

SEANKELLY

Woff, Rachel. "Koh My God," *The Aesthete*, April 2013.

THE AESTHETE



Art & Design /

KOH MY GOD

INSIDE THE WORLD WHITE WEB OF ARTIST AND PROVOCATEUR TERENCE KOH

by RACHEL WOLFF *photography* BRIAN FERRY

Artist Terence Koh and his husband, graphic designer Garrick Gott, moved into their downtown penthouse last August. Koh's studio manager and boyfriend, Evan Wilson—that is correct, Koh has both a husband and a boyfriend—joined them shortly thereafter. It is an arrangement, Koh says, that has proven a very sturdy triple. "Being an artist is a selfish occupation, in a way," explains Koh. "If I wasn't in a relationship, I think things would be different. I would probably live in the smallest room I could find. I wouldn't have a kitchen. But I love Garrick and I love Evan so I have a kitchen, I have books, Garrick has his office and his colors."

Inside the penthouse, shoes come off, voices drop to just above a whisper and Wilson draws back a thick felt curtain to reveal an all-white space where candles are lit, Bach is playing on a crisp white turntable and the aroma of spiced tea permeates the air. Although this is the first interview Koh has done in this particular space, the all-white motif itself is not new; the walls of

his past spaces were white as well—the lack of color, he says, offers him certain clarity. However, the surroundings here have been implemented to the extreme. The furniture is white, the piano is white—its black keys have been extracted—and most books that fill the office area have been wrapped in matte white sleeves. Even Wilson’s Mac has a neutralizing white frame. The only pop of color, if you can call it that, is a wooden table and matching bench.



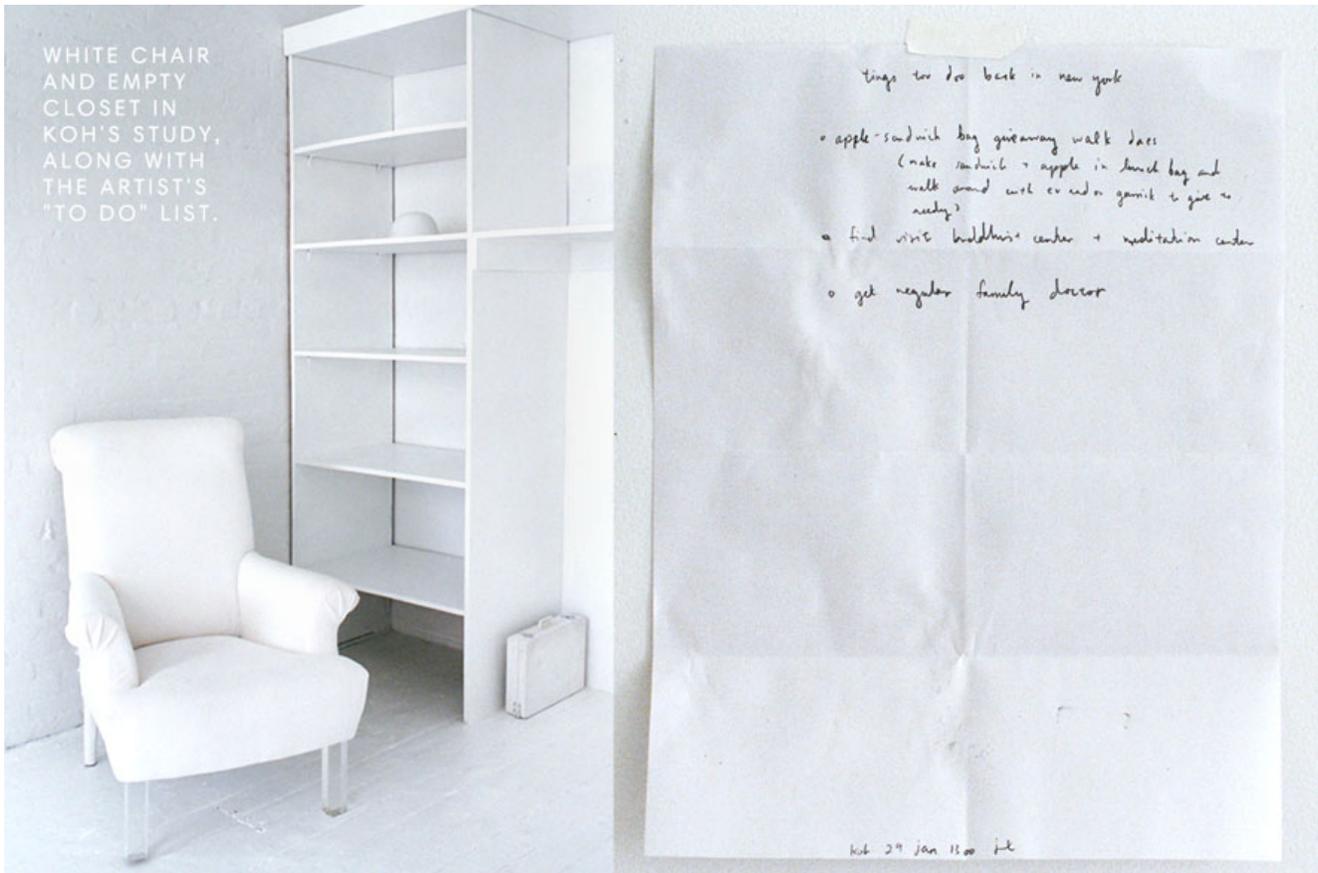
Koh emerges, slight, barefoot and dressed in an all-white pajama-like ensemble—modest fabrics, his own design. He asks, in his shy and soft-spoken way, if we can conduct the interview in a Freudian manner with him lying on the chaise, and me perched in a chair behind him. I agree. We settle into our respective roles.

