

SEANKELLY

Shiner, Eric C. "Love for Eternity," *Ars Magazine*, January-March 2011.



Love for Eternity

To call Terence Koh an enigma of epic proportions is not only an accurate statement, but for this New York City--based artist, being so is also a way of life. Like a cloaked specter at one moment, or as a smartly appointed dandy in another, Koh inhabits the rarefied world of contemporary art as a trickster--- cum---instigator whose elegantly pristine installations, sculptures and performances are at once deeply complex and intrinsically pure in equal sway. Koh is the rare artist who seemingly opposes the zeitgeist of his era, yet is forever wrapped up in—and perhaps even defined by—the dominant trends of early 21st---century art and its attendant proclivities and persuasions. His work seems to hover in a universe far beyond that which we could ever understand as our own, as if it might be an aura or a flash of the ephemeral frozen in time. This mysterious nature extends well beyond the physical structure of his artwork, as it fully pervades all aspects of his life and deeply informs his own viewpoints on his aesthetic processes and philosophies. In thinking about Terence Koh, one must constantly navigate between the realm of the void and that of the lived here and now; his work takes us to a place we might never know, and yet one that is forever familiar. Ultimately he takes us on a journey both philosophically rigorous and readily accessible to a world where the unknowable becomes the mundane and the common becomes the dynamic.

In first thinking about the artist, the color white often springs to many a person's mind. Indeed, Koh and the color white are intrinsically linked. He inhabits an all---white interior near New York City's Chinatown, a bustling section of the city known for its Technicolor storefronts and neon signs, its boisterous marketplaces and tourist---laden streets. And yet, mere blocks away from one of Gotham's most dynamic neighborhoods, Koh takes comfort in his white---washed living space, replete as it is with a synthetic white Christmas tree, a taxidermied white peacock, several white sculptures and other assorted white bric---a---brac . His home is both minimal and fully loaded at the same time; the only bursts of color appear in the form of his pet cats or any human that navigates the space. In thinking about why he created this monochrome arrangement, Koh posits that "in white I find clarity and peace. I also have this childhood fantasy—and an ongoing fantasy—that all spaceship interiors are white and that I live inside this spaceship and the world of New York City outside is an alien planet that is waiting to be explored every day." And so he becomes both visitor from outer space and now long---time inhabitant of this strange new world in equal measure, a stance felt by anyone from somewhere else who calls New York City home. For Koh, the time spent exploring the streets of New York, often on his bicycle, becomes a palimpsest of images, sounds and experiences which he then boils down to the lowest common denominator in the form of a simple gesture that sends shivers and shockwaves out in droves.

For an artist who makes work steeped in the mysterious, he is surprisingly candid in discussing the perceived magical nature of his work. "I don't believe in magic. I believe in nature. My body is natural; I am born of the earth. I have the basic elements that existed before. These elements are just genetics and chemistry and natural occurrences. There is no magic; therefore it is all just a natural chemistry. I am more a chemist than an artist then because I feel the chemistry of the earth. I breathe it and it informs my movement and makes me perform. I am both a sponge and mirror of the earth." Viewed as such, Koh becomes both consumer and that consumed, product as well as producer. He is forever defined by the world around him, just as he reflects it out to those that take the time to observe. Here, he starts to sound like one of his forefathers, Andy Warhol, who himself knew that he both represented and was represented by American culture in all of its many guises.

Koh, in thinking about other artists that might be viewed as his forebears, in classic fashion rebuffs any such direct lines of influence in saying that, for him, "all artists are one family that spans through time. We don't influence one another, artists are just reborn into one another throughout time." In typical Koh doublespeak, when asked about his lineage with American artist James Lee Byars (1932---1997), he says, "Yes, I feel he is like a son to me. I discovered his work in another life." He goes on to say that he has seen the work of Byars "in my daydreams and it is beautiful." Here lies the genius of Koh it seems, in that he places himself within the full

timeline of art history not as a single point on a horizontal axis, but more likely the axis itself. His project is not about a singular aesthetic or way of making art, but, at a much deeper level, about universal emotions, mindsets and essences that reach back to the beginnings of human history and which will expand to the end of time. For Koh, ultimately, love is the common denominator that trumps everything: "I always say to myself: love for eternity. It is the reason for all of my art work."

