

JANUARY 15, 2007

NEW YORK

Warhol's

Children

Thought the era of the bohemian superstar was over? Meet artists Ryan McGinley, Dash Snow, and Dan Colen, who are doing their outrageous best to prove that **downtown lives on.**

BY ARIEL LEVY

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at the
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and
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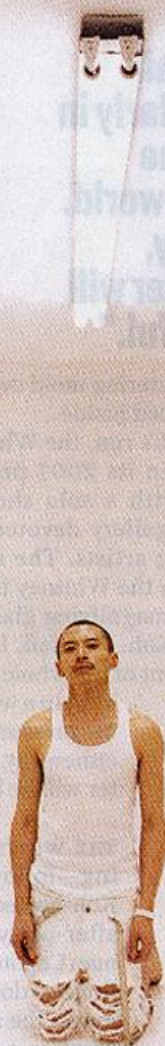
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Is Terence Koh's Sperm Worth \$100,000? Portrait of the artist as a young punk capitalist.

BY MARC SPIEGLER

Photograph by Joseph Maida

TERENCE KOH'S ARTISTIC coming-out hardly seemed auspicious. It was May 2003. Collector Javier Peres had recently scrapped his international-law career to open Peres Projects gallery. He offered its opening show in Los Angeles to Koh, a young New York artist then known as asianpunkboy, whose track record con-

sisted of little more than a perverse and freewheeling Website and a few 'zinelike books. As art openings go, it proved to be bizarre. Artist-designer-gay icon Ryan McGinley played D.J., and there was no art in the gallery itself. Through a hole in its floor you entered the basement, which Koh had transformed into an all-white space inhabited by two albino parakeets. "The Los Angeles art world was like, 'You had a party, not an opening, and there's no art in your gallery. You're a joke,'" remembers Peres.

Fast-forward three years and jet halfway around the globe to Switzerland, where in June crowds flocked to see Koh's solo installation in Art Basel's invitational "Statements" section. Through word-of-mouth, the work—which included glass vitrines containing fist-size gold-plated chunks labeled as Koh's own excrement—had become one of the fair's signature pieces. More than a dozen collectors fought to buy up the various components, whose total selling price approached \$500,000.

Even in an art world marked by the speed with which new stars rise (and fall), Terence Koh's trajectory is phenomenal. After Art Basel came the season-opening show at the prestigious Kunsthalle Zürich, which allocated him more than 8,000 square feet of space; Koh blanketed one huge room in white powder—walking inside felt like suddenly being caught in a fog bank—and

filled another with 1,200 glass vitrines stacked to form a precarious labyrinth. Six weeks later, the godfather of the British art market, Charles Saatchi, and his curatorial ally Norman Rosenthal awarded Koh the pole position just inside their controversial "USA Today" show at London's Royal Academy, where Koh showed *CRACKHEAD*, a wall-like arrangement of 222 vitrines containing plaster heads

"If I fail, I fail spectacularly in front of the whole art world. Either way, the splatter will be beautiful."

covered in a festering mold owing to the humidity trapped inside.

Capping Koh's run, the Whitney Museum will open its 2007 program on January 19 with a solo show in the ground-floor gallery devoted to spotlighting young artists. The stakes are high. "Being in the Whitney is like having this huge magnifying glass shining on you," says Koh. "If I fail, I fail spectacularly in front of the whole art world.

That in a way relieves the pressure, because either way, the splatter will be beautiful."

THE WHITNEY OPENING—followed by a Koh-hosted all-white after-party à la Truman Capote at Deitch Projects downtown—marks the artist's triumph in a city where not so very long ago he couldn't afford studio space. In October, Koh moved back to New York after a three-month sojourn in Berlin. He took over an entire building on Canal Street, painted every exposed surface white, and designated it the new home for his Factory-style gallery project, Asia Song Society (ASS). Koh shares the upstairs with his

longtime boyfriend, Garrick Gott, a graphic designer. Peres Projects director Blair Taylor manages the gallery's roster of New York artists from an office directly below their apartment. In the basement will be a sort of clubhouse for the hard-partying downtown art crew, which includes artists such as Peres Projects stablemate Dan Colen, as well as Banks Violette, Barnaby Furnas, Dash Snow, and McGinley.

