

# SEANKELLY

Arning, Bill. "Terence Koh Against the Fascism of the Real"

from: *Terence Koh: love for eternity*, (Ostfildern, Germany : Hatje Cantz), 2009.

## TERENCE KOH AGAINST THE FASCISM OF THE REAL

BILL ARNING

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Maybe there is a "real world." It is possible to prove the existence of some version of an inarguable external reality, agreed upon and discussed by a majority of people. That majority can read about this real world in the newspapers and make decisions about how to live their lives in accordance with its clear rules. They will feel confident that those who disagree with their politics or religion perceive the same basic indisputable facts, but interpret them differently or incorrectly.

But I don't think I have ever lived in such a place, let alone understood its rules and been able to make clear decisions based on that understanding. This "real" always seems to be a totally insupportable fiction at best or a conspiracy among the dull-yet-powerful at worst.

The artist Terence Koh also does not live in the world of base reality, and I will discuss him here as an artist/(re) maker rather than as a biographically delimited person. Since Koh appeared in the consciousness of the visual arts and queer cultural worlds under the name asianpunkboy and has, in recent years, morphed through the monikers Kohbunny and Ming Ching Ping Ling in the realer-than-real world of the press, "Terence Koh" should clearly not be given any more primacy than any other persona. Attempting to ground art-theoretical or historical discussions of his work to any undisputable facts goes against my argument that there is no fact in Koh's universe too trivial to deny, contradict, or distort. I would argue that to state any fact-as-a-fact about Koh's life—including birth date, family history, height, or name of childhood pet—goes against the spirit, pleasures, and wisdom of the work. There is no aspect of his production that celebrates the quotidian "real," a construction that he can help us see through and resist.

Notes on language: throughout the essay, I insist on a return to the term *queer* in all its fierce utility. In my youth, this was the political nomenclature of choice, as it includes many whose sexual desires are not well described by the word *gay*, but who share the

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sensibility and spirit of unbounded desires and radical thoughts. In my mind, that of a vaguely nostalgic gentleman in his late forties, *queer* is unsurpassed in its inclusiveness. That said, I do understand that, for Koh's generation (defined not by calendar age, but by social mores and sensibilities), *queer* is a quaint anachronism based on some unrealized, possibly failed dream; however, I was just updated by a trans friend that the younger generation (18–22) find the term's imprecision worth problematizing again, challenging our failed dreams of inclusiveness with the unglamorous retro-literalism of words like *lesbian*.

In addition, the term *real* as I am using it needs to be framed here, as those readers who read theory, philosophy, political, or art writing will have many previous encounters with the term that might suggest other meanings than mine. The framework for the real I want to discuss as a fascistic method of control is neither the mythic incomplete knowledge-product of scientific method discussed by Lacan, nor the political real world that requires clear thought and heartless maneuvering, nor any of the other philosophic concepts from Greek thought that share the word *real*. Rather, this is the “death and taxes” real, and it's the real to which you are forcibly condemned when teachers make you return from daydreams, or when parents insist on practical life choices. It is the real-as-weapon that some encounter when drunk—Dad bursts in the room and demands that you start living in reality. It is the real that one learns to live with when sewers explode and diagnoses of fatal diseases are given. This real, or the threat of it, is used purposefully to bludgeon the life out of overly imaginative youth and flatten the world into a dreary representation of itself.

This deadening process starts early. A fundamental primal rupture occurs when we are told as children that we will, in the future, want to marry and imitate our parents' unions. These prognostications are uttered uncritically and followed by conspiratorial smiles on the faces of all the adults—“Oh, how cute, six year old Billy has a girlfriend.” This is the likely response no matter how tragic the choices of our elders might clearly be and even before our actual desires have earned a name in our little hearts. Their visions of the future are false—and have always been false—and even they do not believe we will follow the path they pretended to follow. It is my assumption that every unspoiled child knows this fact, but those who presume to benefit the most socially from overlooking the obvious gaps in reality convince themselves of the fiction and willfully forget their earlier wisdom.

Yet believing that children's appreciations of each other mirror heteronormative models appears to be an irresistible delusion allowed by even the hippest of ones breeding friends—including, oddly, many same-sex parent-pairs—and can only be the





tragic result of spending too much time with babies, imitating baby talk, and having dreams of protecting the tykes from unnamable dangers. Yet it is precisely the uncritical insistence upon accepting rank falsehood that leads sensitive children toward the most self-destructive of dangerous paths.

