Has Terence Koh Lost His Bling?

by Ben Davis
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Right now, Terence Koh is either marching slowly on his knees around a giant pile of salt crystals, or resting on his stomach at its edge before getting up to march again, in an unceasing cycle. The five-week-long performance-installation at Mary Boone gallery, titled "nothingtoodoo," takes the form of a perpetual, pointless ritual of self-punishment. It has some of the signatures of Koh's multifaceted body of work — most notably, everything is white, from the giant salt mound to the loose uniform that Koh is wearing. But it has none of his typically antic spirit, projecting instead an asceticism. There's not even a real press release. What we know about its intention — something about how Koh is performing a ritual for "peace" — comes to us via statements given before he started. He's not speaking now.

What does it mean? Terence Koh bears the dubious distinction of being associated with "bling conceptualism" (a term, I'm told, coined by Ossian Ward in an article referencing a Koh installation that incorporated the artist's own gold-covered turds, reportedly sold for half a million dollars at Art Basel in 2006). Characteristic of the pre-2008 bubble years, bling conceptualism describes an aesthetic that melds anti-art attitude with a sense for surface pulled from fashion and design. Dan Colen or Luis Gispert come to mind, but Koh is king.

The guy knows how to cause a sensation. In 2006, Koh touched off an uproar when Charles Saatchi tried to show his "Medusa," an installation featuring Jesus and Mary figures with phalluses clustered around a urinal, along with another work involving a drum set dotted with dead bugs, blood, and semen. In 2008, he was in the news again, this time for another installation incorporating a Jesus figurine with an erection. He has talked about his taste in men with porn star Sasha Grey ("tall and black"),yodeled alongside Lady Gaga, and contributed to a set of artist-designed coke spoons.

Whether or not you appreciate these antics, you probably wouldn't call them deep. Koh's 2007 Whitney museum installation — a single, super-powerful, impossible-to-look-at theater spotlight cranked up to full blast — is a reduction of his oeuvre to its essence: Art as pure, high-impact effect.

 Which brings us back to the current performance, which is outwardly so different, offering the tantalizing suggestion of deeper meaning. If Terence Koh is all "blinged" out, it would seem to mean something. Has the vogue for substance that everyone predicted right after the big art crash of 2008 finally arrived, three years late and with the art world back in full-on speculative frenzy mode?

Perhaps this is what you are meant to take away from "nothingtoodoo," but I think the answer is no. Koh's performance has less to do with some new contact with realities outside of the hedonistic world that he has constructed for himself — he'd have to do more than just mouth phrases like "peace iz non-violence" to impress me that he had a thought about the subject — and more to do with concerns that are purely internal to it.

The obvious reference point for the current performance is Marina Abramovic's recent outing at the Museum of Modern Art. Koh, of course, sat down for a turn at

her epic staring-contest performance, "The Artist Is Present." You can see how that work — or rather, the popular frenzy that it generated — would fire the imagination of Koh, who is like a heat-seeking missile for attention. The inbuilt dynamics of the endurance piece yield the perfect admixture of fine-art credibility and diva-ish celebrity worship.

In [a memorable formulation](#), Jerry Saltz described "The Artist is Present" as "narcissistic, exhibitionistic work" that "brought out the crowds' own narcissism and exhibitionism, in a self-fulfilling feedback loop." At Mary Boone, you can feel Koh reaching for, but not quite attaining, the same media-vortex effect. It's a spectacle, and seemingly every visitor in the galleries is photographing the performer, sometimes walking up and shoving their camera or phone right in his face. This is evidently part of the idea, with Koh having announced in advance that he would consider anything people did to be a part of the piece, as long as it didn't directly disrupt his poker-faced flow. Yet the work doesn't offer up the space for participation that made "The Artist Is Present" so combustible. Perhaps this is because Koh is unsure how much of the spotlight he wants to share. (When I first stopped in, one Koh superfan with little horns on his head was kneeling beside the salt pile; he was quietly asked to leave by a gallery assistant.)

A 2007 New York magazine article about Koh, "[The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Punk Capitalist](#)," gawked in awe at his fabulous art-star lifestyle, describing him dropping thousands of dollars on clothes and accessories in minutes. But it also quoted a few admirers already fretting about his course's sustainability. Kunsthalle Zürich director Beatrix Ruf put it this way: "He's in an interesting moment.... People are fascinated by Terence's objects and the white spaces. But as an artist, you have to ensure they are an experience beyond that first fascinating moment." Therein lies the dilemma of "bling conceptualism": welding art to the conventions of fashion puts it at the mercy of fashion's hunger for youth and novelty, and consequently gives an artist very little room to mature gracefully.

This career reality, and not any sudden change of heart on the artist's part, is what "nothingtoodoo" makes me think of, particularly since beneath the faux sobriety the performance appears to be mainly about the same old theatrics by other means. The ritual seems an attempt to keep on doing what he has been doing rather than to change course. Koh is circling, literally and figuratively. But who knows? He's had a lot of time to think. We'll see what he does next.

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