

Panel Discussion



Remembering *SlutForArt*: Tseng Kwong Chi

*A Conversation on Dance, Performance, and Art with Muna Tseng,
Ping Chong, Bill T. Jones, and scholar Karen Shimakawa*

Introduction by Alexandra Chang

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“Remembering *SlutForArt*: Tseng Kwong Chi,” a conversation between artistic theatre directors and choreographers Muna Tseng, Bill T. Jones, and Ping Chong with scholar and ADVA US Area Editor Karen Shimakawa, took place on 1 May 2015 at NYU’s Cantor Film Center presented by the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University and the Grey Art Gallery in conjunction with the Grey’s exhibition *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera*, curated by Amy Brandt. Brandt, who sadly passed away just weeks after the opening, curated this first major travelling survey show of Tseng’s works, which ranged from candid shots of his immediate East Village circle of artistic creators and his little seen *Moral Majority* series depicting Right Wing politicians posing in front of a crumpled American flag, to his more well-known documentation of the 1983 *Body Painting* collaboration between Bill T. Jones and Keith Haring. The exhibition also featured Tseng’s popular *East Meets West* and *The Expeditionary* series, performance self-portrait series in which the artist posed as his alter ego, the Ambiguous Ambassador, in a Mao Suit and mirrored glasses in front of iconic landmarks in the US, Canada, and Europe. The artist, who died of AIDS in 1990, was part of the 1980s Mudd Club and Club 57 set with artists such as Ann Magnuson, Kenny Scharf, and Jean-Michel Basquiat and collaborated with Keith Haring, documenting the Pop artist’s work in the subways even before his international rise to fame.

Tseng's works have been a mainstay for Asian diasporic and Global Asias art and visual cultures fields, however they are recently obtaining greater exposure to mainstream art audiences. While there have been several essays on Tseng Kwong Chi's works and the inclusion of his works in seminal exhibitions such as *The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene: 1974–1984* at the Grey Art Gallery in 2006, and the *Asia/American: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* show at The Asia Society in New York in 1994, among others, this current exhibition at the Grey is helping us all “catch up” with and revisit, or visit for the first time, Tseng's poignant reflections on the multiple facets and positionalities of the artist and of Asian identity, his time and milieu, and the complexity of his multi-layered gestures to art history from French romantic painting and street photography to Chinese ink painting in his performances.

In 2009, Tseng Kwong Chi, his sister Muna Tseng and director Ping Chong created a dance theatre piece titled *SlutForArt*, the moniker for which Tseng Kwong Chi named himself on the ID badge he wore for his own performances as the Ambiguous Ambassador. This excerpt of the panel discussion at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute is a rare look into the *Body Painting* and *SlutForArt* performances in relation to his artist peers' thoughts on Tseng Kwong Chi, the exhibition, and his work.



FIGURE 1 *Installation view of the exhibition Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2015.*

PHOTO CREDIT: ALVIA URDANETA 2015.

BILL T. JONES: Thank you very much, Muna, thank you very much, Ping, for allowing me to be part of this, and thank you very much to the Grey Gallery for doing such a beautiful show. I was thinking what could I possibly say about *Body Painting*, because Kwong and I, we liked each other very much, and it's odd, but when we lost him and Keith [Haring] and Willi Smith and so many people from that scene, it didn't occur to me until a few years afterwards that we were doing identity politics. I don't think he and I ever spoke to each other as men of colour, which is something I can't imagine right now, but so it is.

In about 1983, Arnie Zane got a small video camera. We'd been working with video since the Experimental Television Center under Ralph Hocking up in Binghamton in the seventies. When we moved down here, we won a couple of grants, we were able to buy better equipment, and Arnie and I had a duet company. We were touring in England. Keith and I were good friends, very close. He said they were going to be there, and wherever Keith was, there was going to be a mix of exciting art being made and a party.