It is comic to see parents of my generation, who should know better, intuiting little Doris Day movie scenarios on their daughters' plastic jewels when the script clearly involves little Rock Hudsons diddling each other in the playground. Such blindness makes it easy to see that everyone—from one's family to childhood friends, to teachers and the families of friends, and the people on TV—was involved in a vast conspiracy to maintain an illusion.



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The useful applications of a heightened sense of doubt could not be easily contained to our families. We applied doubt to every situation in which the constructed truth we faced seemed off. Clearly, politics and religion needed to be questioned. But as we moved further afield, even the food we were given seemed suspect, and everyone else's habits of work, school, and friendships seemed untenable.

We looked, as children, at how romantic concepts of faith, family, and love manifested themselves in the lives of grown-ups and saw a massive schism that our guides seemed willing to overlook. Once our rebellion took root, we found similar schisms between the world as presented and our experience everywhere; unable to overlook them all or to communicate adequately our revulsion at this fractured reality, many of us became misanthropes or turned the anger inward and self-destructed. Distrust was our constant companion as puberty took hold. We knew we had been lied to by those responsible for our upbringing. If they weren't liars, they were crazy, and that explanation for their delusions was no better.

Unable to believe that they believe, we had no choice but to rebel. The literal dumb pleasures of the world would have to suffice. So we danced on bars and threw our bodies into the pleasures of the night as if they would save us, and for a limited time, they did. Such distractions work well until they don't, and that is the final disillusionment. The lucky few developed a healthy "fuck you" attitude toward the fascism of received



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reality and set about living in a constructed, conspicuously artificial world, in which the daily business of remaking the world became a joyful way of life, in which the slippages between “real worlds” became a source of endless fecundity rather than pain.

The experience of watching our fellow humans *en masse* act as if they firmly believe in the newscaster’s version of reality is profoundly disconcerting. Forever unconvinced that we need to pretend, we seek sites of culture in which everything is contingent, conspicuously constructed, and therefore equally false. Koh’s exhibitions are just such a site: comfortable places where illusions reveal themselves as such and are therefore factual in their revealed constructedness. His exhibitions are like a kindergarten in which the innate skills for remaking reality as we wish it to be are trained via enjoyable learning experiences.

The physical structure of Koh’s works revels in a great sense of two- (or more) sidedness, of seeing through and under things, and around the unhidden back sides. Sculptures have to be uncovered from under layers of powder; these are surely training exercises in physical form for breeding an agnostic attitude toward direct experience, privileging the oblique over the direct frontal viewpoint, and non-visual methods of perusal over the rational. This is all done while providing iconic views as well, just nudging every viewer to look obliquely, directly at his scenes and objects. This is how those who don’t share the dominant culture’s reality see anyway; so if you share Koh’s sensibility, it’s just a massive game.



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Koh is famous for creating environments that are monochromatic in white, black, or gold and that also frequently have hidden elements as well as display structures, such as clear vitrines. The formal devices of display—of making things literally obvious—are intermingled with formal strategies that camouflage, obfuscate, and make any sense of a “real” sputter and fade behind the rumors about what might be in the works.

Koh’s choice of elements—such as live ants, artist’s sperm and piss, intoxicants, expensive scents, and unguents—is meant to be repeatable by those who have taken the time to read the checklist. (They were probably inspired by rumor and press *reportage* to look for the various vicarious thrills Koh’s materials are known to provide.) Just this sort of fact-finding mission might be said to reinforce rather than question our attachments to a communal “real,” since it triggers our collective urge to find out if Koh really did piss and cum on the work at some undated, prior moment in the work’s evolution. And finding *live* ants is always tricky.

But because here 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 interwoven with doubt is very much desired by the artist and the curators and publics who attempt to approach and comprehend Koh’s works.

For instance, when all the elements of an installation are painted black or gold,



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our abilities to comprehend the forms visually are diminished and require more active contemplation to “name” an item as an identifiable form with meaning, be it a turd or a skeleton.

The white, two-sided, invertible shelf-based sculptures that the artist constructed in 2003 display objects that are, on the whole, fully namable—a flashlight, a ceramic owl—with the unsubtle obviousness of store display. Yet each object is coated in the same white paint as the shelves. Upended, Koh’s readymades further lose their specificity as familiar objects. When combined in illogical combinations, their ambiguous forms read as biomorphic and their lumpen, pathetic character requires another suspension of believing in identification and another act of invention on the part of the viewer to make them appear magical. Yet it does happen with a fair degree of ease and frequency before these pieces. The pleasure such discoveries give reinforces viewers’ sympathetic processes of active apprehension.

