

ARTIST

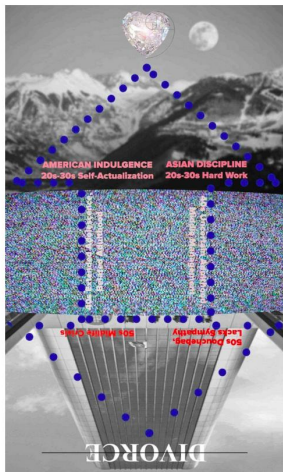
BECOME THE INSTITUTION!

Christopher K Ho on identity (technically)

By Yu-Chieh Li 2015-10-26

The wry twists of Christopher K Ho's work show an acute sensitivity to the social meaning of an object—whether that's Eau d'Issey, an Ivy League monogram, or a peace lily. Not quite floating, his work skims across a finely calibrated surface of luxury brands and theoretical references. In a seemingly bizarre turn, however, Ho's latest work revolves around the idea of responsibility: in particular, parenthood. But it might also bespeak a certain maturation: as one of his characteristic diagrams might indicate, in the erotic wrestle with power, after ignorance, there is guilt; after guilt, there is outrage; after outrage, there is caring.

Ho spoke to us about his upcoming performance, "St Joseph As Model", as part of a SCREEN-curated performance program during the Field Meeting. *What Kind of Technology is Culture?*



Yu-Chieh Li (YCL): Perhaps you could begin by talking about the notion we've been addressing here, which is of culture as a set of practical techniques. How might identity be rehearsed, and performed, in a very literal way?

Christopher K Ho (CKH): Gilbert Simondon argued, some 50 years ago, that technology is a form of culture, and indeed, that it must be approached as such if culture is not to be atavistic, to relegate itself to the pre-industrial and to engage in a misguided and dangerous attempt to resist technology (misguided because doomed, and dangerous because at risk of metamorphosing technology into an untamable, monstrous agent). SCREEN's title, intriguingly, updates Simondon. It implies that today, in a post-industrial, post-Internet, networked age, the question is not "how is technology a form of culture?" so much as "how is culture a form of technology?"

High and popular cultures encapsulate collective identity; subcultures often cultivate members through signs of willfully limited legibility. But today, identity may be less cultural—whether high, popular, or sub—than individual. Identity additionally coheres in the present tense, fluidly, through a click of the mouse, a "like", a repost. Such a diminution of culture and of history into a multitude of tweets and of feeds presents a major challenge to artists engaged in identity politics, and frames my performance-lecture *St. Joseph as Model* for SCREEN.

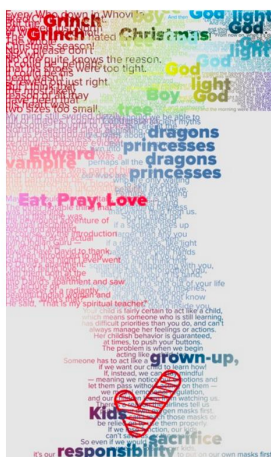
Rather than to 'rehearse' or to 'perform' identity, durational activities both, might we simply *be*? Such, for instance, is Vietnamese-American artist Lap Le's thesis when he declares, "Identity is protest." Rather than approaching the critical function of identity politics as something which occurs retroactively, or as a predetermined procedure for issuing judgments, Le approaches it as concomitant; he renders the verb 'to critique' intransitive. This counterintuitive conception informs *St. Joseph as Model*, which advocates being—as in being a role model for someone—as a potent political act.

YCL: You have frequently subverted the positions or claims of Western modernists in your projects. For example, in *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (2013), abstract art became the primitive; you turned modernist sculptures into the stools and drums of a fantasy tribal circle. I think it's a quite powerful work. I wonder, as an Asian American artist, standing between the West and the Non-West, what is the cultural legacy you identify with?

CKH: "Cultural legacy" conjures a past that populates the present, and that tenaciously, sometimes surreptitiously, directs the future. But one can—one should—leave a legacy, or strive to. This admonishment risks espousing arrogance, even delusion. But envisioning oneself an initiator rather than an inheritor is more generative and less restrictive. Too many artists position themselves at the conclusion—arrogant in its own way—a result of over-education and of the myriad ends that pervaded the '90s of painting, of history, of meta-narratives, of ideology.

Neither, however, am I advocating a return to the model of the avant-garde, itself a legacy of twentieth century Europe. If *Demoiselles d'Avignon* had a polemic, it was to point out that capitalism dooms successful avant-gardes to assimilation, to inscription into the main, to institutionalization. The legacy leaving I have in mind is synthetic and unabashed in its ambition to *become the institution*. It is dynastic, not subversive. In this, it is perhaps more Asian.

"St Joseph As Model" premieres at Field Meeting Take 3, a signature event of Asia Contemporary Art Week.



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