

germaine koh

5 July to 24 August 1997

Agnes Etherington Art Centre
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario

PERSONAL

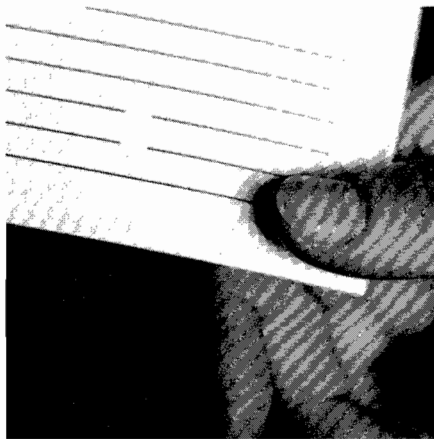
THE STUBBORN GRACE OF THE PARTICULAR¹

Jan Allen

The constitution of intimacy, of the personal, is a primary function of the social conventions that govern with whom and under what circumstances we may reveal, share, and exchange the inner workings of our lives. Germaine Koh's art projects address the changing paradigm of the personal in Western culture. Her use of the banal and the discarded as avenues of meaning proposes the personal as a last sanctuary of connection to others.

These works draw you in, each project so understated, so slight and ordinary, it might well be overlooked. Germaine Koh's work is high impact, but slow release. Its effects are cumulative: like hormone therapy, it lingers and blossoms with new relevance week by week. For example, *Exchange* (1996), a set of standard white business cards, each bearing the open lines of an I Ching hexagram, at first seemed mildly amusing. But Koh's fusion of divination with the ubiquitous exchange of contact information profoundly changes the way I view this small ritual of business and professional life. The promise (or hope) of future contact is enmeshed in the thrust of cosmic forces; it is neither insular nor innocent. Perhaps because each project in Koh's oeuvre consists, most of all, of gesture or process, of a logic laid bare through displacement, these works spark a heightened awareness of the loaded nature of everyday acts.

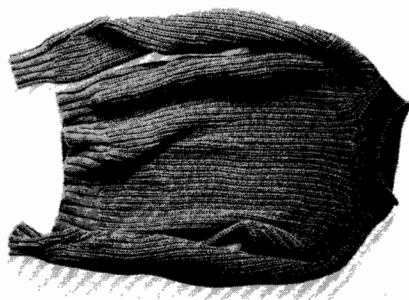
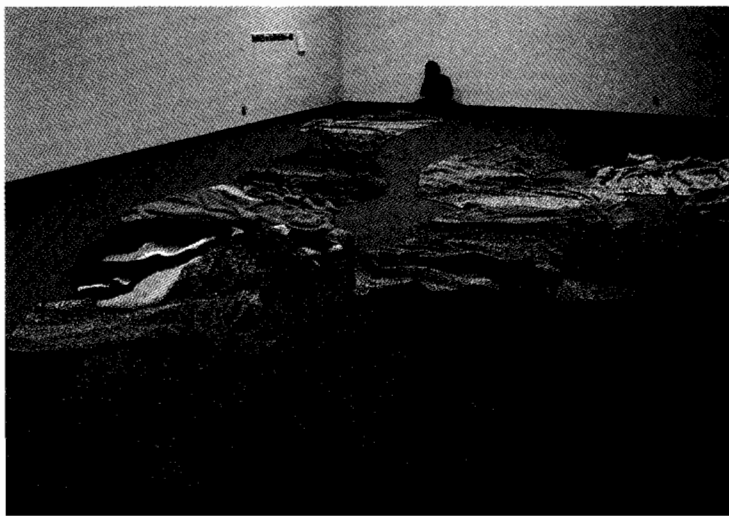
Superficially, Koh's accumulating body of art is diverse, from the courtroom sketches of incidental activity in *Witness* (1995–96) to the manic overproduction of *Knitwork* (ongoing since 1992) and the diaristic



Exchange, 1996,
unlimited edition
business cards, each
bearing one of sixty-
four hexagrams.

real time and space. It is a form that draws on Fluxus actions, Minimalist seriation, Conceptual practices, and the well established convention of the artist's multiple. While a frame is offered by any particular exhibition or presentation of Koh's work, the gesture of the work, of each project, exceeds this frame temporally and spatially. The impulse or logic remains consistent in, for example, the accumulation of stitches in *Knitwork*, a massive blanket of reused yarn from unravelled sweaters, or the ongoing production and distribution of the postcards based on found snapshots in *Sightings*. The principle of extension may be internal to the work: *Self-portrait*, for example, consists of a series of self-portraits over-painted on a single board in layered states since 1994.

