve a niche for Tseng Kwong Chi in the pantheon of postmodern innovators, where he so rightly belongs."

Tseng, whose parents fled Communist China to settle in Hong Kong, was born in 1950. When he was sixteen years old, his family relocated to Vancouver. After studying briefly at the University of British Columbia, Tseng moved to Paris in 1974 to attend the prestigious Académie Julian, where he began to seriously study photography. After moving to New York in 1978, Tseng began crafting the performative self-portraits that form the backbone of his artistic practice. "Tseng was simultaneously mindful of art-historical precursors and way ahead of his time," said Grey director Lynn Gumpert. "His self-portraits are prescient in anticipating today's 'selfie' culture, and art history has finally caught up with him in recognizing his party persona as a sophisticated performance of identity. At NYU's art museum, we are excited to spotlight these issues, which will resonate with so many of the university's students. The show also fits squarely into the Grey's commitment to exposing multifarious stories of downtown New York, as well as to presenting multidimensional artistic perspectives from outside the western canon."

For his landmark East Meets West series, which he began in 1979—and which evolved into The Expeditionary Series—Tseng adopted the identity of a visiting Chinese official, wearing a deadpan expression and a "Mao suit." Describing himself as both an "ambiguous ambassador" and an "inquisitive traveler," he assumed the role of a dedicated tourist crisscrossing the globe, always an outsider in a foreign land. These strikingly formal yet performance-based images feature the artist posing before popular tourist sites, such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, or Mount Rushmore, and in magnificent natural settings such as the Canadian Rockies and the Grand Canyon. By embarking on his own version of a Grand Tour, Tseng was determined to find and identify what was quintessentially American. In another guise, he was an eager and reliable witness to his time, documenting not only his friend Keith Haring's subway drawings but also downtown New York's lively art and nightclub scenes of the 1980s.

Tseng's genius for performance allowed him to act as a social chameleon, insinuating himself with great poise into nightclubs, art openings, beach parties, and posh society evenings. He snapped innumerable Polaroids of himself with attendees as they entered these events, soliciting the autographs of friends and celebrities alike, which he assembled into dense photomontages stapled onto board. These dynamic montages, which have rarely been seen, display the artist's interests in series and groupings, and are a highlight of the Grey's presentation. In all the photographs portraying these social encounters, Tseng's immutable costume and Asian identity mark him as an outsider. "Ironically, while Tseng stood out in his images in his guise of Chinese dignitary—and, in most cases, the only Asian in the room—his Mao suit allowed for a certain acceptance into social and political circles," observes Brandt. "In exaggerating his difference into an exotic mystique, Tseng found a way to infiltrate spaces typically closed to Asians and other minority groups."

Tseng's stereotyped Chinese bigwig borrows from downtown New York's love for masquerade and glitter—and reaches a new height of absurdity—in his Costumes at the Met series, which was published in the *Soho Weekly News* in 1980. Armed with his Mao suit and his performer's

charm, Tseng insinuated himself into the exclusive reception for The Costume Institute's exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644–1912*, which was organized by Diana Vreeland. The exhibition brought together one hundred and fifty lavish imperial robes worn by emperors and empresses of the Ch'ing dynasty. Then called "Party of the Year," the reception was attended by more than six hundred guests at three hundred dollars a ticket. As Tseng wandered around the gala, his assistant Dan Friedman snapped photographs of him standing next to major figures from the worlds of art, politics, and fashion—such as Paloma Picasso, Henry and Nancy Kissinger, and Yves Saint Laurent. This series clearly demonstrates how the artist inserted questions of geopolitics and cultural fetishism into the show's glam and glitter.

Dancer and choreographer Muna Tseng, the artist's sister, recalls that her brother enjoyed social gatherings of all kinds. This is seen not only in the social subterfuge of his *Costumes at the Met* photos, but also in rarely exhibited images of the artist laughing and cavorting with beachgoers at New York's Jacob Riis Park, and crashing a lifeguards' ball in Wildwood, New Jersey. Though Tseng's uniform remains constant—as does his outsider status—the artist reveals a different side of his persona in these photographs. His demeanor is more relaxed and playful, more suited to the casual social atmosphere of these occasions.

For his little-known 1981 *Moral Majority* series, also published in the *Soho Weekly News*, Tseng shed his Mao uniform for a genteel seersucker suit, adopting the guise of a conservative sympathizer amid members of the then-ascendant Republican party. With artist Kenny Scharf as his assistant, Tseng convinced famous figures of the Reagan era to pose in front of a heavily wrinkled American flag. In so doing, he anticipated Sacha Baron Cohen, Stephen Colbert, and Jon Stewart's parodies of television hosts, journalists, and other interviewers, which have become an indispensable feature of our present media landscape. The cheeky satire of the *Moral Majority* series echoes the fashion photos Tseng shot for a 1980 article in the *Soho Weekly News*, "It's a Reagan World!," a collaboration with his friend Ann Magnuson. For these photographs, artist friends such as Jack Smith, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Magnuson herself take on the guise of young Republicans, dressing in conservative drag. Their ironic, punked-out take on preppy style suggests fashion's power to effect political critique, a constant theme in Tseng's practice.