We were a little older than a lot of guys in the scene, but we were good friends. Keith had in his loft (I don't know if any of you were ever hanging around Keith at that time) lots of people, lots of pretty girls, pretty boys, and magazines. Keith showed me a magazine of (I think it was in Brazil, or was it Spain?) a really stunningly handsome soccer player body-painted in one of Keith's vases. So, this thing about identity politics: A Black man who strips naked and then he does this thing—body decoration—with a white guy from Cookstown, Pennsylvania. Keith was going to have a show at the Robert Fraser Gallery in London, but we went to another location to do this body-painting stunt. He never explained it to me until he was painting for hours; you can see it's very intimate. Then somewhere along, he said, "Oh, by the way, the press is coming." So can you imagine now? Do you know the English tabloids? Do you know how bitchy they can be? So that's the arrogance of youth, I think. But fully painted, the doors open, and there they are like a pack of hungry wolves, smart-alecks, saying things that are inappropriate, "Hey, bloke, you forgot your pants," that sort of thing. And the next day it was on the art page of the *Standard*, these working-class pages: this Black American painted up like a mud man from New Guinea.

Kwong was very, very kind to me, saying: "Make sure that you flatten the shapes out, because that's how we will see the painting." That was very strong instruction, because it influenced a lot of the way that Arnie and I proceeded to make choreography. As I said, Arnie had a brand-new camera. He photographed the whole thing. We brought back the raw tapes. Tom Bowes, who was the video curator at The Kitchen at that time, and Arnie worked together on it. Tom edited it down, and took it upon himself to lay the soundtrack, which,



FIGURE 2 *Tseng Kwong Chi*, Bill T. Jones, body painted by Keith Haring, London, 1983.
Gelatin silver print, 19 × 15 inches, printed 2014.
 COURTESY MUNA TSENG DANCE PROJECTS, INC., NEW YORK.

incidentally, I'm not sure if we have cleared the rights, but we've never really made any money from it. But you'll see it was very much of that moment, Keith had just been to this concert somewhere in Queens, and he loved this music. So here we have *Body Painting*. It's nine minutes long, shot by Arnie Zane, you might say under the artistic direction of Kwong Chi, and edited by Tom Bowes of The Kitchen.

MUNA TSENG: Kwong Chi died in 1990 and he was thirty-nine. We had shared a childhood in Hong Kong, and we both came to New York in 1978, to become artists in this city. After losing him, which was also kind of losing my childhood in Hong Kong, because we shared that and the memory of that, I wanted to make a piece about him, the incredible community that he had, and the amazing times when we became artists in New York through the eighties. But I didn't quite know how to go about doing it. He had a ten-year career, basically. He created all that work at the Grey in ten years.

SlutForArt was made in 1999. I had worked with Ping Chong in 1996 in a piece that was called *98.6: A Convergence in 15 Minutes*, done as a companion



FIGURE 3 *Publicity photograph for SlutforArt, aka Ambiguous Ambassador, choreographed and performed by Muna Tseng, written and directed by Ping Chong, 1999.*
PHOTO CREDIT: DAVID KING. COURTESY MUNA TSENG DANCE PROJECTS, INC., NEW YORK.

piece to *SlutForArt*. Ping has this wonderful process of interviewing. Basically we met and we talked, and he wrote a very beautiful piece that lasted fifteen minutes. I thought Ping would be a really good collaborator to work on the piece on Kwong Chi because Ping did not know my brother, so he could add the kind of objective voice and structure to the piece. We used his interview process and made a list of Kwong Chi's friends and colleagues. Bill speaks in it, his partner Kristoffer Haynes, as well as other friends, some of them not with us anymore. The sound score was the interviews, and the music that I used was all Kwong Chi's favorite music. Some of it was from my father's LP collection, like Cuban Mambo, which my father and Kwong Chi loved. *SlutForArt* is a forty-five minute-long solo performance. It took me nine years before I was ready to make it. The 2002 rendition was done at La Mama for Ping Chong's thirtieth anniversary season.

PING CHONG: The ending of the video of the show was a picture of Kwong Chi with his back to us, and then what we did was we took him out of the picture. He just vanished out of picture, and then the names of people in the New York arts community that died of AIDS during the eighties came up all around the image.

JONES: I think we're having a moment; I wonder how Kwong Chi would feel. I don't think he would approve of the work being a nostalgia moment. I think that he was doing something very, very important, and as a result in the show, I find the things that are most compelling are not the party pictures, not just the kids in front of a camera, you know, mad-capping, but I think he really nailed it with his landscapes. I think the *Expeditionary Series* was very important. I liked the *Body Painting* photos, but I think I might put the political ones, the *Expeditionary Series*, even before the *Body Painting* series, which are handsome records of Keith's work, but I think Kwong Chi really was saying something that was very forward-thinking. What do you think about that idea that there's a tendency now to associate artists like those who Kwong met, with the eighties and the AIDS crisis that it becomes always about looking back?