Having conjured shopping in the shelf works, Koh triggers our scopophilic desire via the provocative mechanisms of porn. For those who have ever felt the pull to see sex performed, Koh knows and employs those triggers toward the pornographic gaze in his gallery work. (Visual desire is surprisingly not universal, and many people I know who are unashamedly sexual beings testify to not gaining pleasure visually, hence the existence of pitch-black dark rooms, to which we will return below.)

“Normal” people often have a deep suspicion of Koh, and they don’t ever consider why. I am not referring to right-wingers, who already hate contemporary art’s deskilled aesthetics. Clearly a thousand aspects of Koh’s practice would make him an unlikely



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first stop on the road to loving current art. Rather, I am referring to people who swoon at Duchamp, but yet, when face-to-face with Koh's foregrounded artifice and the transparency and lack of illusion in his gestures of creation, grunt and utter the world-weary, "I don't know, I am sorry, but I don't see what the fuss is about." This sort of critical phraseology is used to deflect the fact that something inside the speaker feels threatened by implying that his fans are slightly gullible. I would like to acknowledge this threat to the critics' worldview as real and to suggest that those whose world-weariness is triggered are meant to walk away both slightly aggrieved and feeling superior, and leave those who thrive on his strategies in peace, and in pieces.

Take his 2007 piece made for the Whitney Museum, untitled and as invisible as light can be. In the *New York Times* review, Michael Kimmelman called the piece "a one liner."<sup>1</sup> The work—a blindingly bright light aimed out of his room, across the lobby of the Whitney, and out across Madison Avenue—was only a one liner if you described it literally, as a mere listing of its "real" elements. But such literal, piece-by-piece description is the fake critical response that kills all joy. It's not that Kimmelman was incorrect. He articulated the agnostic's attitude and probably spoke for the majority of *The New York Times's* readers. Yet 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. One close friend said that Koh had managed to take the typical question you might ask a friend, "Have you seen the Koh exhibition at the Whitney," and make the question unanswerable. If you had seen it, you would be blinded and still have seen nothing, but you could always see its effects: the light on others in the lobby, the efforts of the guards to safeguard hapless visitors. You could see the Koh-effect in the art press and style section and never see the work itself. Those conundrums and language games were endless and gave immense pleasures, especially if you had been used to entertaining yourself in your mind. I always understood the Sol Lewitt phrase that the conceptualists were mystics and not literalists to mean that those working on conceptual aesthetics were strange loners living in worlds of fancy. This, then, was an extension of that cerebral tradition rendered as theater.

The reason some recoil from his work is because he reveals uncomfortable contradictions by making such grand effects without magic; you can believe and experience as much as you can think through one of his works, using the skill set developed to move through a reality that is disjunctive and incomplete. If you find reality *believable*, you are likely to find Koh's works *unbelievable*, frauds at your expense. They are not frauds, although they are conspicuous in their artifice.

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, whether it's *Don Giovanni* or *Colt* porn studios.

Sexual desire is always invisible and perceived only through its powerful effects, just as the existence of black holes is observable only by the effects on the matter around them. Yet, inside our heads, the reality of attraction is a solid, if mutating, fact. Because we can only compare our insides to other peoples' outsides, it makes all the little bits of evidence of their real desires fascinating.

I came out at fourteen, and my friend Charles followed suit a couple months later. I remember clearly the moment when our doubts as to what others desired were articulated. We were untroubled about our own sexuality, and desires' reality, shared between us, was the only overpowering external "real" we believed in. This was five years after Stonewall, in a junior high school less than twenty blocks from the site, and with abundant openly gay faculty. One of the faculty, our clone-style, muscular, shaved-head and goateed history teacher, Charles set out to seduce and did so with little worry as to the rightness of a forty-year-old professor's sexual response to him at his tender age. Such libertine cross-generational eroticism has now been brought under the full weight of social opprobrium—even to say how little worry there was about it in 1974 seems unthinkable today—and has been traded off for some other successes. So much of the legacy of Harry Hay's radical thought is now gone, and I mourn its loss.

Charles turned to me with a conspiratorial whisper and said, "Do you think they really feel that way? Do you think they like girls really?" While the fundamental sentiment and its implied reversal of "different" and "normal" was not very revolutionary, I found in that phrase a license to understand all desire as constructed and contingent, and that was liberating. Heterosexual desire has the illusion of being an irresistible truth because of its procreative imperative. That adds a confusing layer of good citizenship and social responsibility to what should, from a queer perspective, be a total playground of self-invention with unlimited possibilities for reinvention. The deadening of the vast sea of possibilities that accompanies the procreative imperative is something my hetero friends deal with every day.

