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Q&A with Germaine Koh Tuesday, February 17, 2009



Germaine Koh is a Canadian visual artist, based in Vancouver. Exhibited internationally, her work is concerned with the "significance of everyday actions, familiar objects and common places." Her recent pieces are currently on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Charles H. Scott Gallery in Vancouver. For further information on Germaine Koh, visit her website [here](#).

Linus of Artsy!Dartsy!: Thank you Germaine for agreeing to speak with us. At a recent lecture hosted by the Vancouver Art Gallery, you described your works as "plugging into...existing systems". An example being the Fair-weather forces (sun:light) in which an interior space's lighting is "directly" controlled by the exterior natural lighting condition in real time. What inspired you to this exploration of this nature? What "systems" interest you?

Germaine Koh: The work at the VAG is part of a larger series of architectural interventions that all use some kind of technical apparatus to bring built space into alignment or relationship with the natural world outside – sunlight here, and in other cases wind speed or the tide level in a nearby body of water. In this way these works partake of some basic principles in my work, such as attempting to be attentive to the world around us, focusing on the present moment, being open to large but possibly imperceptible processes beyond our control, and so on. In this view, our human systems are seen as part of a larger ecosystem.



Above: Fair-weather forces - wind speed (2002). Photo by artist.

My work has called on many other aspects of the systems around us, such as communications, social interactions, commonplace technologies, everyday patterns of use and behaviour, local economies, and so on. I don't pretend to be an expert about any of them. Rather, my work has the character of open-ended experiments designed in response to, and unfolding within, existing situations.

L: Your piece "Fallow" has been installed at different locations (Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2005; Currently at Charles H Scott Gallery). If it is correct that audiences respond to/understand the piece differently, how are they different?

GK: The context for those two presentations of Fallow were quite different, so they are perhaps bound to be understood differently. Berlin is a city that is currently marked by vast stretches of vacant land, which to my mind serve a kind of memorial function, marking the absence of former buildings and holding the place for others that will be built in some unknown future. Vancouver, on the other hand, is a city that until recently was experiencing rapacious real estate development, so that vacant land bore quite a different premium. In Vancouver Fallow is also installed in a gallery situated on a man-made island, and hosts the ground cover from another area of reclaimed land. Besides these social dissimilarities between the cities, the physical effect of the different spaces is also bound to be different, and the land will settle in uniquely in any space based on its particular layout and dynamics Those absorbing and overwhelming

sensual effects are really central to the experience of the piece. The character of the local soil itself creates different effects; even the weeds in Vancouver are more lush than their Berlin counterparts.



Above: Transferring ground cover from Great Northern Way to Charles H Scott Gallery for "Fallow". Photo by Daniel Oates-Kuhn.

L: You made an interesting remark regarding architecture as "inert", which I find compelling because it is probable that there are architects out there would object to your remark due to a belief in architecture's capacity for social change and/or its necessity "to delight". Could you elaborate on that?

GK: That was probably an impolitic choice of words on my part, in the moment. What I was trying to get at was that the legal and professional constraints that architects have to act within in order to make buildings that function and don't fall down, often seem incompatible with ideas of changeability, malleability, permeability, and so on. Sure, some architects have attempted to design spaces capable of change, but the very practical requirements for permanence and durability are pretty overwhelming. In the talk, my comments about the inertia of architecture were also made with an acknowledgement of the relative "luxury" (another word that could perhaps be misunderstood) of being an artist making temporary interventions into existing structures, without the need to design the criticality out of one's gesture.



Above: Shell (2005). Photo by artist.

L: Thank you Germaine and congratulation on your recent shows! I look forward to speak to you again in the near future.

GK: Cheers!

For further information on Germaine Koh, visit www.germainekoh.com.

Below: "Fallow", 2009 version, soil and plant matter transplanted from nearby vacant land; as installed at Charles H Scott Gallery, 3 February-8 March 2009. Photo by Germaine Koh.





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