The device of extension in Germaine Koh's art emphasizes the work as a vector of meaning. The dissemination built into several of the projects, such as *Sightings* or *Exchange*, is congruent with the convention of communication addressed. These works yearn to circulate beyond the hot-house environment of the art world: Koh envisions *Sightings* distributed in the postcard racks of corner stores and tourist stops, a situation approximated in the AEAC show, where the piece stands across from the reception desk for the attention of the summer's tide of tourists and convention visitors.²



Knitwork, ongoing since 1992, used garments with photographic and text documentation, installation performance at Yukon Art Centre, 1995.



Koh's work entails circulation, use and re-use, rather than mere proliferation; materials are reworked and re-presented in ways that maintain their connection with the everyday. The work of art becomes a record of movement, evidence of the passage of individuals, of someone's sweater in *Knitwork*, of "don't worry guy" in *Memento* or "couch boy" in *Sightings*, and, not least, of Koh's own action in each project. She carefully documents, for example, the place and date that the source image was found on the backs of the *Sightings* postcards. This task of rescue and reactivation amounts to an endearing insistence on the significance of the lost moments and individual lives that slip through the coarse net of history. These minutiae are, after all, history's matrix: what is history but a story told and retold, changing as a new lineage of events emerges into significance?³



Self-portrait, on-going since 1994, seventh state, oil on board with photo documentation of previous states.

The reuse, revaluation, or discard of things parallels the movement of ideas and the shifting lens of comprehension. Koh's *Lumber* (1991–94), consisting of scrap wood scavenged from streets and dumpsters, glazed grey and lined upright along the gallery wall, is a material presence that has special resonance when exhibited at the Ottawa Art Gallery.⁴ It speaks to the city's history as a rough-and-tumble timber town; the settlement that began as a node in the passage of log booms is now, as national capital, a node of political power, and as such continues to be engaged in cycles of extraction, use, discard, and reuse. There is, too, in this piece a pathos and grandeur in a presentation of the harvested waste

of urban life: an orderly mass of shattered two-by-fours thus accumulated has, like the *Sightings* images, compelling particularity.

Extension entails a refusal to recognize limits; as an operant principle in Koh's work, it may take the form of surfeit that denies function. Although Koh documents the various states of *Self-portrait* photographically, the successive paintings are obliterated by over-painting such that the mutations of self and self-perception supersede the genre of the stable self-portrait. There is a similar denial of rational limits in *Knitwork*, in which old cardigans and pullovers are transformed into the animal weight of a vast extended blanket. As it passes the proportions of a bed cover or even that of a gigantic scarf, it becomes a colourful beast of excess production. Yarn and knitting speak of domestic comfort, and irrational scale gives *Knitwork* a comic presence, but the piece is essentially aggressive. Its refusal to stop growing — or rather Koh's commitment to continue knitting — refers not only to the glut of Western production and consumption, but to cancer and political revolutions, states likewise defined by their refusal of limits. It also affirms the grace of the continuous present in that the accumulation of stitches is a metaphor for the incidental actions that accrue into the larger patterns of our lives. In *Knitwork* and *Lumber*, the artist uses Minimalist form as a vehicle for the incremental processes of the everyday.

Displacement

A second device shaping Koh's practice is displacement, a substitution of unexpected content for expected that reveals the nature of both the form and the content. The postcards of *Sightings* and the business cards of *Exchange* are slight physical objects,



Lumber, 1991–94,
wood, enamel, oil
and varnish,
installation at
Ottawa Art Gallery.

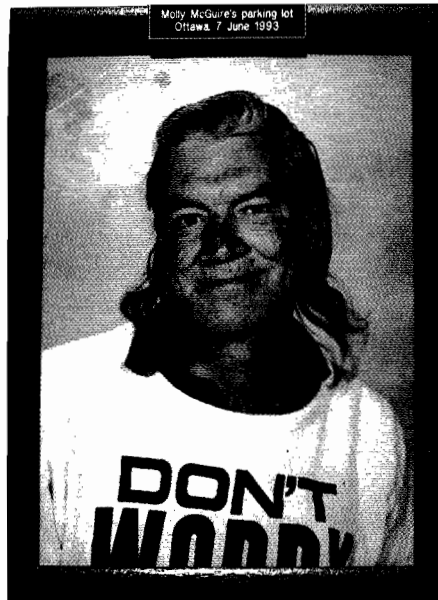
in both cases rectangular cards of conventional dimensions bearing symbolic content and fulfilling social function through circulation. The displacement of content — the image of day-care toddlers for that of an urban monument in *Sightings* or the enigmatic hexagram for business identification in *Exchange* — has a poetic weight that brings attention not only to the function of these exchanges, but to the rigid conventions that shape their content in daily life. Koh's projects propose, in a quiet and humorous way, that other images or information may well be more worthy of exchange.

Sightings mimics the form of the souvenir postcard and skews its content by carrying images from found amateur snapshots. The work disrupts the space conventionally occupied by vacuous images of public gardens and monuments, mountain landscapes, or aerial views of major urban centres. Many of the *Sightings* images are not only banal, they are damaged or otherwise unsuccessful, out-of-focus,

overexposed, and incidental end-of-roll shots. Their content is so inanely commonplace and personal, so deeply specific, that they cross into the territory of the profoundly generic — not the digested genericism of mass culture, but a refreshing one extracted from the cracks of represented culture. Koh's strategy of revelatory displacement is reminiscent of that used in Stan Douglas' *Television Spots* (1987–88), a series of brief video clips of mundane, life-paced incidents intended for insertion in broadcast television.

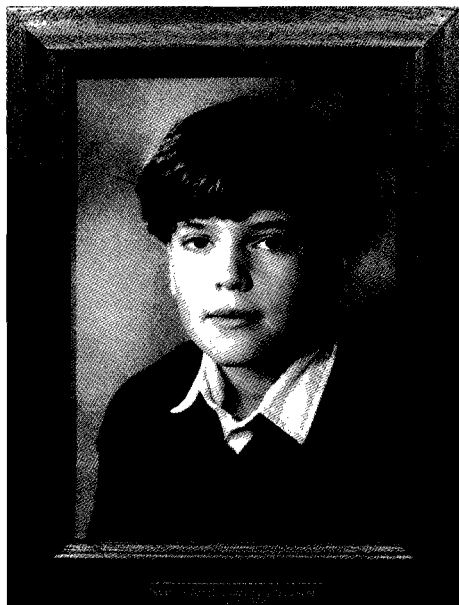
Memento is based on wallet-sized portrait photos, lost or abandoned images that Koh reproduces and frames with little

Memento, 1995,
framed colour
photograph with
trophy plaque.



brass plaques bearing a date and place name of unknown significance. As the artist points out, "There is a certain unease in these trophy-like captions, which could refer to the finding — or loss — of either the actual person or the photo, or to some other noteworthy moment." The frames are the off-the-shelf variety commonly used for family portraits, baby snaps, and school photos. The insertion of photos of strangers in the presentation mode reserved for family and friends suggests they might readily act as surrogates. There is a hint of the memorial too, especially in those, like "Evan," that are identified by a personal name. The relationship with the viewer is further complicated by the availability of these anonymous portraits for "sale," an offer that entails a bizarre presumption of their intrinsic desirability. Koh's re-presentation of these images is a gesture that calls up the false memories/simulated pasts implanted in *Blade Runner* replicants, memories for which staged snapshots provided visual evidence. The *Memento* project makes a subtly poignant and disturbing proposal of the interchangeability of lives.⁵

Personal Messages (ongoing since 1995), in which the artist inserts anonymous journal entries in the Personal section of classified ads in the daily newspaper, displaces the declarative voice with introspective and diaristic musings. Koh's messages offer mundane observations on daily life that signal intimacy in their assumption of familiarity; their condensed form mimics the truncated language of the classified notice, but, as the sampling below suggests, rather than seeking transactions, they seem by their very banality to solicit an empathetic response.



Memento, 1995,
framed colour
photograph with
trophy plaque.

96.2.7 Things went smoothly in Halifax. I tried to be outgoing. I'm getting a bit better, I think.

96.2.28 Mom's birthday. She hasn't even called since we moved. I guess I'll have to call her, as usual.

96.3.25 I bleached the tips of my hair blonde yesterday. It looks fabulous. I feel lovely.

96.4.8 I picked another fight last night. Why do I do it? I've been forgiven, as always.

96.4.15 E is in mad love and G wants to buy a house. We are all settling down, except Dad.

96.4.22 M is back on the May project. Relief — I thought she disapproved of me. Drink wine tonight.

Most of the ads placed in the Personal Messages section of the *Ottawa Citizen* refer to family, friends, living conditions, insecurities and resolutions for self-improvement. Koh writes about the project:

Instead of signalling or aiming at events (whether potential commercial transactions, lived milestones or hoped-for encounters), I employ the real time and repetition embedded in the newspaper to relate little but the passing of time, gently magnifying its banality and arguing for the monumentality of daily (pre-)occupations.⁶