Before we even begin, it’s very clear that something has shifted in Koh, whose persona, several years ago, had a fair amount of sheen. He made YouTube videos with Lady Gaga and threw all-night parties in his Canal Street studio-slash-home-slash-gallery; his all-white ensembles were often Comme des Garçons; and he once called himself the “Naomi Campbell of the art world.” His work at that time was mostly sculptural—stacks of glass vitrines filled with porcelain, plaster and metal curios; life-sized self-portraits of the artist as a kind of white rabbit, bedecked with bunny ears and studded with pearls; and, most famously, gold-plated pieces of his own excrement.

Lately, though, Koh’s work has shifted focus toward performance. His well-received 2011 solo exhibition at Mary Boone featured the artist slowly circling an eight-foot mound of rock salt on his knees daily for the duration of the show. His intent, per a handwritten press release: “peace iz non-violence / peace iz everywhere / peace iz now.” But if his current all-white palette, handmade wardrobe, monastic lifestyle and overwhelming sense of cultivated calm in his home cumulatively appear as a kind of performance art in itself, Koh insists the opposite is true.

“More and more these days, I feel myself trying to be more like a human than an artist,” he says. “I’m trying to be a beautiful human that has the qualities of truth, goodness and beauty.”

The deflection for Koh is in part a reaction to a changing New York City. A few years back, on Canal Street, Koh’s Asia Song Society (as in: ASS) was at the epicenter of a newly revived downtown scene—one that revolved around figures like Koh, Dash Snow, Dan Colen and Ryan McGinley, and one that allowed New York to reclaim a bit of edge in the face of mounting rents, moneyed bankers and Sex and the City bus tours. “It was fun during



those times—I don’t regret anything,” says Koh, “but I came to realize that I’m actually deep down quite an introverted person. It took a lot of energy for me, in a sense. And I wanted to refocus my energy on other things.” Indeed, refocusing has meant, in some ways, reducing. “I stopped talking to almost all my friends and going to art events and art dinners because I really wanted to see a different side of me,” Koh says. “At one point, I was making objects in Berlin and I had like 30 assistants and three studio managers and answering like 300 emails a day.” Today, Koh doesn’t have a cell phone or an email account. Nor does he have a designated studio—just a spare study in the back of the loft, where his days are disciplined. He wakes up and draws, then pees, drinks a glass of warm water (“to take out all the toxins in my system”), makes a juice, then journals, reads and, finally, jogs down to the New York Harbor to meditate on a bench. He spends weekends with Marina Abramović and Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons) in the Upper Hudson Valley, where he plans to buy property of his own soon and build a sustainable house and garden—to, as he puts it, “create my own world.”

“I’m reading this book called The Krishnamurti Reader and in the very first sentence it says, ‘The greatest art is the art of living,’” explains Koh. “And it struck me so much, even more so than paintings and sculptures and poems, more than these physical things, it’s how you structure your life.” And while he is working on two separate 2014 shows—solo exhibitions at Sean Kelly (Koh recently left his longtime dealer, Berlin’s Javier Peres), and at New York’s Maya Lin-designed Museum of Chinese in America—Koh is clearly intent on attending primarily to his immediate livelihood.



LEFT: KOH PAINTED HIS BRIEFCASE WHITE FOR USE DURING A SHORT PERIOD.
RIGHT: TOOLS PAINTED WHITE, WITH HEAD SCRAPS FROM HIS THE KOH TINKER EDITION.

“I used to do sculptures and sound pieces but now I’m just trying to be,” he says. “A lot of these things I’m doing don’t require a studio. It’s just me being myself and asking questions. I think it’s important for me to be as immaterial as possible. And maybe in this immateriality there’s spirituality, and maybe in this spirituality there is humanity.”



WHITE FAUX FUR ON THE WALL OF A ROOM WITH THE PIANO KOH PAINTED WHITE AND REMOVED ALL THE BLACK KEYS.



KOH'S CATS, HANS MAYA IN SAND, AND SKELETON IN WHITE.



KOH SHARES THIS
WORKSTATION WITH
HIS STUDIO MANAGER
AND BOYFRIEND,
EVAN WILSON.
THE BOOKS HAVE
BEEN WRAPPED
IN A MATTE
WHITE SLEEVE.



PLASTER HANDS.