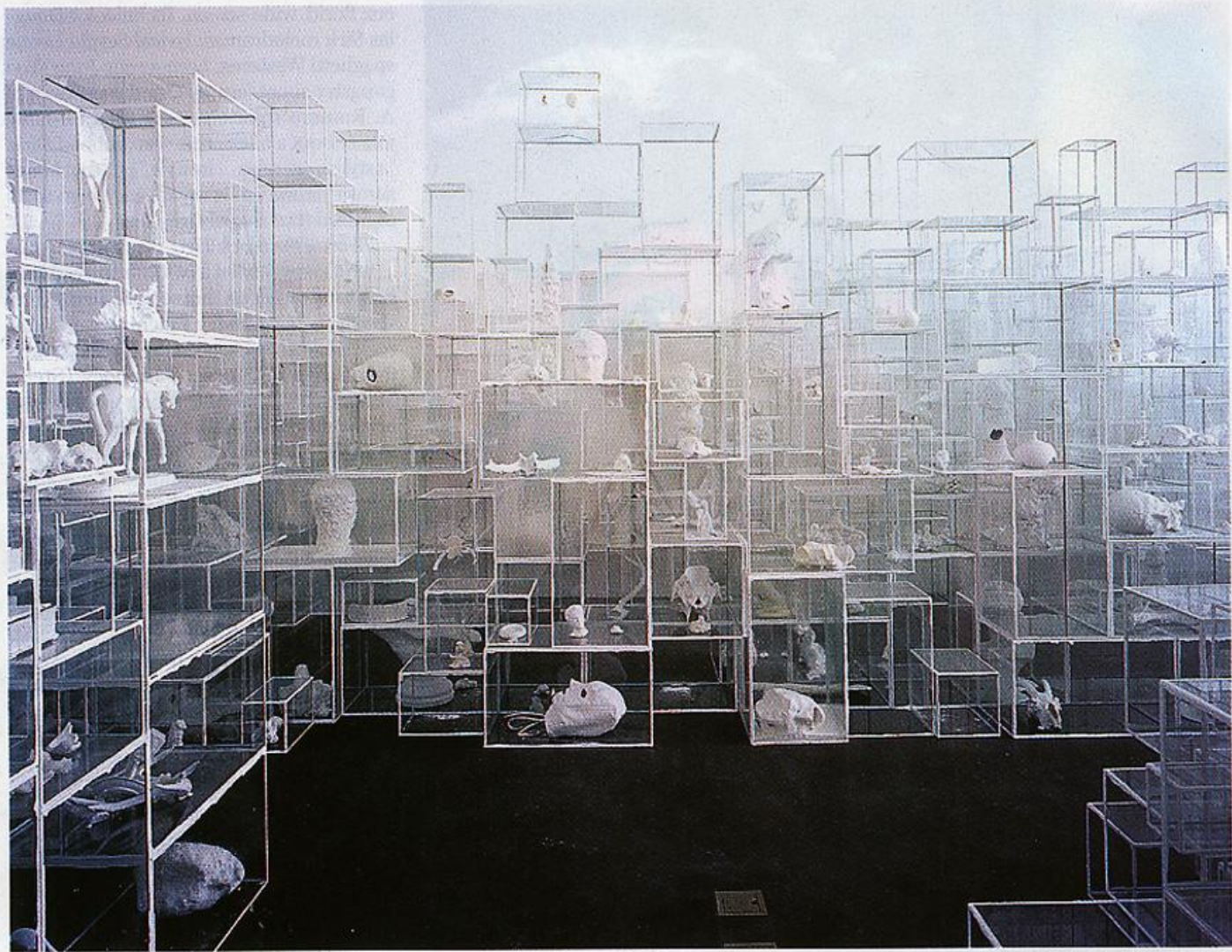
On the afternoon I stop by, just before Christmas, Koh is having a shoe crisis. He and Peres are planning to fly to Toronto early the next morning for the wedding of gay filmmaker Bruce LaBruce to his Santeria-priest lover, and Koh needs some white pumps. He calls an SUV car service, puts on "the monkey fur" (a hypnotic white couture coat that looks like it was stripped from a yeti's back and stitched by elves into a sort of winter bolero), and heads to Patricia Field.

Given his swallowlike frame, Koh has humongous feet, and the store doesn't have white pumps in his size. Improvising, Koh spies a silver version with three spikes jutting from the toes and buys two pairs: the ones in stock, which he plans to razor-slit so he can wear them to the wedding, and a pair commissioned to fit him. The shoe crisis solved, Koh and Peres storm Seven for some Bernhard Willhelm. Speed-shopping both the men's and women's sections, they rack up a four-digit bill in fifteen minutes. (Koh is particularly pleased with a pair of white shorts that were once knee-length but have been lacerated into lingerie-like laciness.) On the way out the door, they notice a silver necklace that looks like a cross between a feather boa and the sort of thick dookie rope popularized by rappers in the eighties. Peres, in full sugar-daddy dealer mode, caps the shopping spree by buying it for Koh. It's beautiful but heavy and sharp. By the time we get back to the complex on Canal, Koh's swan neck is an angry, rashy red. "It's not the first time I've caused you pain," jokes Peres.

