



Tseng Kwong Chi: Citizen of the World

June 13 - July 28, 1999

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

## He Was a Visitor

*As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of a space in which they are insecure.<sup>1</sup>*

We are transients. Wanderers in a landscape of designated monuments, borders and signs. We believe in a labyrinthine construct that we monitor through our senses coupled to a colossal electronic matrix. Claiming dominion over the earth as a birthright, we celebrate our mastery over all we perceive. Yet we visit nature these days as tourists. Lakes, national parks and waterfalls are institutionally supervised recreational zones for middle-class nomads.

Our desire to fill space with memorials has fueled communal spectacles from the ancient pyramids to Trajan's Column to planting the U.S. flag on the moon. We constantly need to prove that we've been there, that we will continue to be there.<sup>2</sup> Everyone ultimately gets his or her own monument, whether it is a cross in the dirt or a mausoleum.

Tseng Kwong Chi exposed a complex network of myths for the masses by photographing himself amidst monuments ranging from the sacred (Notre Dame, the statue of Christ in Rio) to the secular (Lincoln Memorial, Eiffel Tower) to the blatantly commercial (Disneyland Castle, a towering Bordeaux wine bottle). His expeditionary series is not only a deconstruction of tourist photography, but of military or royal portraiture and tableaux d'histoire, with all their attendant propaganda (e.g. Napoleon depicted by artists as a Roman emperor or God). Tseng's 10-year pictorial saga was inspired by the idea of history as a complete fabrication.

*I am an inquisitive traveler, a witness of my time, and an ambiguous ambassador.<sup>3</sup>*

It seems that whenever I ran into Tseng Kwong Chi in New York City throughout the 1980s, he was either about to embark on a trip or was just returning. Unlike many of his image-scavenging contemporaries who let mass media do the walking, he preferred a more itinerant approach to gathering visual material. It was essential to his project that he actually visit his chosen site, rather than pose before a back-lit slide projection of a scene. His aesthetic and geographic explorations were inextricably entwined.



*Empire State Building, New York, 1979, silver gelatin print, 36" x 36", collection Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson*

Viewing Tseng's work in retrospect reveals more a mission than a career. He had a singular, finely tuned vision and was dedicated to the refinement and subtle evolution of his images. In an art decade bursting with rhetoric ranging from the artist as "shaman" or "guardian of the culture" to "critic of late capitalism," Tseng chose a rather expansive theme: artist as tourist in a world whose eeriness increases in proportion to the degree to which that world is quantified. In his persistent depiction of a fictional emissary confronting wonders both natural and man-made, he addressed our chronic sense of alienation and our desire to displace it with a transcendent harmony. He charted his pathways among signposts of culture from the Colosseum to the Statue of Liberty, investing awe and electricity in sites neutralized by tourism and overexposure.

Born in Hong Kong, Tseng Kwong Chi moved to New York in 1979, after having lived and studied in Vancouver and Paris. Shortly after his arrival in New York City, he became friends with Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Ann Magnuson,

John Sex and other luminaries of the downtown art and performance scene. Tseng later became the photo-chronicler of Haring's myriad out-of-gallery installations, from the subway drawings to the Berlin Wall mural.<sup>4</sup> Like Haring, he was acutely aware of the relationship between artmaking and performance. For one of his earliest photographic series in New York City he crashed a high society party at the Metropolitan Museum. Posing as a Chinese dignitary, he repeatedly photographed himself standing next to individual party guests, including royalty and famous designers.

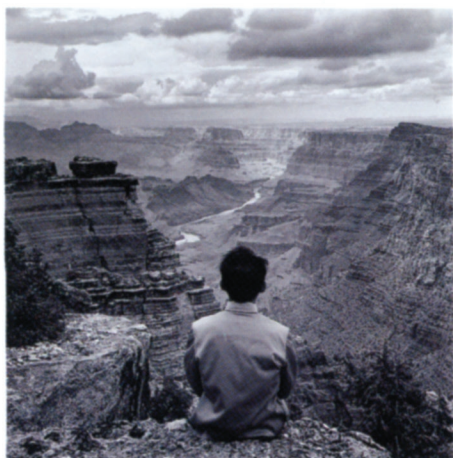
Tseng's knack for theater infused his *East Meets West* photographs as well. He began that series in 1979, donning a Chairman Mao worker's suit and photographing himself at the sites of America's postcard clichés such as the World Trade Towers, the Golden Gate Bridge and the Hollywood Hills. Tseng had never set foot in mainland China: his alter ego, a self-appointed ambassador, was both a response to the superficiality of restored diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China

and a nod to Mao's masterful Long March propaganda.

