

WORLD WITHOUT END; OR,  
THE SECOND COMING OF CRIT?

Below and pp. 130-131 - *Untitled* (details), 2018.  
Courtesy: the artists and Gaga, Mexico City / Los  
Angeles. Photo: Omar Olguin



Perhaps one of the more alienating aspects of conceptual art, today, is its lack of any material container: now missing the gridded, hand-processed, black-and-white frontal photographic views and typewritten annotations that indexed various sites and/or “problems” from approximately 1965 through 1975. This sober text and image approach also eventually construed Benjamin H. D. Buchloh’s “aesthetic of administration,” a condition that somewhat paradoxically offered institutional validation—just as the readymade first critiqued but then also, through repetition and seriality, in fact reinforced the law of industrial production.

“As of this writing, all millenarian prophecies have failed.”  
—Yuri Slezkine, 2017<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary conceptual art may not *look* like anything coherent, or betray any clear visual significance, thus potentially eluding the dominant mode of our digitally significant moment—that is, *appearance*—and anyway registering its “critique” (or critical failure) on a linguistic or discursive level. Let’s suppose the uncomfortable contradiction supported by such hypothetical art would ultimately be its viral dissemination as a “meme,” a potentiality giving the lie to any tangible complexity in its argument.

An example of the latter category, here, might be Mike Kelley’s 1991 *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry*, only ever realized as an installation: an office doodle blown up to

BY KARI RITTENBACH



Mike Kelley, *Proposal for the Decoration of an Island of Conference Rooms (with Copy Room) for an Advertising Agency Designed by Frank Gehry*, 1991, *Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s* installation view at The Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles, January 26–April 26, 1992. Courtesy: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Paula Goldman

mural scale, with block capital letters spelling out “IF ASSHOLES COULD FLY—THIS PLACE WOULD BE AN AIRPORT!” positioned behind a long table of meeting chairs and flanked on either side by goofy midcentury cartoons of a scolding suit and a giant toilet-training baby. Although once directed at mythically hard-driving admen, the pejorative now—literally—applies all too well to the jet-setting contemporary art audience, which faithfully congregates at fairs, biennials, gala dinners, and other events spanning at least six different continents, according to a seasonal timetable.

What prevented Kelley’s not-especially-masterful conceptual proposal from becoming a meme, however, may have been a mere temporal hiccup—its conception before the commercial availability of dial-up internet. But the (non-)translatibility of obscure or subversive jokes (and references) into the injury-prone, contextless mainstream of lowbrow culture today presents itself as a real hazard for what curator Elisabeth Sussman then named Kelley’s avant-gardist or “anarchistic rhetoric.” For Sussman, the sprawling and even irritating sculptural work itself proposed a “mangled Conceptualism,” by “dragging out its dry theorizing into an open space of sheer theatrical rant.”<sup>2</sup> By now, the (recurring) refrain of theatrically implausible exasperation plays itself out through globally linked digital and satellite news channels, both with and without the aid of “conceptual” provocateurs and/or heads of state.

Some fifty years after the fact—of Conceptual art per se—Peter Osborne suggested the term “postconceptual art” to describe the global shift beyond the exceptionally dry idiom of art making described above, not intending, however, to define “the name for a particular type of art so much as the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, whereas Kelley’s indolent *idea* in the early 1990s still stands, theoretically, as such, in the twenty-first century the situation of art has moved away from the precise positioning or articulation of a concept or idea, to rather merely occurring as a matter, after the fact:

1. Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 271.
2. Elizabeth Sussman, *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 16.
3. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 51.

