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

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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.