Many of the earlier *East Meets West* photographs are characterized by dramatic, somewhat vertiginous camera angles, spatial compression and a perverse mimetic association between the artist/visitor and the building or structure. Posing with the Statue of Liberty, for example, both man and monument lean at the same angle and are captured in three-quarter view. Yet Tseng counteracts Liberty's upheld "torch" arm with his own arm extended rigidly downward, fist clenching the omnipresent and sinister-looking remote shutter release. In an age of terrorism, one cannot escape the association between the remote release and a bomb detonator: the artist's use of this device epitomizes Susan Sontag's term "soft murder." In any case, the picture we see was obviously recorded by activating that cabled remote. Thus, the photographer and subject merge to form a third, synthetic persona.

Whether posing in front of the London Bridge, Notre Dame or Capitol Hill, Tseng's robotic stance, his monochrome geometricized costume and his austere expression reinforced by impenetrable mirror shades render him virtually monolithic. Rather than blending in with the scenery, his posture makes him look all the more alien. It is as though we are witnessing an extra-terrestrial who, having miscalculated his decades and hemispheres, has just beamed down to earth in a Maoist "everyman" disguise.

As his work progressed, the scale within Tseng's photographs shifted



*Grand Canyon, Arizona, 1987*, silver gelatin print, 36" x 36", collection Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson



*Cape Canaveral, Florida, 1985*, silver gelatin print, 36" x 36", collection Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson

considerably. After 1985, he abandoned his use of the cabled shutter release, giving him the freedom to move farther away from the camera. We can barely find his figure in many of his photographs of such natural wonders as the Grand Canyon, the Badlands of South Dakota, Monument Valley and Canada's Glacier National Park. The paradox in his work is that as much as he wanted to call attention to the power structures behind any empire's monuments, whether man-made or natural, he was also intent on finding the transcendent oneness with things that Emerson and Thoreau espoused. The nature Tseng sought was of a particular kind: dizzying heights, huge rocky, wooded or ice-covered expanses — the type of exotic scenery that drew 19th-century landscape artists from the Hudson River to the frontiers of the American West.

Like many other artists working in the 1980s, Tseng imbued his images with multilayered references to visual sources from popular entertainment and art history. Hitchcock's *North By Northwest* inspired the artist's visit to Mount

Rushmore in 1986, but Tseng's tiny backturned figure looking up at this surreal American memorial recalls Caspar David Friedrich's scenes of similarly posed figures contemplating the unfathomable expanses of nature. There is also a playful allusion to Norman Rockwell's faithful Boy Scouts, beholding glories of the American Dream with hands and hats respectfully clasped behind their backs.

*Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety, And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome.*<sup>5</sup>

Tseng's journey was cut tragically short by the AIDS virus in the winter of 1990. He was planning a trip to Alaska when he became too ill to travel. We can only imagine what vistas he would have seen and captured there, or on subsequent expeditions. I often think of Kwong Chi rowing along Lake Ninevah, as he appears in an exquisite photograph of 1985. Oar raised, seated in perfect profile, he hovers like an apparition in a scene where boundaries between air, earth and water dissolve into a silvery mist. His image mirrored in the water



*Lake Ninevah, Vermont*, 1985, silver gelatin print, 36" x 36", collection Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson

bespeaks the illusion of duality to which we cling so fiercely. No longer a stranger in a strange land, here the traveler sheds his alter ego, at peace in the flow of the Tao.

— Barry Blinderman, director  
University Galleries  
Illinois State University, Normal

NOTES:

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1973.
2. By some strange synchronicity, Tseng Kwong Chi's series of Cape Canaveral photographs was on exhibit in a Soho gallery when Challenger exploded in January 1986, a testimony to the fragility of even the sleekest, most futuristic monument, one destined to transport us to another world.
3. Tseng Kwong Chi, in Christine Lombard's film *East Meets West: Portrait of Tseng Kwong Chi*.
4. While photographing Haring's projects in London, Paris, Bordeaux and Berlin, Tseng made pilgrimages to many of the sites of his Europe series.
5. *The Way of Lao Tzu*, chapter 1, translated by Wing-Tsit Chan.

*Essay courtesy of the Houston Center  
for Photography, Houston, Texas*

Cover: *Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*, 1984, silver gelatin print, 36" x 36",  
collection Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson