

## ***Sneakerotics: Further materials for a theory of the young-girl***

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Modern Hong Kong nightlife began with the California Restaurant in 1983. It then expanded to fill the neighbourhood surrounding the California Tower. The karaoke scene was dominated by California Red until it was finally acquired by a competitor in 2010. The soundtrack to Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express* famously includes "California Dreaming". Suburban gated community Palm Springs (California Garden in Chinese) is oriented around the main thoroughfare of Santa Monica Avenue. California Beach Club offers sunless tanning. California Fitness is a subsidiary of 24 Hour Fitness, itself headquartered in San Ramon, California. A recent analysis of "Missed Connections"<sup>1</sup> data suggested that 24 Hour Fitness is the most common location for such tragicomic classified listings in the state of California. Back in Hong Kong, the major BBS HK-Golden included, until the great censorship purge of 2013, a sub-forum dedicated to how-to guides posted on picking up women—namely the underemployed and, needless to say, highly coveted mistresses of powerful businessmen kept in luxury apartments—in the gyms of a certain residential complex that, incidentally, happens to be at the centre of the city's under-construction cultural district.

With the exhibition "Sneakerotics" I hope to propose a position with regard to the parallel life of the California dream in Hong Kong: fitness, as an aesthetic category, comes to act as a site of investigation for the circulation of imagery and desire. California is, in Asia, best represented not by the freeways, canyons, surf breaks, palm trees, and Hollywood signs that define it in the American imagination, but rather by specific visual cultures like the gym and the parking lot. Both are runways for the display of bodies, perhaps not unlike the well-lit gallery spaces along Pedder Street and Queen's Road in Central Hong Kong. These cultures of display—a turn of phrase that has occasionally been commandeered to consider curatorial practice and its forebears—constitute a form of pornography in that, as architectural and social environments, they intend to reveal the specific contours of the body and persona in their entirety. Abandoning the erotic play of the hidden or partially visible, in the gym it is not only the size and shape of specific parts of the body that are intended to be revealed, but also the training and production of the same, drawing a graph on which the derivative is as visible as the function. By transposing artefacts of the gym into the gallery space, we double the will to visibility shared across these cultural worlds and subject each to the pornographic gaze of the other, allowing the display of display to overshadow the display of the body. The body, here, is absent.

For this exhibition, I looked broadly into how media imagery touches on the connection between fitness and sexuality across cultures, and how these culturally specific relationships might be warped and reconfigured through artistic practice in a way that may ultimately prove more cosmopolitan than its

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<sup>1</sup> Listings in newspapers or on websites such as Craigslist where people can write in and say that they were attracted to someone on the street or in a public place but didn't exchange contact information, thus giving the other party an opportunity to do so.

multinational sources. While earlier corporate visions of Hong Kong's California were tied to marketing initiatives, it is now the internet that has become the cultural sphere in which we can imagine the most interaction between these two categories of places. Net culture allows for a space in which imagery from, say, Los Angeles and Hong Kong could mix without anyone really knowing or caring where it comes from—even if there is a reductive geographic specificity to the generic imaginary that moves back and forth between these two poles. Here the global spread and transformation of an imagined "California lifestyle" is about yoga, spandex, smoothies, sneakers, spinning, and aerobics; this is a distributed imagination of a centre without a centre. We are gathering a thick stack of territorial references that mirror the density of the exhibition: the gym, the gallery, and the internet. And, of course, we must add to this pile the fact that California and Hong Kong are both described as "dense" spaces, albeit for superficially different reasons. Where Hong Kong is vertically dense, a veritable forest of commercial and residential skyscraper towers arrayed along a thin strip of concrete between mountain and sea, southern California defines the American standard of horizontal density, packed town to town along the coast and house to house along suburban tract plots. Both, in their own ways, are decentered geographies.

Research for this exhibition began with the assumption that mechanisms of transmission like the internet allow for the circulation of imagery that borders on the generic, resulting in the lowest common denominator graphics of waves and palm trees that define the corporate gym's Asian fantasy of California—or the exotic red-lantern-laden decor of Chinatown in Los Angeles. There is, however, a fierce pride that attends regional identity, particularly where artistic practice is concerned. Artists Niko Karamyan and Tierney Finster, for instance, are particularly interested in subverting this notion of a uniform or domineering global imaginary of gym culture, and instead are focused on the unique "characters" that mark their experience of particular gyms around LA. Their process began with the observation that the display of the body at the gym, when it becomes a social or potentially romantic activity, often precludes the physical actuality of working out, and so began shooting models on workout machines in full makeup. Even if these individual figures are quintessentially Californian, however, the archetype of the aerobic class beauty queen is a broader category that drifts and expands across borders. Petra Cortright, in her series "SO WET / NIGHT HEAT" (2011), isolates in digital prints on silk other constituent elements of the California vision, including palm trees and succulent plants against a clear blue sky. Her focus, however, is on the more universal (or at least less regionally-specific) issues of digital media and painting; in Hong Kong, her compositions stand as windows onto a distant space.

That the category of the generic image might play a key role in these investigations derives in part from the theoretical treatise *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* authored by the radical French collective Tiqqun. It must be made immediately clear that the young-girl does not refer in any way to a gendered "young girl". Instead, according to Tiqqun, "the Young-Girl is simply the *model citizen* as redefined by consumer society." Although the text was originally intended to function as

something of an analytical manifesto of the subjectification of the post-postmodern consumer, in reality it is perhaps most useful as a series of poetic statements that romanticise the position of the young-girl as much as they critique it: “The young-girl resembles her photo.” “The tomboy is indispensable as a kind of modernity.” “Youth and Femininity, hypostatized, abstract, and recoded into *youthitude* and *feminitude*, are then elevated to the rank of ideal regulators of empire-citizen integration, and the figure of the Young-Girl thus realizes an immediate, spontaneous, and perfectly desirable unity between those two variables.” If nothing else, Los Angeles and Hong Kong are perhaps the two hemispheric poles of this culture, and the gyms are their temples. Tiqqun takes great pains to make clear that the figure of the young-girl is a generic one, inhabited by all members of society in their individualised form: “young” because this is the stage of life in which the individual is a non-productive, purely-consuming actor; and “girl” because this is the role in which the individual has the potential to reproduce this system in a domestic, non-productive environment.

Alongside this quality of the universal let us read the work of *Body by Body*, a collaborative effort described as a “band but with visual art” formed by Melissa Sachs and Cameron Soren. Their practice, which often evokes the role of stock imagery and the redeployment of specific cultural archetypes in unexpected places, reflects the generic nature of the young-girl as a consumer of images. Here, they contribute a rug from “The Angel Collection” (2013) printed with the image of a bodybuilding guardian angel, a mash-up of various “micro-genres” discovered on concept art portfolio websites—both generic and achingly specific. If the category of the generic relies on the logic of the genre, then the notion of the mash-up explored here also draws directly on the music industry and its own patterns of online circulation. NGUZUNGUZU, the collaborative effort of Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda, is best known for work taking the form of live DJ sets and mixes, all of which often circulate through art world channels. While their sound is perhaps indicative of the schizophrenic global nature of LA, their approach to performance constitutes a genre in its own right. Composing “Crunch Time” (2013), a performance involving an idealised soundtrack for the gym that is derived, in part, from the actual soundscape of the gym, they also populate the exhibition space with a full-length mirror and, as one might assume, a bodybuilder to make use of it. At the core of this project is the notion of limits: as the athlete can only perform to a certain weight and length of time, the performance must end at a particular point. Jeremy Everett approaches this question perhaps more obliquely, by attempting to vacuum the floor of Death Valley. Pushing his tools to the point of failure, he does so until the vacuum breaks. Everett also contributes to this exhibition a pair of crystallised porn magazines, implementing a limit to visibility (and pleasure) even as he exhausts the materiality of his practice.

Sterling Crispin, too, is interested in the limits of the body. “Territory” (2013), a triptych produced in holographic media developed by the American military, depicts across all three panels a three-dimensional scan of the artist’s face against the background of a landscape consisting of his torso. Exposing himself to tangible bodily harm due to the instability of the scanning process, this element of

danger points also to the military origins of the imaging techniques utilised here, reflecting the realities of an industry that has had almost as much influence over the visual imaginary of southern California as the better known film industry. Of course, the digital mapping of the body—and hence its conversion into a generic image for circulation online—defines its limits in one way, but the training of the body demanded by military service might be transferred even more directly onto the culture of training and self-improvement cultivated in the commercial gym. Lauren Elder, too, is interested in the measurement of the body, and how its limits might be reflected in sculptural practice. By laser-cutting sterile graphic icons onto the surface of gym floor mats and a reflective surface hung on the wall, Elder creates an environment in which the body might be measured against a more generic, external standard—even a multinational one. Just as the body promised in the typical gym advertisement is an empty, idealised descendent of Leonardo da Vinci's perfectly proportioned Vitruvian Man, so the artist here offers foam dumbbells that, almost weightless, allow anyone to "measure up".