Koh's works do not stem from any positive, culturally-supported imperatives and will not save or help the world. Their functionlessness is worthy of Oscar Wilde in their capricious, healthy disregard for any quality but the delectation of those who share Koh's exquisitely louche sensibility. Koh uses rumor and moments of personal discovery, such as finding a warm mouth in the dark room, as sculptural elements. Burying objects in











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powder to be found with the hands or feet or revealing elements through subtly hidden apertures forces every viewer to restage moments of discovery that they may or may not have heard about from like-minded souls, framing and claiming as part of his oeuvre the viewers' self-inventions. Just as I learned that there were places along my route to my junior high school where things happened between men from folks who thought they were warning me away, entering one of Koh's underground projects feels risky.

It's not so risky on the whole, as it's still the art world after all, and the art world sanitizes everything it touches through the disinfectant action of commodification. Still, I felt at risk my first time at ASS (*Asia Song Society*—Koh's New York Lower East Side studio and project space); the jammed street was full of rumors of nudity, sex, and stoned, hung performers as I walked down the street toward the throngs of the curious and semi-engaged art-worldlies. Then, witnessing one nude performer overflow the performance boundaries and wander out naked and semi-hard to the Lower East Side street, the "real" appeared before me as an unlikely alien presence. When actual police sirens blasted, I felt a healthy confusion of my curator role, my horny faggot role, and the risk of my actual incarceration at being caught confusing them.

We, the viewers, awakened suddenly together as the confusion worsened. "Did you see what I saw?" "Did he cum?" "Did you get a finger up his ass in the dark?" The front was pitch black, the second room bright white; everything was hot and sticky inside, yet the clamor was mainly on the street. It was a recreation of a well-known illegal dark room of a well-known and popular bar mere blocks away. A large chunk of the art audience had also entered the actual sex room and, like Tom Burr's famous re-creation of a cruising park not far from the actual site, the architecture triggered behaviors that were reenacted by patrons as a type of art performance.

Animals run through Koh's work, but the fact that something is natural would neither raise nor lower its status in Koh's cosmological models, and "normal" would certainly be a pejorative adjective. In fact, in the literature written on Koh to date, a mode of interpretation based on the points in physics where the normal laws are inverted seems to be a common metaphor for interpretation. For Koh, nature is only interesting when its effects appear unnatural, impossible, and amazing.

Read interviews with Koh and it is clear that his self-made world is an endless movie, described as such. Whether it's a stylish Audrey Hepburn concoction or a snuff film varies by the day of the week; a snuff film might be a perfect corollary if one cares to discuss the snuff-film hysteria of the late seventies. Snuff was a type of film of actual murders that were probably never actually filmed. Yet the rumors of imaginary films still provoked a very strong response from viewers. That caused commercial filmmakers to

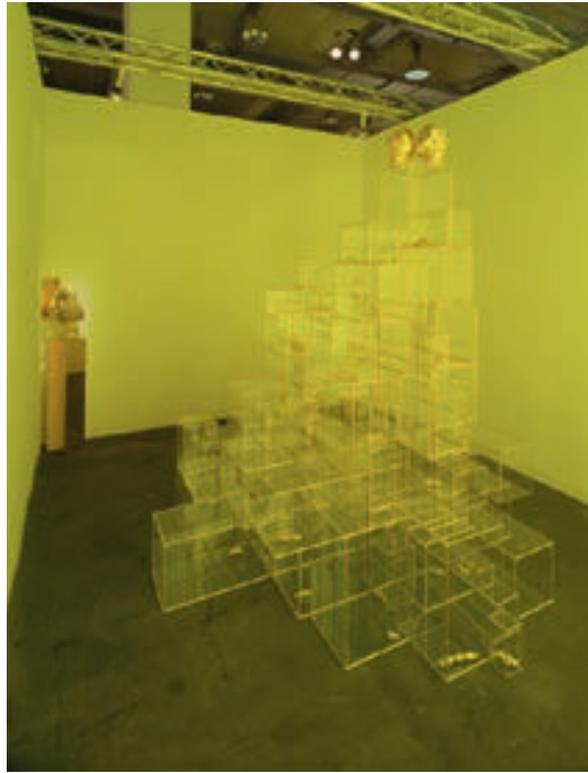


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capitalize on the hysteria by making movies about snuff films and caused others to make fake snuff films—since the only thing that defined them as “snuff films,” rather than bloody-horror films, was the *reality* of the murder depicted, a fake snuff movie is kind of a hallucination, an unreal *reality* in the mind of the viewer.

