

# YU CHENG-TA *FAMEME*

Welcome to the Museum of Durian, where the rotten stench of the fabled fruit pumps through the air filtration system, aggressively neon-orange merchandise scales the walls, and the clock ticks with each flashing light from a glitzy photobooth. Located on busy Canal Street in Downtown New York, the museum was the brick-and-mortar manifestation of Taiwanese artist Yu Cheng-Ta's Performa 19 Commission. A giant garish inflatable of the export and a ball pit (filled with faux fruits) were among the highlights of this made-for-Instagram display. Yu's presentation riffed on the success of the Museum of Ice Cream, an experience which opened in 2016 just a few blocks away in SoHo, and continued to attract more than 500,000 annual visitors and thirty corporate sponsors for years after its debut. A serving of the crop, considered the stinkiest fruit in the world (public consumption and transport of the plant are banned throughout Southeast Asia), would finally be as coveted a treat as a scoop of ice cream.

This was all thanks to the fictional character of *FAMEME*, the Museum of Durian's poster boy brought to life by Yu Cheng-Ta for the occasion. *FAMEME*'s backstory was that of an Asian billionaire farmer who had come to New York City with a mission of promoting the regional delicacy as a "superfood," the trendy buzzword applied by marketers to boost undervalued vegetables like kale by overpromising on their health benefits. Dubious marketing strategies have been the subject of Yu's work before, most notably in his film project *Tell Me What You Want* (2015-17), which followed local panhandlers who made money by offering suspicious night-time services, such as motorcycle rides through the red-light district of Malate in Manila to vacationers. The artist explored these clandestine transactions between East and West and exposed the inherent sexual undertone of modern capitalism's exchanges.

Yu Cheng-Ta is to *FAMEME* as Clark Kent is to Superman: a thinly veiled alter ego enacted by just the slightest change of costume. Once dressed in his flashy red suit, "I♥NY" t-shirt, high-top Converse sneakers, and red cat-eye sunglasses, Yu Cheng-Ta embodies his new identity, a flamboyant and gregarious celebrity, playing in the crosscurrents between persona and artist, fantasy and reality.

*FAMEME*, whose name combines the words *fame* and *meme*, shamelessly touted durian around town, soliciting social media followers and rattling off viral hashtags such as #bigapplebigdurian and #mesothorny, posing with anyone who crossed his path. Yu's work often involves playful interactions with audience members and passers-by, creating what the artist calls *life theater*, mockumentary style.

Organized by  
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The Museum of Durian  
and Times Square

November 2-24, 2019

*FAMEME*'s charade related to another provocateur: the iconic Hong Kong-born, East Village photographer Tseng Kwong Chi of the 1980s. Posted to Instagram, *FAMEME*'s slew of selfies channeled the only emotionally charged portrait in Chi's *East Meets West* black-and-white photo series, in which he staged himself as a visitor donning a "Mao suit" and jumping in jubilation in front of the Brooklyn Bridge. With this comparison in mind, the glee of *FAMEME*'s images begins to spoil and the sarcastic consumerist undertones come to the surface. Has the power of branding led to our mindless acceptance of cultural stereotypes? *FAMEME*'s over-the-top showmanship ultimately revealed identities to be easily reduced to packaged performances, bought and consumed, for better or for worse.

In a final climax of fame-chasing, *FAMEME* took us on a jaunt to Times Square, the most popular tourist site in NYC, for his "big reveal." His music-video streamed across the massive digital billboards at Father Duffy Square. Then, in real time, one of his songs boomed from surround-sound speakers while a flash mob broke out, with the character leading an army of pom pom-waving cheerleaders. A bewildered crowd gathered and succumbed to *FAMEME*'s frenzy: New fans and followers were easily won over by the impersonator-influencer. BRITTANY RICHMOND