TSENG: It's been interesting at the Grey because when I visited with younger students, they come in and I've heard them say: "Wow, you know, this guy, like, is he still around? Is he doing this?" So, in other words, they think that he's among us, and yet the work was created almost thirty, thirty-five years ago, from 1979 to 1989. The technology was totally different, pre-digital, analogue film, no Photoshop. Some of the young people think that he's Photoshopped himself in front of backgrounds. That notion did not exist. He was always in the moment and he captured a sort of timelessness as well. He chose iconic urban scenes and nature scenes that you don't know when it's from. So that nostalgia thing, I think you're really right. And then that photo downstairs of



FIGURE 4 *Tseng Kwong Chi*, New York, New York (World Trade Center), 1979, *from the East Meets West series*. Gelatin silver print, printed 2005.

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him with the boy with the planets titled *Mille Fleur Garçons, Paris, France* (Tseng Kwong Chi and Ya-Lin Wu Tchien, 1986), that was double exposure. He was already kind of time-travelling to the planets, so I'm sure he would be shooting somewhere out there.

JONES: I'm feeling a familiar hurt and passion at this moment. It's as if the AIDS crisis was just a bunch of decadent people having too much fun, and they did something that was interesting, cute. Then they were cut down. Move on, next. And I feel that for some of us who have survived, there is a militancy. We were not sick and dying children. We were using a strategy, we were in a time, but we were making something that was to last, and we were not impotent. We were cut off, but we had children. We propagated. We added to the culture.

Do not make that disease the whole meaning of our lives. I think that's why I am so glad this show is done. He was doing something that was a harbinger of what was to come and it was something. Those images will continue to be beautiful. Now, do we know the "in" joke about the Mao suit and the photo? Even then, he does look like an alien has landed, and that is a perennial condition for many creative people.

TSENG: The story of the Mao suit? It's a Chinese suit that was worn by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, and then later Mao wore it, and so it became known as the Mao suit. Kwong Chi bought it in Montreal at a secondhand store, and when we were in New York, first in 1978, our parents came and took us to Windows on the World to dine at their expense, and Kwong Chi called up and found out that there was a dress code and it was suit and tie. He said, "I don't have a Western suit and tie, I'm not getting one, but I have a Chinese suit." So he wore that, and we arrived at Windows on the World, and the *maître d'* took one look at him and treated him like a Chinese dignitary, a VIP. We have to remember also that at that time China was still quite closed. There were no Chinese tourists running around in New York or anywhere else. If there were Chinese visitors, they were officials, and often they wore the suit. That was a different era, and he realized the light-bulb moment that this suit represents power, it represents entry, and then he added the ID badge, he added the eyeglasses that blocked out his eyes; he definitely was, like, "Okay, I'm going to play your game."

In 2004, the Shanghai Biennial invited his work to be part of it, and so there were about ten self-portraits shown in Shanghai for the first time. I went and met artists like Song Dong who told me they actually knew of his work. It was being smuggled in through arts magazines into China when they were art students at the academies, and they would look and go, "Oh, my God, this is so interesting. We have to wear the Mao suit because it's the law of the land. We hated wearing the Mao suit, but look at this guy. He looks really cool in the Mao suit out in the other world beyond our border that we're not allowed to travel to."

KAREN SHIMAKAWA: I appreciate what you said about not caricaturing artists from the eighties, the downtown scene in the eighties, but at the same time, I would say that coming to his work through the *East Meets West* series and *The Expeditionary* series and not being part of that scene and only seeing those portraits for a long time, what I appreciate about the show is seeing them all together, seeing what a whole artist he was and how versatile he was as an artist. When you see the *East Meets West* photos you can see the beauty of the composition and understand it as a kind of visual genealogy and aesthetic tradition concerning very different genres of photographs. I'd like to ask some



FIGURE 5 *Tseng Kwong Chi, Art After Midnight, New York, 1985. Vintage gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 inches.*

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questions about the eighties though to really understand it as part of a longer and fuller and more continuous kind of artistic history, rather than just this kind of bubble moment.

JONES: We were young, and the young are incredibly self-involved. I mean, it's wonderful to be in the moment but that moment then is maybe not so cute when you're looking at it with forty years' perspective. If you've read Proust, he's always describing these parties, and in his last book, the same people are at the parties but there's this little bit of puffiness under the eyes and the skin. The great beauty, it still looks good until you get closer to her and so on. That's why we've got to have a lot of respect for the young; don't let them control the dialogue but understand that that is an essential part of human experience.

SHIMAKAWA: I see the Costumes at the Met series in some ways as a documentation of a performance arts project. The real work was the performance of the moment, and we get to see just this documentation of it. What was your experience of actually being documented as a piece of art, but also that experience of the ephemerality of it and not being able to capture all of it?

JONES: Andy Warhol was a very important influence but I think because of the identity aspect—the other, the exoticism of him being Chinese—was it unconscious political critique going on? That's why the works are important to me. They're about who is looking and what is agency and all of those things. Andy Warhol's shadow is very large here, and I don't think there's any shame to say that Kwong was taking that strategy, that party even.

TSENG: Yes, the idea of the celebrity, like when Kwong Chi crashed the Costume at the Met party, the society, uptown, and he had a press badge from *SoHo Weekly News* because it was an assignment for this incredible paper that Kim Hastreiter shepherded and allowed all these fantastic editorial pieces to appear in. It was really playing with this fifteen minutes of fame and how everyone loves to be photographed. So he set up the perfect kind of performance stage in the Grand Staircase as they arrived, and he asked them, "Would you like to have your photograph taken?" He also had a tape recorder and recorded the interviews. No, unfortunately, we don't have [the interviews]. We've been trying to track it down.

JONES: Was that Betsy Bloomingdale or—who was it? Kissinger's wife?

TSENG: Nancy Kissinger, wearing the same Adolfo gown as the other two ladies. And how he managed to get them all to pose with him. [Laughter.] So I think he had incredible charm, and he used that in the same way that Warhol might go, "Mm-hmm," kind of playing dumb, but that was his way of getting people to reveal themselves. I think a lot of the young people now, they don't know what happened during the Reagan era, they don't know what kind of politics and very dire political decisions were being made by those people up on that panel. Terry Dolan, for example, who then died, himself, of AIDS, but he was so anti-homosexual issues and medicine and research for AIDS.

SHIMAKAWA: I come from Performance Studies, so what I would be interested in is what do those photos do in different moments for different people? You can just tell he's kind of sweaty, and the suit's not right, and the flag is all wrinkled. There are just ways in which there's something, even if you don't read the little placard or you don't know who those people are, there's something askew in those images that makes you interested and makes you want to dig in more. I want to bring Ping into this conversation. Because I write about Asian American [studies], I have to come back to identity politics. I'm curious about your relationship to this term and identifying or not identifying.



FIGURE 6 *Tseng Kwong Chi, William F. Buckley Jr., 1981, from the Moral Majority series. Gelatin silver print, 10 x 10 inches, printed 2014.*

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CHONG: I remember in the eighties when the multicultural wars were going on. Everybody was calling me: "What do you think? What do you think? What do you think?" And I was like Kwong Chi in that sense, because I said: "I'm an American artist." And, of course, some Asian Americans held that against me for saying that. But what if I said: "If you're the best of this little corner they put you in, then you're going to be in that corner. You're marginalized. And we're going to be marginalized in my lifetime still."?

Anybody of colour in this country is a second-class citizen, and that's the way it is right now. So why give them that advantage and say I'm going to be in that corner? I'm an American artist.

SHIMAKAWA: And has your relationship to that term changed over time?

CHONG: No. I'm more militant now.

JONES: You're more militant? That's the way I feel as well. But I feel a part of the militancy has been that I proved to myself first that I have a body of work that can stand independent of my race. ... You can be the prodigal. The prodigal has its own payback, yeah, I'm a badass, and I'm superior because I've been able to survive outside the traditional soil that I'm supposed to be in. But I think that gets old, and I think we begin to look for tradition. I think we begin to look for—at least I speak for myself—we want to feel a part of something, and I want to feel that I've expanded the world's understanding of what a Black artist can be, and it doesn't take anything away from me to be called a Black artist now, and it used to offend me. I felt that I was in a ghetto in that way.

TSENG: I think Kwong Chi found his community pretty early, and I think once you find a community, you're less alone. His community was East Village. They were performance artists, visual artists. It was basically kindred souls. When he was not wearing the Chinese suit, he wore t-shirts and jeans.

JONES: He always looked really good.

TSENG: He always looked really good. [Laughs.]

JONES: In a different way than a lot of other people, didn't you think?

TSENG: He was a bit older, you know. I mean, he was born in 1950. He was older than most of his friends.

JONES: I was fifty-two, so I thought he and I were the same age, but two years older.

TSENG: And he had lived in Paris and he was very interested in fashion. Actually, he supported himself by doing commercial art. He was doing fashion shoots and he designed ski suits up in Montreal. The curator at the Metropolitan Museum Andrew Bolton's show, *China: Through the Looking Glass* opening next week is about how different fashion designers take China as inspiration. And it's funny, because Kwong Chi's suit is in the exhibition on a mannequin. [Laughs.] So he's going to be back at the Met next week. And also they have one of his self-portraits with the Statue of Liberty there. Andrew Bolton told me that when he was a young curator of fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London—he's British—he said that when he saw Kwong Chi's work in a book, it really made sense to him that he could meld the world of fashion with art. So it would be interesting to ask Andrew if he thought of him as a Chinese artist.

We left Hong Kong in 1956, but Hong Kong has a complex identity as well. It was an island that was still under British rule at that time. He went to St. Joseph's Boys School, a Catholic school. My parents had lots of British friends and so it would have been quite different if we had been born and raised in mainland China. My parents escaped the Communists in '49, they came to Hong Kong, and then they escaped again in '66 when there was the

Cultural Revolution making tremors across the border, and they didn't want to run away again from the Communists. So it's a very complex thing. If I think of how we grew up and how our parents brought us up, I must say that race was not so much of an issue. It was not an issue until identity politics became the syllabus in universities, and that pretty much happened in the 1990s.

JONES: I'm going to take it a little bit further and say that when I'm in a kind of provocative mood in my milieu where people are so progressive and all, I say that this world is populated with refugees from the middle classes. Class more than race. And as someone said to me the other day, we on the left are much more comfortable talking about racial differences than we are talking about class. So Kwong was educated, spoke French so well that Yves Saint Laurent



FIGURE 7 *Tseng Kwong Chi, East Meets West Manifesto, 1983, from the East Meets West series. C-print, 71 × 71 inches, printed 2014.*

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said, “You must be—.” What was that compliment that sounded so bizarre about his speaking French so well?

TSENG: An ambassador from China.

JONES: “You must be an ambassador from China.” So his class was his calling card, and I think that’s something that we forget in identity politics, that class is oftentimes the dirty secret.

TSENG: The unspeakable.

JONES: The unspeakable is class and education.

CHONG: Muna told me about something which we didn’t actually put in her first piece. But I was curious about Kwong Chi in this context, which is Muna’s family, Muna and her brother and her parents, moved from Hong Kong to Vancouver, Canada, which is a whole different world in the sixties, right, in the early sixties?

TSENG: Sixty-six.

CHONG: And it was very traumatic for Muna, so I can’t imagine that it could have been that easy for your brother.

TSENG: Oh, no, no. He was traumatized.

CHONG: I’m just saying that has a big influence on how he is seen in the West.

JONES: How was he traumatized? Canada is a nice place to land.

TSENG: Vancouver in 1966 had a Chinatown. My parents did not land in Chinatown. We lived in a white suburb and went to high school. Kwong Chi was sixteen. I think he dealt with it a little better than I did. I had lockjaw for three years and couldn’t speak, and so I went into dance. He had art. He was like the prodigy because he had taken landscape painting and calligraphy so he would be doing murals in the high school lobby, and mosaic and things like that. He joined the Gilbert & Sullivan Club Society, and he was Guiseppe in his velvet balloon things in *The Gondoliers*. [Laughs.] He just had a way of finding himself.

The video of the panel discussion is viewable online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjGMnEWFA1U>.