Indeed, Koh prefers to read romantic novels when given the choice, and he is a deeply affectionate and caring soul; one need only spend a few moments with him to realize that his heart is pure and that his inquisitive nature is ever-present, probing and camouflaged as the (anything but) naïve. His constant examination of the human condition in our contemporary age is due in large part to his own vigorous quest for a basic understanding of who he is and why. When asked what the most exciting project he has worked on to date might be, he coyly responds that "I think the most exciting art project I will yet take on or am trying to take on is the creation of the self-actualization of Terence Koh as Terence Koh. Where every living, breathing, sleeping or dreaming moment of my life I exist as Terence Koh realizing he is Terence Koh. This is an upward physical manifestation through gestures, body, speech, etc. to the very notion of my very thoughts on existence."

It is important here to note that the artist Terence Koh has not always been known by that name. When first starting off his art career, Koh presented his work under the pseudonym Asian Punk Boy. When asked where one begins and the other ends, he says, "I believe that Asian Punk Boy was born in the spring of 2001 in or around the waters of Granville Island in Vancouver. I decided to become Terence Koh the first time I answered to the name Terence by my mother. That was when I was 8 months old. The number 8 has since held an important significance in my life and work." Reading more into this, not only is the numeral 8 a hugely auspicious number in Chinese culture, but once turned on its side, it also becomes the infinity symbol—clearly a fact not lost on Koh. For, in essence, his own identity relies upon the never-ending circulation of Asian Punk Boy and Terence Koh, just as it depends upon the constant ebb and flow of the real and the imagined. As one explores Koh more and more, the duplicitous nature of his work and his persona guarantees that one never knows what to expect from him—a trait that has produced not only uniquely meaningful works of art, but also a certain amount of mythology as well. Is Terence Koh real, or a figment of our imaginations? Of course, it is not the answer that matters, but the thought processes that one must embark upon to attempt to identify him in the first place. Like Warhol, Koh becomes the mythic uber-artist, yet not through the Warholian strategy of mass-media proliferation, but instead via the Kohsian aural dissemination of wholly-universal traits as if through transfiguration. Is Terence Koh as deep as this, or is he as simple as this? It seems as though his white-washed world is both loaded and benign at the same time. He might inhabit the central junction of the infinity sign, just as he is forever caught in its arcs and edges. Indeed, when queried about what his greatest accomplishment in life would be, he hopes to be "as simple and pure a human being as I could be within my limitations." Yet again, Koh becomes a self-sustaining entity, if not an alien trapped somewhere between his spaceship and the queer world beyond.

Of course, far beyond these philosophical attempts to "place" Terence Koh anywhere in space and time, it is clearly important to make sure that he is not viewed solely as some sort of esoteric monk or galactic soldier here to save humanity. He is very real, very social and very known, after all. Besides his serious and academic explorations into the meaning of art through the medium of art, Koh is also known for his playful and at times devilish references to the sexual and the flamboyant. He has made works of art out of soiled underwear, just as he has in the past had a clear penchant for Balenciaga and other haute couture labels. He seems to have foregone his love of gold sequined pants of late, however, saying that "I don't think I am a fashion junkie. Perhaps I used to be. Now I make and design all my own clothes. My favorite piece of clothing is the same thing I have chosen to wear everyday, which is about 2 yards of cool white cotton cloth that I wrap in different ways around my body every day. And it's really easy to maintain: just bleach and a washing machine." In terms of the sexualized nature of some of his work, he notes that "I think it's like life. You chase sex and sometimes it comes and sometimes it goes. And if it shows up in my art then it's just like sex, which is life." To be certain, and much like life itself, Terence Koh—or his work—can never be fully pegged down.

And to be sure, this constant cyclical action is all part of the beauty of Terence Koh: he is nothing and all things at once. Perhaps it is best to think of him as the personification of every mood and no mood at all. He is as empty as one wants him to be, just as he is full to overflowing should one so desire. The objects that he makes, often out of such unusual materials as powdered sugar or from things as common as wax and resin, seem as organic as they are man-made. In all things, Koh requires that everything he produces, from his artworks

through to his public persona, exists along a continuum that is forever in flux. He and his work inhabit a world where binarisms are a given and where absolutes can never exist. In the end, he is cipher and sage, just as he is muse and author. Thanks to Koh's resolute refusal to be understood as just one thing at any moment in time, he stands to be an artist that will remain at the forefront of the avant--garde, and one that will be bathed in white and driven by love, for eternity.

Eric C. Shiner is The Milton Fine Curator of Art at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.