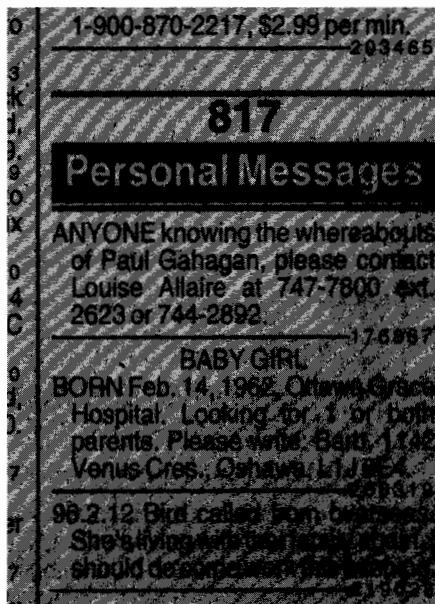
The complete absence, in this context, of urgency or persuasion involves the chance reader in the small dramas of daily life of the unknown author. This appeal is augmented by the extremely cryptic nature of the passages, a quality that opens them to wide interpretation. The messages seem most of all to function as a plaintive record of existence, calling to mind On Kawara's *I Got Up* postcards (1968–79) and *I Am Still Alive* telegrams in their condensed iteration of the central constituents of human existence.

Labour

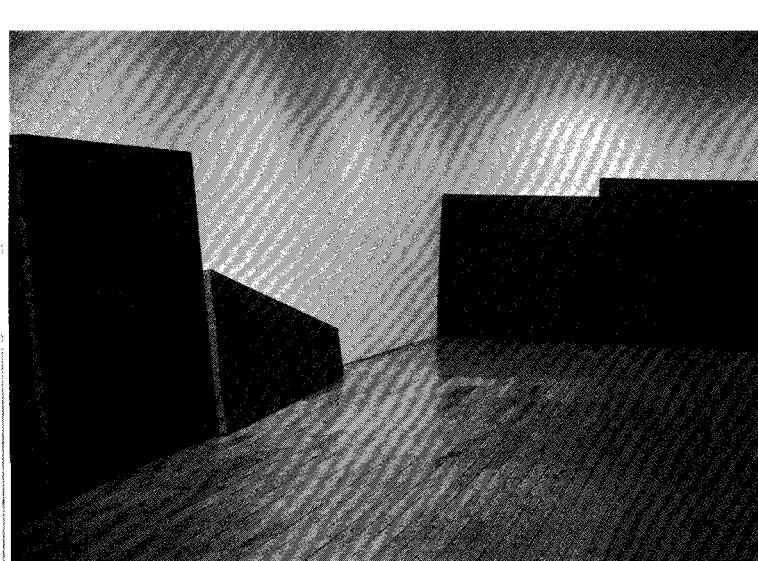
Another element of Koh's practice that deserves mention is labour: as a record of action, Koh's projects embody an exercise of will. The impact of their logic is boosted by the viewer's recognition of the effort entailed in their realization, a factor most readily apparent in *Knitwork*. The sheer scale of the piece — at present nearly sixty metres in length — is evidence of the labour of its making, a facet emphasized by the in-gallery performances in which Koh continues its production, knitting cross-legged on the floor.⁷ The disciplined distillation of daily life in *Personal Messages* is a less obvious form of labour, but the continuation of the project over a period of years speaks of a work(wo)man-like commitment to following a course of logic once laid down. Daniel Sharp has written eloquently about the logic of labour in relation to Koh's *International Code of Signals Paintings* (1990–91), a group of forty paintings based on the international marine alphabet and code:

These paintings are fundamentally about the possibility of work, about freedom, about how to act (work, paint) in the face of unceasing and relentless systems of signification. In contemplating this installation of paintings in the gallery, the viewer is met with not merely defaced signs, erasure and deflection, but a peculiarly anonymous, anxious production.⁸

Although Koh's work is not without personality, a considered neutrality is maintained such that the willful gesture of conception and making dominates its meaning. This neutrality is a form of self-effacement: the preponderance of labour in the work



Personal Messages, ongoing since 1995, classified ads in the *Ottawa Citizen*.



*International Code
of Signals Paintings,
1990–91.*

common experiences and the impulse to share them with others. Through decisively low-tech means, the work mirrors a widespread appetite for exchanging the minutiae of personal life. Tell-all talk shows thrive on the angst and seamy revelations of utterly ordinary strangers, and on-line chat groups share the most intimate details of everything from vacation planning to diet and post-partum depression. E-mail initiated friendships, especially among those under 25, are becoming increasingly common. There is a boom in production of diaristic Web sites and zines, while phone-sex services and psychic hot-lines do a roaring trade.¹⁰ Real-time feed from minicams allows Web users to participate remotely in the life of a stranger. There seems to be no limit to this craving for vicarious banality: one site features the feed from a camera installed in the subject's bedroom. The camera is always on; to prevent any confusion, the host provides a notice that explains, "If the screen is dark, I am asleep."

Koh's works participate in this circulation of desire, but with a clear difference in their rejection of the hype of fantasy, glamour, and airbrushed sales pitches. In a culture snared in commercial overdrive, the allure of the everyday as it is presented in these projects is nothing less than shocking.

entails submission to process in the interest of generating a shared space of uncertainty or potentiality. It also serves to blur the distinction between art making and the activities of daily life.⁹ The application of repetitive, rules-based process in Koh's art undermines linear or positivist notions of time in favour of an unfolding perpetual present.

Personal

Germaine Koh's projects posit a particular relationship between individual and society in that they suggest that the public sphere today consists not of a communal grand narrative but of accumulated

The found snapshots used in *Sightings* and *Memento* — the "soft porn" shot, the gravestones, the cat, the grade-school student, or the sunbathers — fall into a typology of intimate situations, but they also invite speculation about the specific lives and circumstances they depict. The artist's reliance on lost and discarded images ensures the absence of bracketing context for the images' particularity. Koh's production and recirculation of the images, in the case of *Sightings* in editions of 1,500 or 2,500, is an assertion that the value of these images is not exhausted, that they retain an open-ended capacity to take on new significance. In fact, the subjects of *Sightings* and *Memento* are endearing, even lovable, because they are devoid of context: they demand so very little. The awkwardness of the images guarantees their reference to real people and situations, creating in the viewer a small sense of guilty pleasure in the scrutiny of other people's private moments, licensed as it is by anonymity. Presumably, the subjects live on, quite unaware of the proliferating associations their images accrue within Koh's projects.

The ordinary stranger, encountered by chance, holds a compelling capacity for fantasy, projection, and identification. As a teenager, I had a friend who, although she was generally truthful with people she knew, habitually told outlandish lies to strangers. They readily believed her convoluted inventions and mawkishly tragic personal histories. Her justification for this behaviour, when asked, was that she told them what they wanted to hear, thus claiming a collusion of deception and desire within a liberating context of anonymity. The exegesis of an arbitrary encounter is perhaps best explored in the disinterested yet unrelenting surveillance of a stranger in French photographer Sophie Calle's remarkable *Suite Venetienne* (1980–95).¹¹ A similar thread of willing submission to the particularity of the stranger lies deep within the logic of Koh's work.

The decline of many traditional forms of community life and the erosion of public space have produced a social insularity that is supported by the conveniences of technology, car-based urban planning, and fear of violent crime. In many respects, society is increasingly atomistic, swept up in a hyper-individualism that has little will to address the widening rift between driven worker/consumers and the permanently

marginalized underemployed. We have passed from the extended to the nuclear family to a society of intimacy-craving individuals who understand themselves, on some level, as radically interchangeable. Koh's works in *Personal* suggest that the social units are mingling and developing new formations, that there exists a craving for intimacy and community that can (truly) be slaked on the common ground of daily life.

Notes

1. The title is indebted to Bronwen Wallace's *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987).
2. Koh on distribution in Hal Niedzviecki, "Picture Postcard: Post-Art in the Garbage Era," *Broken Pencil*, (Toronto) no. 4, Winter 1997, p.14.
3. For example, the current effort to trace the path of Nazi gold from the teeth of murdered Jews to the ledgers of Swiss bankers is understood to be only the most recent pass at the history of the Second World War.
4. *Lumber* was shown in *Monuments in the Present Tense*, 1994, curated by Jean-François Renaud.
5. The deployment of found photos in *Memento* echoes, without the technological trappings, issues explored in Max Dean's *As Yet Untitled* (1993–95), a robotic system that allows viewers to shred or archive anonymous snaps. See Joyce Mason, "Necessary selection," *C Magazine*, 51, Fall 1996, pp. 22–4.
6. Unpublished artist's statement, 1996.
7. *Knitwork* has been performed at Yukon Arts Centre (1995), eyelevel gallery (1996), and Southern Alberta Art Gallery (1997).
8. Daniel Sharp, curatorial statement, "Germaine Koh: The International Code of Signals Paintings," Ottawa; Gallery 101, 1991.
9. On this aspect of On Kawara's work, see Joshua Decter, "(Re)Reading On Kawara: The Difference of Repetition," *Flash Art*, 163, Mar/Apr 1992, p. 85.
10. A recent web search for personal journals turned up some 3,000 hits.
11. See Penny Cousineau, "In My Fantasies I'm the Man': Sophie Calle's True Stories," *Parachute* 82, April/May/June 1996.

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