As has already been suggested, this dedication to the culture of the gym borders on the experience of organised religion, although its spiritual aspects are certainly debatable. Spencer Longo explores these cultic qualities of the fitness regimen through the creation of an installation that threatens to disintegrate at any moment, living only in the posterity of circulated photographic imagery. He has collected several tins of Herbalife supplement powder, a brand with an extremely dedicated following that is sold through a direct marketing system rather than openly on the market; while many swear by it, outsiders often regard it as a scam of one sort or another. Longo then arranges these "magic" powders over reflexology tiles, which—although many Hong Kong gym bodies may disagree—embody for the artist a similar degree of belief without knowledge. This notion of the profane spiritual experience appears again in the work of Maha Saab, whose body of work revolves around a dream in which Sol Lewitt showed her a book entitled "The Sect of Sects of All Religions," which included an image of Usain Bolt's gold Puma sneakers next to a strange font, among other things. Saab's paintings, drawings, and collages use shoelaces and other materials to make lines exploring the metaphysical connections between Bolt's graceful athleticism and the minimal sculpture of Lewitt, reworking two-dimensional depictions of movement to map the coastlines of our experiences of three-dimensional space. While the artist's practice typically involves the subjectivity of mark-making, this reference to motion through space seems to position this particular series firmly within the temples of fitness.

The dominant religion of Los Angeles, for better or worse, is Hollywood. As much as the art world has crafted its own visual culture independent of reference to this situation, the film industry retains a potentially annoying presence in the background. For Vincent Szarek, however, this style is synonymous with what it means to visualise LA; the artist often produces ultra-slick sculptural objects of the sort often outsourced to large fabrication houses, but does so completely by hand—a fetish to finish rather than a finish fetish. While his practice often develops outsize installations that look like they rolled directly off of a film set, he presents here a gentler diptych entitled "90 Lbs." (2013), consisting of two barbell

weights rendered in glossy black urethane. There is an abiding love for this “cheesy” aesthetics, and it is often able to bridge the gap between screen and gallery cultures. The Culver City design and media firm Gentleman Scholar, who developed the brilliant “seapunk” font that introduced the title sequence for Harmony Korine’s 2012 film “Spring Breakers”, has retooled this typeface with a bit of equally cheesy slang: “GETSWOLE” (2013), which may as well be the motto for this exhibition project in general. Produced in the vocabulary of neon signs that unites the Sunset Strip with Nathan Road, the phrase will illuminate the Hong Kong night.

Net culture, Hollywood, and the military aside, the exhibition is bookended quite simply—as the title suggests—with two sets of sneakers. Anna Rosen’s series “Skechers Shape-Ups Work” (2012-2013) departs from the advertising claims of the titular sneakers, which turn the choice of shoes into a “productive exercise”. By placing the useless components of deconstructed sneakers within the compositions of her paintings, the artists encourages the objects to continue their useful lives, allowing them to continue “working” as parts of her “work”. Here, three paintings call on a fabricated mythology of dancing, the Biodome, and extraterrestrial visitors, all of which are depicted in a predominantly duochromatic palette derived from the blue and green colour schemes of the Skechers sneakers. Approaching the productive value of shoes from another direction, Clarissa Tossin’s “Converse” (2009) consists of a pair of canvas sneakers that have been disassembled and reconstructed inside-out, all after having been worn practically threadbare while following the paths worn over time by pedestrians criss-crossing between the formal architectural features of Brasilia. This is not the first time the sneaker has appeared in Tossin’s work; in “Ladrão de Tênis” (2009) she made plaster casts of the interiors of sneakers as a memorial, of sorts, to youths murdered for their shoes.

Somewhere in the space between these two concepts of the “work” that a sneaker can do—displayed in place of a body or displaying a body, as a productive form of consumption or as a consumed form of production—we locate the position of the young-girl. Although not all of the artists in this exhibition are based in Los Angeles, there is a certain frequency of resonance between Hong Kong and LA that is made evident within this particular Hong Kong fantasy of California; these are temples to the generic values of youth, consumption, and display. “The Young-Girl is the commodity that insists on being consumed, at every instant, because at every instant she becomes more obsolete. ... The Young-Girl is the one who has preferred to *become* a commodity, rather than passively suffer its tyranny.”