Koh’s so-called “porn movie,” and magnum opus, *God* is as excruciating as it is pleasurable. It not only slams Koh’s world-of-artifice against the limits of the real, but also reveals tremendous metaphoric truths about the simulacral media hall of mirrors that is, in a sense, its coauthor. I describe *God* as “so-called porn” because while it engages many of porn’s dynamics, it is difficult to imagine anyone actually getting off while watching it, so it therefore fails the first test for porn value.

Note here that the term “porn”—usually used in art criticism as a pejorative, meaning that something has failed as art and is now merely porn—is here a term of appreciation. Imagine, if you will, a lineage of failed porn that is left no role in the world of images but that of mere art because of capricious, unintentionally poetic miscalculations on the part



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of its maker—from James Bidgood’s *Pink Narcissus* to some of porn legend Al Parker’s later penis-pumping videos.

In the last decades, there has been a series of artists who have performed sexually on camera, from Jeff Koons to Andrea Fraser. I would suggest that there is something about the *reality* of showing yourself with a cock up your butt that is fundamentally of a different order from what Koons or Fraser did, since no other sex act is as loaded in terms of power and masculinity. But it is the word “reality,” which slipped back into the last sentence, that *God* makes impossible, since Koh, as much as he enacts the roll of the dominated, emasculated vessel as he is getting fucked, is clearly the ring master—pun intended. Koh, as author of *God*, is the ultimate bossy bottom who has set into motion this circus and is, in his success, paying for it—with all the overtones of the use and rental of human flesh.

And the real/fake dynamic is part of what makes a little deconstructive porn viewing entertaining, decoding that which is “real”—meaning tied to the actual biographies and





invisible desires in the performers' heads versus the director's artifice. There are moments of confrontation. Condoms—the signal that life and death continue off screen—are used. Skinny dead-eyed guy fellates the other bunny-headed performer to get him hard enough to enter Koh. That only totally hard cocks get past sphincters is another “real” that can be faked—and/or edited out—but is left in.

And then there is a repetition of a charged sequence probably fifty times in the six hours, and the relentless return makes a quick, easily-overlooked image haunting; it's Koh looking back at the camera. He could just be checking what is happening as author, but it suggests a common cinematic trope in moralizing films about porn, in which the “real” performer—the innocent farm girl from the Midwest—wakes up from a stoned dream to find out that she has ten loads on, or in, her ass and is ready to utter the desperate cry for help. Even the American version of the television show *Queer as Folk* used this device: one character acknowledges a crystal meth problem only when he realizes the man he is watching get gang-banged bareback in a drug fuelled orgy is himself—the same glassy eyes glance back at the unseen camera.

Drugs, in the form of cocaine, are also on view in *God* in a simultaneously mythic and demythologized form. While doing coke on camera is also not new in art—Rob Pruitt and Hélio Oiticica come to mind—Koh captures the up-the-nostril shot of caked white powder too thickly layered to be absorbed into the artist's bloodstream. The desired effects of the drug, in terms of both the high and the glamour, are held in sharp contrast against the banality of powder and snot.

Yet, in *God*, Koh wins points on his own realness—like an outtake from the judging portions of the Harlem pageants in the film *Paris is Burning*—because I believe he is the first male artist to get fucked “for real” in a major gallery exhibition, and the interview with him in the show's catalogue focuses again on the effects that leap out from Koh's reality: the discussion of its effects on the city of Zurich, where it was first shown, on the artist's boyfriend, and other supporters.

I first saw *God* not in its gallery form, but at Art Basel Miami. The dreadful glut of art should make any serious writer on art want to get to a convent. After aisle after aisle of good artists looking sanitized, there was the film and related objects tucked in a corner and refusing to be tamed. If even subversive geniuses like Andy Warhol and Martin Kippenberger fail to rise above the fluffiness of the art fair, how did Koh manage to stand out?

Then it occurred to me. 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 who want subversive butt-fucking scenarios deployed in stodgy art fairs. We know his art-worldly success must be an illusion, like the end of television's ur-nighttime soap opera *Dallas* or the pod-dreams of *The Matrix*. The ghosts of Jack Smith and Ethel Eichelberger and the "C'est la guerre" spirit of every two-bit drag queen at the Twist Bar in Scranton, Pennsylvania, have somehow conspired to make this hallucination real. It is perversely marvelous that the orgy of capital that is an art fair is so virally susceptible to such fancies, and Koh's success will continue as long as no one ever asks—well, let's keep that a secret.

Notes:

1 Michael Kimmelman, "Brimming from a Ray of Light, the Glare of Elusiveness," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2007, p. B11.