Postconceptual art stands to conceptual art not as postmodern art was thought to stand to modern art, but rather as poststructuralism may be taken to stand to structuralism: namely, as its philosophical comprehension and the elaboration of its consequences.<sup>4</sup>

For example, the term has been used to describe both systems art and post-digital or “post-internet” art. Here Osborne’s commentaries produce a strange synthesis of a sentiment expressed two decades earlier by Hal Foster:

Rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde, might the neo-avant-garde comprehend it for the first time? I say “comprehend,” not “complete”: the project of the avant-garde is no more concluded in its neo moment than it is enacted in its historical moment. In art, too, creative analysis is interminable.<sup>5</sup>

...With one by the late German literary critic Peter Bürger on the neo-avant-garde as chronologically belated, merely: “a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever.”<sup>6</sup> For Foster, this is both an utter misunderstanding of avant-garde causality, and a dangerous misconception of history as punctual—one condemning the contemporary to everything that is left over, after (so per Osborne). Here, it is useful to note that a certain strand of the postwar neo-avant-garde discussed by Foster in his critique of Bürger included the first generation of Conceptual artists—whose “pathetic and farcical” efforts to merge art and life could then make no comparison to the more tragic and beautiful undertakings of the prewar avant-gardes (Russian Constructivism, Duchamp, Dada). This leads to a few questions:



*Display System: Suicide, Affirmation, Mediation (detail), 2018, NEW IMAGES installation view at Gaga, Mexico City, 2018. Courtesy: the artists and Gaga, Mexico City / Los Angeles. Photo: Omar Olguín*



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1. How—or does—a conceptual practice today surpass contemporary art’s “postconceptual situation” to rearticulate its historicity?
2. What constitutes an avant-garde, defined by metaphorical and temporal proximity to ground wars, in an era defined by near total war at the global periphery, as compared to the periodic expressions of both homegrown and alien “terror” erupting through the center?
3. What is art when there is no (more “real”) life?

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“Now, if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that ‘originality’ is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence.”

—Rosalind Krauss, 1981<sup>7</sup>

“It seemed like a minor revelation that everything—our taste, our aspirations, our behavior, and even our scorn—was completely inherited, either from our immediate predecessors or from our peers. It is incredible that even something like disdain gets passed down as tradition.”

—Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda, 2012<sup>8</sup>

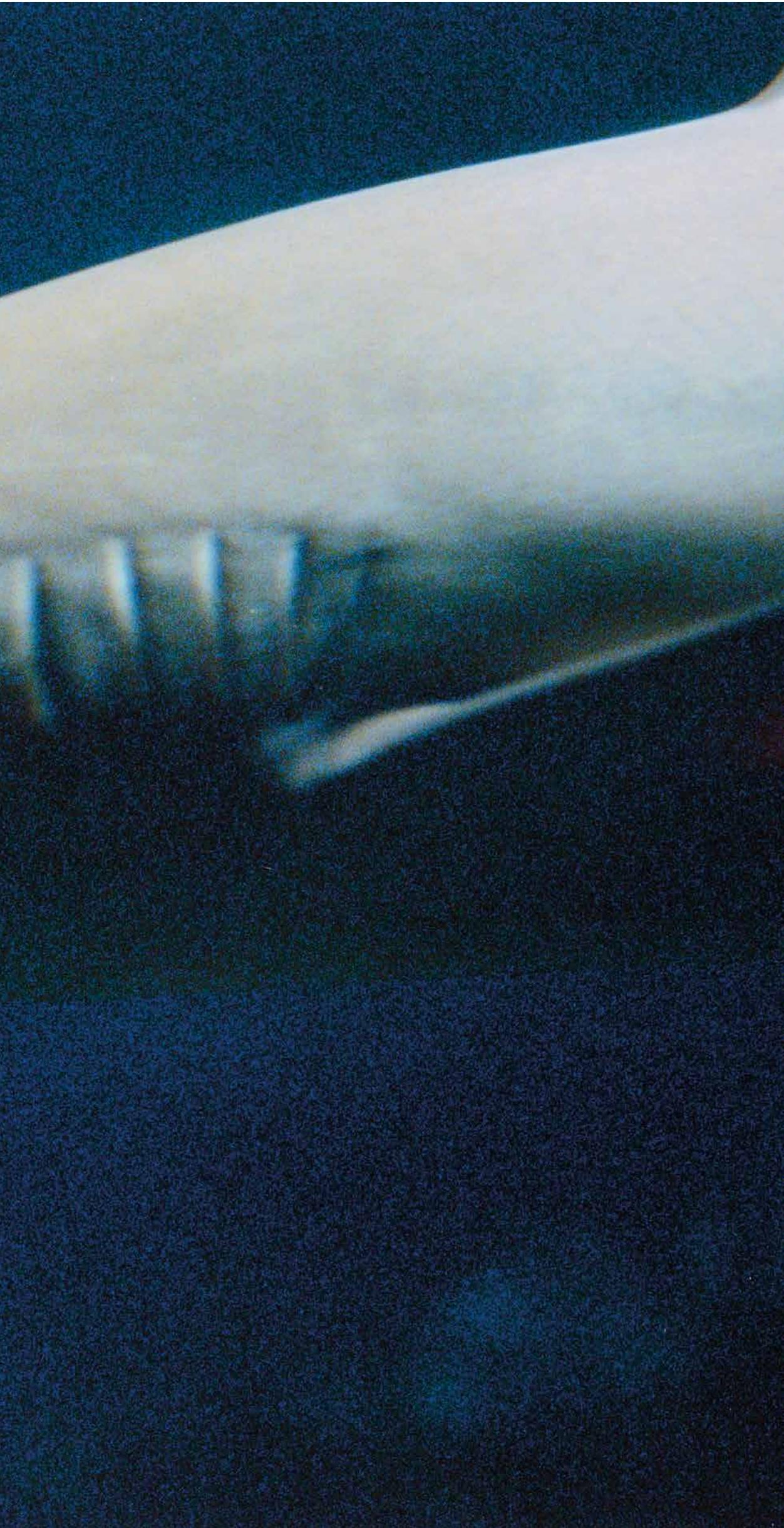
For their spring exhibition at House of Gaga in Mexico City, *New Images* (March 27–April 28, 2018), Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda proposed a “conceptual format that could be considered suitable to the current status of contemporary art with respect to its own history and place in the world at large.”<sup>9</sup> The gallery installation conceived for this purpose, *Display System* (2018), consisted of three

4. Peter Osborne, “The Postconceptual Condition, Or, the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today,” *Radical Philosophy* 184 (March–April 2014), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-postconceptual-condition>.  
 5. Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?,” *October* 70 (Autumn 1994), 16.  
 6. Quoted in *ibid.*, 14. Here, Foster notes in Bürger the echo of Clement Greenberg’s critical dismay at Minimalism. Whereas (elsewhere) Buchloh rebuffs Bürger’s claim as “not logically compelling at all.”  
 7. Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” *October* 18 (Autumn 1981), 53–54.  
 8. Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda, “10 Years of Jay & Q,” interview by Aram Moshayedi, 2012, <https://www.redcat.org/content/interview-jay-chung-q-takeki-maeda>.  
 9. *New Images*, March 2018, press release.



Top - *Display System: Suicide, Affirmation, Mediation* (detail), 2018;  
*Untitled* (details), *NEW IMAGES* installation view at Gaga, Mexico City, 2018.  
Courtesy: the artists and Gaga, Mexico City / Los Angeles. Photo: Omar Olguín

Bottom - *Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: the artists and Gaga, Mexico City / Los Angeles. Photo: Omar Olguín





separately structured cube-like rooms, with an even distribution of floor space—not dissimilar to the museological staging of the exhibition within divided galleries, as if to prevent aesthetic contamination, and to signal clear boundaries between eras, movements, individual artists, et cetera. The gesture of inserting walls, here, also reversed Michael Asher’s general tendency to “reveal”—through the removal of various fixtures, instruments, ceilings, and wall panels—the collusion between systems of knowledge and power embedded within the institution. In part due to the gallery’s modest size and lack of grandiosity, the temporary walls nevertheless emphasized the ease with which the modular trappings of said institutional systems can be transported “off-site,” to locations where their (ongoing) strategies are already in operation, if not exactly readily evident.

*Display System* also mirrored the strategies of the mid-century American television shows *The Dating Game* and *Let’s Make a Deal*, by sequestering three possible outcomes for the historical legacy of the avant-garde behind its various “doors”: *Suicide*, *Affirmation*, and *Mediation*. Sans-serif labels provided a send-up of Kelley’s histrionic wall-drawing-cum-commentary, only to less laughable, more sobering effect. Because if the exhibition’s title referred to the century-old<sup>10</sup> ambition to—sometimes even violently—abandon the old order for another imaginary, and usher in another era, then the gallery installation demanded some kind of action from its audience in reflecting on the same utopian possibility today: *Okay, what’s behind door number 1?*



Untitled, from the series *Outtakes and Excerpts*, 2009. Courtesy: the artists and Gaga, Mexico City / Los Angeles. Photo: Diego Berruecos



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While the question of *Suicide* may seem superficially extreme, its manifestation within a dominant culture of gun violence and active deployment as a political weapon are increasingly common.<sup>11</sup> In contemporary art its ramifications (in relation to decades of lonely sex tourism in Asia) have recently been analyzed by Richard Hawkins,<sup>12</sup> but here the implication refers to the group—specifically, anyone working under the influence of Western art history with a view to its radical dialecticism, and continuing to do so even after the many so-called “deaths” of art: painting, sculpture, Christopher D’Arcangelo, et cetera. Must art really go on?

The door to *Affirmation* hinges on Foster’s critical rereading of Bürger, in recovering an attitude or position for supposed avant-gardists despite the exact chronology of their historical emergence—that is, the (still) necessary task to “contest the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and expressive artist.”<sup>13</sup> Because there remains the double-edged possibility of avant-garde criticality instead producing “the actual affirmation of the cultural order concealed in its apparent withdrawal from it.”<sup>14</sup>

The trick at last played by Chung and Maeda is as classic as three-card monte, if only slightly more complicated. Because “behind” (but also in front of) *Mediation* the viewer finds the only space hung with artworks, or at least objects resembling contemporary artworks: on the external “gallery” wall a series of ten color photographs showing high-contrast, close-up underwater views (jaw, fins, gill slits) of a shark arranged into a tight two-by-five grid; within its chamber another smaller framed photograph of a (different) tiger shark from a more distant angle, seen swimming toward crepuscular rays—*god light*—filtering into the picture at the right-hand edge of the frame. Accompanying this visual material, a text available in the gallery reworked a story by British artist Damien Hirst on the conception of his famous 1991 sculpture *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, purchased by hedge fund manager Steven A. Cohen from Charles Saatchi in 2004 for an undisclosed sum (approximately twelve U.S. million dollars).

In other words, *New Images* describes the actual coping mechanisms that (conceptual and all other) artists have used to deal with anarchistic, art-historical “millenarianism” since at least the nineteenth century, a point also made by Rosalind Krauss several years before

10. M. H. J. Schoenmaekers, *Het nieuwe wereldbeeld* (Bussum, the Netherlands: Van Dishoeck, 1915).

11. See Jeffrey C. Mays, “Prominent Lawyer in Fight for Gay Rights Dies after Setting Himself on Fire in Prospect Park,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/nyregion/david-buckel-dead-fire.html>; Nikita Stewart and Luis Ferré-Sadurní, “Another Taxi Driver in Debt Takes His Life. That’s 5 in 5 Months,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/27/nyregion/taxi-driver-suicide-nyc.html>.

12. Richard Hawkins, *Hotel Suicide*, January 19–March 3, 2018, Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.

13. Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?,” 8–9.

14. Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?,” 12. For another take on contemporary legacies of Conceptual art, see Nizan Shaked, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was translated into English. The image itself need not be new, and surely it is something we have seen before—in life, in a dream, somewhere online. Through an elaborate conceptual strategy, then, Chung and Maeda's "answer" is simply that artistic investment may still be useful for demonstrating the relentless ideological capture of mimetic imagery, and the dangers of relying on appearance. The failure of the "new" is inevitable. And despite the romantic retroactive certainty of academic historians, contemporary artists have only an inherited history and an inherited reality to work with, whether or not "escape" is viable within a particular political moment—there is no *Deus in this machina*.



*Untitled* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artists and Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich

*New Images* continues Chung and Maeda's engagement with the quasi-institutional character of art historical narrativity also explored in their various projects on particular gallery histories—*Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda*, ESSEX STREET, New York, 2016; *Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda*, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2014; *The Teeth of the Gears*, Cabinet Gallery, London, 2011—and in the short film *Untitled* (2015), first shown in *Dull and Bathos* at Francesca Pia, Zurich, in 2015. A leisurely paced and seemingly lighthearted conversation unfolds across three "generations" as a trio of archetypal (white, male) artists play roundtable matches of ping-pong in a terribly lush, secluded outdoor setting:

There's no spirit of revolt, no new ideas appearing among the younger artists.

Each succeeding generation has bought the media's version of the previous. The end result is a loss of a sense of values.

When we look at these young artists, their work looks like Conceptual art, but they've probably never read a Buren essay, and they certainly don't have the critique that was developed there. It's the look rather than the substance. Of course, then you could say that's what happened to Daniel Buren. His work, I mean.

Drawing on a variety of almost-recognizable sources, the film script humorously works through claims of avant-garde criticality in a manner that recalls Andrea Fraser's conceptual cutup speech-striptease *Official Welcome* (2001/2003). Although rather than highlighting art's servility to figures of authority, Chung and Maeda show that recent art history itself is at worst a "century of condescension" replete with the skepticism toward youth that is particularly acute with regard to "millennials" in our current world-historical moment.

A further distancing effect in *Untitled* comes from its particularly jarring late-indie/mumblecore aesthetic. Chung and Maeda gave complete control of the work's visuals to Columbia University-trained filmmakers Lev Kalman and Whitney Horn (*L for Leisure* [2014]), providing them only with the script. As in many interdisciplinary encounters, the swiftness with which art's self-serious critical language disintegrates into elite snobbishness is extremely lucid. Here too, the "restaging" of narrative through an unexpected cast of characters reflects on the same conceptual trope in films by Douglas Huebler (*Second Generation Conceptual Artists* [1970]) and Christian Jankowski (*The Matrix Effect* [2000]).

The tension between text and image—insofar as both are representational—is endemic to the very history of (not only conceptual) art. By working consistently in this fissure between the two regimes, Chung and Maeda maintain and critique prior Conceptual art practices while avoiding the purgatory of contemporary postconceptualism—that is, contemporary art—the institution of which more and more resembles Slezkine's "bureaucratized millenarianism": "As the new regime settled down to wait, its most immediate tasks were to suppress the enemy, convert the heathen, and discipline the faithful."<sup>15</sup> By drawing attention to the mythico-poetical construction of the field of art history at large, Chung and Maeda affirm, but also advance, the ongoing failures of radical art "to withhold plastic-aesthetic appearance and come up with ever-renewed reductions emphasizing the reference to reality."<sup>16</sup> However goaded by the spectacular image-capture machinery of the current moment, the possibility to produce an "insincere"—that is, negative—expression also endures.



*Dull and Bathos* installation view at Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich, 2015. Courtesy: the artists and Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich

**Jay Chung And Q Takeki Maeda** were born in the United States and Japan, but live in Germany.

**Kari Rittenbach** is a critic and independent curator based in Brooklyn, New York.

15. Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government*, 273.

16. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Context—Function—Use Value: Michael Asher's Re-Materialization of the Artwork," in *Michael Asher*, ed. Jennifer King (Cambridge, MA: October Files, 2016), 22.