

frieze

June 2019

Sit With the Cool Kids? Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda Take on Art-World Micropolitics:
Their latest show at Kölnischer Kunstverein sees the post-conceptual duo bite into the exclusionary social realities of art
making
By Stanton Taylor



Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda, 'The Auratic Narrative', 2019, exhibition view, Kölnischer Kunstverein.
Courtesy: the artists and Kölnischer Kunstverein; photograph: Simon Vogel

Most artists who manage to pay their own rent are painfully aware of just how much their social network factors into their cultural and financial viability. They also know just how laboriously these networks need to be maintained, or even defended from unwanted incursions. Few artists, however, remind us of these conditions quite as directly as Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda do in their latest exhibition, 'The Auratic Narrative'. Visually aloof and snarkily evasive, theirs is an aesthetic of social distances, or aura as exclusion. Here, the age-old cafeteria shade of 'you can't sit with us' finds itself resurrected as latter-day post-conceptual art.

Conceived as a mid-career retrospective, 'The Auratic Narrative' spans the entire Kölnischer Kunstverein, presenting a selection of works from 2006 to the present. On the ground floor, visitors are greeted by a series of images so markedly indifferent – to paraphrase Jeff Wall – that they render the idea of individual authorship incoherent: standardised commercial portraits of white people, nondescript black and white images of early 20th-century furniture, random snapshots of strangers on the street. Of course, these works are far richer than they initially appear. The generic faces in the series 'Untitled' (2011), for example, are press photos of unsuccessful local politicians, while the beaming faces from the series 'Outtakes and Excerpts' (2009) were captured by a camera fitted with a smile-seeking algorithm. But, in the absence of any explanatory information, visitors unwilling to google these details are likely to leave none the wiser.

Though the inscrutability of some works can make the show feel unapproachable, Chung and Maeda are not without a sense of humour. *Untitled* (2015/2018) is a modest frame with a necklace and two A4 prints peeling off a matte board, which document an exhibition about a series of sketchy emails their New York gallerist, Maxwell Graham, sent to clients upon leaving his former job. On the top floor, the audio piece *The Teeth of the Gears* (2011) recounts the belittlements a young dealer endures as he courts a filmmaker's favour, while the vulnerable voice we hear is ostensibly the artists' London

gallerist. At their most charming, Chung and Maeda approach a kind of institutional critique in which critique verges on gossip and the institution is their peers.

Consequently, the most compelling piece is the titular four-part wall text *The Auratic Narrative* (2019): a disarmingly honest, if at times indulgent, monologue collaged together from recent, noteworthy art-world writings. Deceptively personal in tone, it paints a collective portrait of an unnamed but presumably identifiable segment of the Berlin via Frankfurt via New York art world. It is a community under siege, we are told, 'desperately clinging to one another for safety' in dark times, a network that 'acts as a sort of barricade...though against what enemy I admit I don't actually know'. As the exhibition's sole wall text, *The Auratic Narrative* shifts the focus away from the individual authors and towards a community at large. Though it doesn't mention any particular works, for some, it is clear about who exactly this work is for.

Like many post-conceptual artists who took off in the early 2000s, Chung and Maeda excel at transfiguring mundane artefacts into artworks via a dazzling web of narrative. Though in refusing to disclose the complexity of specific works to the uninitiated, the exhibition demotes its objects to the status of memorabilia manufactured for a highly selective fan club. Perhaps that's all art is anyway; perhaps this is the inevitable conclusion of the self-demystification alluded to in the press release. But, since you have to already know what they're talking about to know what they're talking about, what could there possibly be left to demystify?