In 1979, the suit Tseng wore still evoked the policies and pervasive presence of Communist leader Mao Zedong, who died in 1976. Today, Western notions about the distance and mystery of China, as conveyed by the artist in the 1980s, have evolved into a new set of stereotypes and associations, as the world's second-largest economy has become a major US trading partner. In our present economic environment Tseng's images are more relevant than ever before, given China's current status as a global superpower. In the 1980s Chinese artists such as Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan, and Song Dong, who had learned about Tseng's photographs through American art magazines, made Chinese politics a subject of their work. Despite the cultural changes that have taken place since then, today, as this exhibition demonstrates, Tseng's art personifies the idea of "East Meets West" as powerfully as it did in the 1980s.

### **Exhibition Publication**

*Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* is accompanied by a beautifully illustrated 178-page publication with an introduction and four essays exploring Tseng's work, his place in the downtown scene, and his importance for contemporary artists who also address the nexus of identity, politics, and performance. Lynn Gumpert, director of the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, opens the volume with her thoughts on Tseng's place in art history and the significance of the present exhibition. The exhibition's curator, Amy Brandt, PhD, McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Chrysler Museum of Art, provides a broad overview

of Tseng's art, discussing the various series that comprise his oeuvre. Brandt also unpacks current theories surrounding tourism as an activity and cultural phenomenon in relation to Tseng's work, noting that in his guises of Chinese dignitary and inquisitive traveler, he is a double outsider—exploring both his Asian identity and his marginal status as a gay man. Finally, she looks at Tseng's impact on a number of contemporary artists who are inspired by his groundbreaking photographs.

In his essay "On Infiltration," Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, Assistant Professor of Performance Studies, Northwestern University, investigates the guerrilla-like performance tactics that Tseng consistently employed. Discussing the artist's brilliant Costumes at the Met series, Chambers-Letson elaborates on how Tseng—amidst prominent fashion designers, socialites, and other celebrities at the 1980 Chinese-themed gala at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute—convincingly played the part of a "potentially authentic signifier of Chineseness." Tseng's consistent strategy of "infiltration" is, Chambers-Letson concludes, "a keystone of his insurgent aesthetics." Alexandra Chang, Curator of Special Projects and Director of Global Arts Programs, Asian/Pacific/American Institute, New York University, in her essay "Epic Journey: Tseng Kwong Chi in the Diaspora," situates Tseng among Asian American artists who were actively exploring issues of identity and activism in the 1980s, as well as among Chinese avant-garde artists then living in New York City. She also reflects on the "multiple art histories" embedded in his work. For example, she observes that while the small, meditative figure seen from a distance in many of his Expeditionary Series images triggers associations with works by northern European Romantic artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, they also strongly recall the tiny, reclusive figures deep in contemplation amid mountainous landscapes often found in traditional ink paintings made by Chinese literati.

Finally Muna Tseng, who now oversees Tseng's estate, reminisces about her rambunctious, fashion-conscious, cross-dressing older brother, who entertained the family, directing theatrical productions featuring his siblings and cousins. According to Muna, Tseng was also a child prodigy who quickly mastered the basics of Chinese calligraphy and traditional ink painting. Through these five authors' original research and new perspectives, this handsome book offers unparalleled insights into the world of one of the late 20th century's most underappreciated artists. *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* is a definitive and indispensable artist's monograph. Published by the Chrysler Museum of Art and the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, in association with Lyon Artbooks, the volume is available through the Grey Art Gallery for \$50.00.

### **Exhibition Tour**

After closing at the Grey Art Gallery on April 21, 2015, *Performing for the Camera* travels to the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, where it will be on view from August 18 to December 13, 2015. From January 21 to May 22, 2016, the show will be on view at the Tufts University Art Gallery at the Shirley and Alex Aidekman Arts Center. The tour concludes at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, on view from September 17 to December 11, 2016.

### **Sponsorship**

*Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* was curated by Amy Brandt, McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, and co-organized by the Chrysler Museum and the Grey Art Gallery, New York University. This exhibition is supported, in part, by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. The Chrysler Museum thanks Oriana McKinnon and the McKinnon Family. The Grey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the Shiseido Endowment; New York University's Visual Arts Initiative; the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; Jane Wesman Public Relations; and the Abby Weed Grey

Trust. In-kind support is provided by Peter Mustardo of The Better Image and Katherine Sanderson, photograph conservator.

### **About the Grey Art Gallery**

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, film, video, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

### **General Information**

Grey Art Gallery, New York University  
100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003  
Tel: 212/998-6780, Fax: 212/995-4024  
E-mail: [greyartgallery@nyu.edu](mailto:greyartgallery@nyu.edu)  
Website: [www.nyu.edu/greyart](http://www.nyu.edu/greyart)

### **Hours**

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm  
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm  
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm  
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

**Admission:** Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge