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**ART OF “AMBIGUOUS AMBASSADOR” COMES HOME TO THE CHRYSLER MUEUM OF ART
IN *TSENG KWONG CHI: PERFORMING FOR THE CAMERA***

—Nationally Acclaimed Exhibition Celebrates Art of Underestimated 1980s Photographer and
Performance Artist, Scholarship of late Chrysler Curator Who Conceived and Mounted Show—



Niagara Falls, New York, 1984,
from the series *East Meets West*
Vintage gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 in.
Collection of the Chrysler Museum of Art



Art After Midnight, New York, 1985
Vintage gelatin silver print, 36 x 36 in.
Image © and courtesy of Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc.,
New York

NORFOLK, Va. (July 28, 2015) – The Chrysler Museum of Art proudly presents first major museum touring retrospective of works by Tseng Kwong Chi (1950–1990), a prolific photographer, provocative conceptual and performance artist, and key documentarian of Manhattan’s downtown arts scene in the heady 1980s. ***Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera*** spotlights more than 80 photographic works, as well as archival materials, by the Hong Kong-born Canadian artist, who died at the age of 39 from AIDS-related complications. The exhibition, co-organized with the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, is on view at the Chrysler Museum of Art from August 18 through December 13, 2015. Admission is free.

IN MEMORY OF AMY BRANDT

The arrival of *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* in Norfolk is a bittersweet celebration for the Chrysler, as the lauded exhibition was conceived and curated by the late Amy Brandt, the Museum’s McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art since 2011. As the Chrysler’s first specialist in mid-20th-century and 21st-century art, Brandt had great passion for and expertise in 1980s art. For several years she worked on planning, researching, and curating this show, which debuted at the Grey Gallery in New York City in April. Immediately *Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera* garnered both popular

applause and critical acclaim, including stellar reviews in *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, and other important art-world media. Though Brandt's flagging health precluded her from seeing her exhibition on view, she was immensely proud of its success. Brandt, 37, died May 15 after a long and valiant struggle against cancer. The touring exhibition is presented in her memory, and the definitive catalogue she organized leaves a legacy of scholarship.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Tseng Kwong Chi, whose parents fled Communist China, was born in Hong Kong in 1950. When he was 16, his family relocated to Vancouver. After training in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, and studying briefly at the University of British Columbia, Tseng moved to Paris in 1974 to attend the prestigious *École Supérieure d'Arts Graphiques* (the successor of the *Académie Julian*), where he began to study photography as art. Upon moving to New York in 1978, Tseng began connecting with key players in the American art world and crafting the performance-oriented self-portraits that form the backbone of his artistic practice. In roughly a decade, before his death from AIDS in 1990, Tseng created more than 100,000 photographs, capturing the cultures, contradictions, and celebrities of the 1980s.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera examines not only the artist's best-known photographs, but the full gamut of his professional work. Twelve of the artworks hail from Tseng's landmark *East Meets West* series, begun in 1979. In largescale black-and-white "selfies," Tseng adopts the identity of a visiting Chinese official wearing a "Mao suit" and a deadpan expression. In these photos, he is an outsider in a foreign land, prominently posing in front of popular tourist attractions such as the World Trade Centers or Disneyland. In the guise of a self-described "ambiguous ambassador," often wearing a badge reading "Slut for Art," he is the star of his postured performance and the photographs that document it.

East Meets West evolved into *The Expeditionary Series* around the time Tseng was diagnosed with AIDS. Though the settings remain postcard-perfect travel destinations like Mount Rushmore, Canadian glaciers, or the rocky coast of Puerto Rico, the artist is less noticeably featured. In some images, Tseng's figure nearly disappears within the expansive landscape, almost as though being absorbed by nature. The Chrysler Museum's three works in the show belong to these two popular series, but Brandt wanted viewers to see a fuller range of Tseng's photography to better understand his art and influence.

To that end, the majority of the works in the exhibition are the artist's less-famous works, finally giving viewers a chance to "take in the full scope of Tseng's powerful imagery, with its striking social, political, and philosophical implications," Brandt wrote. "The exhibition's subtitle...emphasizes the aspects of masquerade, theatricality, and performance at the root of his conceptual photographic practice."

Represented in the exhibition are images of Tseng's seminal and sophisticated performance-photoshoot from *Costumes at the Met*. Tseng, in full Mao costume, crashed what was hailed as 1980's "party of year." Most of the 600 elite guests had paid \$300 a ticket to attend the Costume Institute's exclusive reception-opening for *The Manchu Dragon: Costumes of the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644–1912* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pretending to be a Chinese dignitary, Tseng had photos taken as he hobnobbed with standouts in the worlds of art, politics, and fashion, but he also created inspired absurdity amid the glam and glitter by posing with mannequins draped in traditional robes and with security guards at the famed museum. His social subterfuge was published in the *Soho Weekly News*.

So was "It's a Reagan World!," a cheeky and satirical collaboration with his friend Ann Magnuson. For this tabloid-styled photomontage and feature story, several of their artist friends played the parts of decidedly heterosexual young Republicans, dressing in quintessential preppy and dress-for-success

1980s style as a sort of conservative drag. Each ensemble, however, took on a slightly punked-out or ironic twist in this commentary on fashion's power to effect political critique.

Tseng's skewering of the Right continued with his 1981 *Moral Majority* series, in which he traded his trademark Mao jacket for a seersucker suit to adopt the guise of a conservative sympathizer. With artist Kenny Scharf as his assistant, Tseng convinced leading figures of the Reagan era—William F. Buckley, Jr., Jerry Falwell, and Alphonse d'Amato, among others—to pose in front of a heavily wrinkled papier-mâché American flag said to look like Old Glory blowing in the wind. The effect of the portraits is a biting critique on patriotism, one that anticipated Sacha Baron Cohen, Stephen Colbert, and Jon Stewart's contemporary persona parodies, Brandt said.

Other of Tseng's works cross over into the realms of society and documentary photography. As a costumed chameleon, an Asian gay man and a seeming outsider within the inner circle, Tseng spent much of his career chronicling New York's lively downtown art and nightclub scenes of the 1980s.

Whether posing in fun group shots with East Village denizens, cavorting casually with beachgoers at Jacob Riis Park, or rubbing elbows with luminaries at posh exhibition openings, Tseng always carried one of his cameras. His *oeuvre* includes Polaroid snapshots and photomontages of celebrities, 35 mm photojournalistic images of his close friend Keith Haring's underground drawings in the New York City subways, and stunning, atmospheric color portraits of notable artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, Philip Taaffe, Keith Haring, and Andy Warhol.

"In combining photography with performance, personal identity with global politics, and satire with farce, Tseng created a compelling body of work in which its easy humor and grace give entrée to its conceptual complexity," Brandt said. "With this exhibition, we are proud to carve a niche for Tseng Kwong Chi in the pantheon of postmodern innovators, where he so rightly belongs."

NATIONWIDE EXHIBITION TOUR

Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera debuted at The Grey Art Gallery of New York University. The Grey's location in the heart of Greenwich Village made it a perfect venue to open the tour, allowing visitors a backyard view of the many downtown galleries and clubs that the artist frequented in his professional and social life.

The Chrysler Museum of Art serves as the exhibition's second venue. After closing at the Chrysler on December 13, the exhibition travels to the Boston area, where it will be on view from January 21 to May 22, 2016 at the Tufts University Art Gallery at the Shirley and Alex Aidekman Arts Center. The national tour concludes in Chicago at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, on view from September 17 to December 11, 2016.

KEY PROGRAMMING

Exhibition Opening Party

Third Thursday, August 20 from 7–10 p.m.

The Chrysler Museum of Art opens this acclaimed exhibition with a bash and a bang as we transform Huber Court into a swank New York club. Dance to the DJ or lounge with friends over custom cocktails from the cash bar. Take your picture at the Tseng Kwong Chi-inspired photobooth, and learn more about his photography in an exhibition gallery talk. Come as you are or dress as you like. Admission to this special Third Thursday exhibition opening party is free to all, thanks to Hampton Roads Pride and Hampton Roads Business OutReach. (The Chrysler's monthly Third Thursday series is sponsored by The Capital Group Companies and Virginia Natural Gas/AGL Resources.)

The exhibition opening continues with a later-night after-party. Head over to Work|Release, 759 Granby St., Norfolk, to continue the fun til 2 a.m. Admission is free, thanks to the Rutter Family Art Foundation.

**Free Lecture: *My Life as an Art Soldier in Mao's China—Art and Politics* by Shaomin Li
Saturday, October 10 at 2 p.m.**

Shaomin Li, Eminent Scholar and Professor of International Business at Old Dominion University, once was an artist serving Mao Zedong's revolution in China. After Mao's death in 1976, he was ordered to paint the leader's portrait for the official state memorial service. As he recalls the unexpected turns his life took when China dramatically transformed politically, economically, and culturally, Li covers how he moved from artist to student activist to businessman to political prisoner, and finally to academic.

Exhibition Catalogue

Tseng Kwong Chi: Performing for the Camera features a 178-page, illustrated hardback catalogue. Curatorial overviews by Amy Brandt of the Chrysler Museum of Art and Lynn Gumpert of the Grey Gallery offer new insights into cultural impact and influence of the groundbreaking photographer they tout as one of the late 20th century's most underappreciated artists. Four more essays by guest scholars cover themes prevalent in Tseng's work –infiltration through performance, identity and outsider status, activism, and celebrity—and a family history and recollections from Tseng's sister, Muna, lend a poignant, personal touch to this definitive monograph. Published by the Chrysler Museum of Art and the Grey Art Gallery, in association with Lyon Artbooks, this indispensable catalogue is available for purchase at the Chrysler's Museum Shop for \$50.

ABOUT THE CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART

The recently expanded Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, is one of America's most distinguished mid-sized art museums, with a nationally recognized collection of more than 30,000 objects, including one of the great glass collections in America. The core of this collection was given to the Museum by Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., an avid art collector who donated thousands of objects from his private collection to the Museum in 1971. In the years since Chrysler's death in 1988, the Museum has dramatically extended its campus and developed new ties with the Norfolk community. It now has rapidly growing collections, especially in the fields of contemporary glass, American art, photography, and 21st-century art.

In 2011, the Chrysler opened a full-service glass studio with a 560-pound capacity furnace, a full hot shop, a flameworking studio, nine annealing ovens, and a coldworking shop. In addition, the Chrysler administers two Federal-period historic houses in downtown Norfolk: the Moses Myers House and the Willoughby-Baylor House.

The Chrysler Museum of Art, One Memorial Place, Norfolk, and its Perry Glass Studio at 745 Duke St., are open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. The Historic Houses on E. Freemason Street are open weekends. Admission is free. For more information on exhibitions, events, and programs, visit www.chrysler.org or call (757) 664-6200.

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For more information or high-resolution images of the show, contact Virginia Hilton at (757) 340-7425 or (757) 232-2178 cell, or virginia@themeridiangroup.com.