The relationship between dealer and artist can be businesslike, but it sometimes grows into something more emotionally charged. "Javier used to be my lover, but now is only my dealer," Koh explains via e-mail. "We probably have the closest relationship in the whole of the art world. He has never asked me about why I do a piece or my motivations or ideas or feelings for it. He makes it all up for the world and it's a perfectly happy symbiosis." That synergy is partly responsible for Koh's tremendous market success. "When an artist and dealer who reflect the current time work to-



A double-sided cast of Koh's head.



The labyrinth of 1,200 vitrines at Kunsthalle Zürich.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY PERES PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES BERLIN

gether like Terence and Javier, things happen quickly—as with Leo Castelli representing Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein in the early sixties,” says veteran art dealer Mary Boone, who had her synergistic moment with Julian Schnabel and David Salle.

Explaining their collaboration, Peres says, “We can talk very candidly about the market issues without it being viewed as a vulgar topic. He’s always alluding to the Chinese merchant culture. Terence jokes about the combination of the Jew and the Chinese being able to figure things out.” It’s not just between them that Koh is candid. Koh once posted online how much money he claimed to have earned as an artist in 2004: \$153,782. Even conservative estimates for his 2006 take

would break a million dollars. “I love money,” says Koh. “Having money is the grease that helps me run my other crazy projects, like my magazine and my Website and the new porn production company I am setting up in my basement.”

Koh was particularly fortunate to hook up with a dealer able to fund (and sell) anything he conceives. Peres spent nearly \$400,000 on an art assembly line in Berlin to produce the 1,400 vitrines required for Koh’s Zürich and London shows. Twenty-eight assistants worked for three months “whiting” the objects Koh collected from sex shops and flea markets. Peres’s investment promptly paid off. The Kunsthalle vitrines, grouped into some ten sets priced between \$65,000 and \$265,000, sold out. The

other objects in the show—a set of white-chocolate paintings, a suspended double-sided mold of Koh’s head, and two towering white-chocolate sculptures (part mountains, part Twin Towers, part phalluses)—brought in \$400,000. Likewise, the installation at the Royal Academy cost super-collector Saatchi more than \$200,000.

Those are high prices for a young artist, even considering Koh’s huge production costs. But what’s shocking is that collectors are willing to pay such prices for pieces of uncertain durability. From the beginning, Koh has made a habit of using unusual materials: chocolate, semen, blood, vomit, Chanel lipstick. At first, Koh and Peres made the mistake of selling the work without (Continued on page 67)

detailing its fragility. "In our rush, our naïveté, it seemed clear that this work was going to change—I mean, it was made of ashes and chocolate. And collectors would later come and say, 'This broke, can you fix it?'" Peres recalls. "Now, no work of Terence leaves my gallery without a release, because his materials are quite unusual. We just don't know what will happen to a piece made out of chocolate and Terence's come."

Koh occasionally consults with buyers when a work degrades, deciding whether it should be replaced, restored, or left alone. Collectors Phil and Shelley Aarons bought a 2004 piece called *Michael Jackson, Michael Jackson*—two fourteen-inch figures of Jackson in his "Thriller" and "Beat It"—era costumes, covered in chocolate—which over time started to turn white. They were not new to the unpredictability of Koh's work. In fact, the pair had commissioned what Koh calls his first real artwork: an artists' book set that incrementally transmogrified into a huge mirrored coffin, packed in white powder, lined in white fur, filled with 220 individual cases, and weighing half a ton. "I gave him my FedEx number when he called to say it was done," Phil says with a laugh, "and he said, 'It can't be FedExed.'" Still, he and his wife were concerned by the whitening Michael Jacksons. "Terence came over to see them," the collector recalls. "He said, 'It's even better now; it looks more like Michael Jackson.'" The figures, lightly crusted, stand immediately inside the door of the Aaronses' apartment near Lincoln Center.

In one sense, this material instability functions as a collector purity test. Because while Koh's rocketing market invites speculation, only a fool buys perishable work for investment purposes. That said, such fragility attracts collectors who pride themselves on supporting "avant-garde" art. Moreover, Koh's heated market has had an alchemic effect on more risk-averse collectors. "Terence's work is sometimes covered in fingerprints, contains dirt and spiderwebs, and it's often broken or already developing mold when you buy it," points out London dealer Nicolai Frahm, who started collecting Koh in 2004. "But with hype and high prices, those pieces somehow seem more aesthetically appealing to new collectors. That was also the situation with Paul McCarthy or Mike Kelley. Their art seemed too tough at \$30,000, but at half a million they're much easier to swallow."

IT MAY BE tempting to chalk up Koh's market ascendancy purely to Peres, but there would be no hype if there weren't something substantive to promote.

Koh's work isn't all about the easy impact of gold-plated excrement and all-white rooms. What intrigues curators and collectors is that with each installation, he's constructing an idiosyncratic and visually stunning universe. "It's always a risk to give someone such a big space, especially if artists are realizing their first large solo exhibition," explains Kunsthalle Zürich director Beatrix Ruf. "It can be frightening. But Terence definitely is not afraid. He has an incredible formal ability, the ability to do several things in parallel, and of course, the right urgency. He's very obsessive. Very precise. And he doesn't give in."

Indeed, Koh has a particularly sharp vision. He's commonly lumped with Gothic Revival artists such as Banks Violette, Aida Ruilova, and Sue de Beer, because his work is dramatic and occasionally all black. But what makes Koh compelling is his command of space (he once worked for architect Zaha Hadid) and a formal style akin to the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*, celebrating the beauty found in decay and impermanence. "As a child, I really enjoyed going to Asian funerals," he recalls. "I loved that we all had to dress in black for fourteen days and then on the actual cremation day everybody was in white ... Maybe that is what struck in me the monochromatic colors." An in-your-face gayness also dominates his work, be it the engorged penis on his home page, the man-children he deploys in his performances, his use of come as an art material, or his inviting Armory Show fairgoers to an "opening" that was actually a gay backroom. It's hard to come up with a prominent artist since Robert Mapplethorpe or David Wojnarowicz whose homosexuality has been employed so provocatively.

Distinguishing between Koh's life and his art is virtually impossible. "I don't think of Terence making individual pieces," says artist AA Bronson, a founding member of the conceptual group General Idea. "It's one complex piece. An almost fictional autobiography, one extended work. Artists like Dieter Roth, Yoko Ono, and Ray Johnson all made these little projects that were part of the fabric of their life. Terence does that as well." The details of that autobiography constantly shift to his advantage. Koh grew up in Canada, but press materials state that he was born in Beijing, and his birth date has advanced over the years from 1977 to 1979 to 1980. Bronson chuckles: "Terence lies about everything.

I think he was born in Singapore. And my guess is he's about 36."

Bronson, whom Koh considers a sort of father figure, worries about the speed of his onetime studio assistant's success. "I really hate seeing artists take off that fast, because they almost always crash," Bronson says. "Terence is the real thing. But even real deals can burn out. I say that to him all the time." Helping set the pace of an artist's career is one of a dealer's primary functions, and Peres's balls-out speed raises eyebrows. "I see young artists as embers to be patiently fanned into flame. Javier's approach appears to be more like pouring gasoline on it," says Becky Smith of Chelsea's Bellwether Gallery. "Call me old school, but when it comes to an artist's trajectory, I look at the whole 'Kaboom!' thing suspiciously."

The pitfall here is that getting the art world's attention is child's play compared with keeping it. "He's in a very interesting moment," observes Ruf. "Some artists don't even get looked at, but others have the problem of only being fascinating. People are fascinated by Terence's objects and the white spaces. But as an artist, you have to ensure they have an experience beyond that first fascinating moment. That's a challenge Terence will have to face just as Andreas Gursky and Jeff Koons did."

It's impossible to say whether the Whitney installation will deliver the type of transcendent experience Ruf describes, but it certainly shows that Koh won't let himself be labeled a one-trick pony. There are no vitrines. No white powder. Nothing broken, decomposing, or vaguely sexual. Instead, inside a pristine room will stand a spindly tripod holding a movie spotlight, 600 degrees Fahrenheit at its surface and emitting an artificial daylight visible yards away on Madison Avenue. "It casts hypersharp shadows even in the middle of the day," says curator Shamim M. Momin, who also selected Koh for the 2004 Whitney Biennial. "You'll walk in, start to sense that it's crazy bright, then turn and have it explode into your vision. The idea is to evoke a physical sensation that is both painful and amazing."

Next up for Koh is a group show at London's Victoria Miro Gallery, another solo exhibition during Art Basel, and a public-arts project in Beijing planned to coincide with the 2008 Olympics. Not to mention plans to start working with a heavy-hitting European gallery. Despite Bronson's advice, Koh does not fear fizzling. "I think it's quite elegant when a star starts burning out, becoming much brighter and then eventually imploding and becoming a black hole, becoming antimatter," he says. "I look forward to it. Just not for a billion or so years." ■