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

SIGHTINGS OF GERMAINE KOH

Wayne Baerwaldt

... continual becoming ...

... she is interested in work that can be done without the necessity of making something new.

— something that can be transferred whole.

... about how to act ... in the face of unceasing and relentless systems of signification ...

... anonymous, anxious production ...

It is now a matter of revealing the residual power of things — a gap in meaning — when the shadows of an irretrievable past life arise from their surface.

It is a type of archive ... the particular identity — colour, texture, extension — of each received artifact is abstracted (by unravelling) and registered, as one indexical unit in a record of the overwhelming passage of time, effort, and bodies.

... urban harvesting of abandoned everyday objects ...

... use the snapshots ... playing on the snapshot's use as a ritual marker of time and place ...

... concrete passage of individuals through space¹

Artists rarely produce, exhibit, or disseminate artwork or the process of artmaking without leaving clues as to the nature of their performative acts. Germaine Koh reveals plenty of such traces in her ongoing *Sightings* postcards and elicits a critique of the photographic snapshot as key to identity, intimacy, and notions of "individual experience." Her sculptural and photo-based work poignantly and methodically reiterates the failure and collapse of the search for individual experience in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Since 1992 Koh has collected found snapshots from the streets of various cities that she has visited or lived in, such as Ottawa, New York, and Montreal. The snapshots

are found by chance on mailboxes, in trash cans, and on sidewalks. Certain snapshots are chosen by Koh to be archived or, more accurately for the artist, to form patterns under titles such as "special occasions," "pets," etc. Eventually, some images are reproduced in the form of 4"x6" colour postcards. Each postcard image is identified on the reverse with pertinent archival information, as in the following example:

One of 33 photographs found June
1993, north-east corner of 11 Street
and Avenue B, New York
Verso marked "FUJICOLOR paper"
and imprinted "[16]4984021(...)"

published by G. Koh, 1996
Box 20032 K1N 9N5 Canada

The sidewalk or some form of public, open container is the resting place for discarded or lost snapshots the world over. Artists consistently return to the streets for cast off photographic images to assimilate in montages, archives, and other formats for artmaking. It is in the back-door dumpsters and sidewalk refuse heaps that Brazilian artist Rosangela Renno has found the thousands of black-and-white photographs and negatives that constitute her Universal Archive of the Disappeared of Brazil. It is on the sidewalks of European and North American cities that the late Happenings artist Al Hansen found the ephemeral images for his numerous *Venus Goddess* collages. For Koh, this resting place for the anonymous, disfigured images of unknown families, individuals, animals, and objects is ground zero. The often scratched, folded, or torn images generally depict common subjects for snapshots: landscapes, a ship's deck, hockey arenas, beaches, piers, bedrooms, and other public and private spaces.

In the process of finding and securing these urban snapshots, the drifting mementos of lives lived and objects set upon by unknown amateur photographers, Koh reaches down to the bottom of the street, to the people and objects there. Images on the

ground are the usually forgotten, and the ground itself is a suspect wasteland of sentimental values, indeed a landscape of homeless objects of another nature. Koh understands it to be loaded with refuse, and one realizes that this landscape has not been created out in the wilds of nature but in the city, an archetype of the anonymous North American metropolis with no centre, an implied seamlessness with no clear divisions from surrounding ephemera and the built environment. From a comfortable distance, or so it seems, places visited (i.e., street corners) are always “empty,” and even if this absence is what’s revealed in the found snapshots of Koh’s artistic project, absence betrays an activity (actions) arising from the artist’s surveillance and deciphering of the refuse with voyeuristic and critical intentions. After the snapshots are first released to the city’s backsides — are dropped, thrown away, perhaps stolen or copied for myriad purposes, and then found — Koh mediates in the process by “marking off” the snapshot from its surroundings. The aesthetic strategy she develops in response to the material (testifying to social reality without concern for people or objects depicted) runs against the grain of an investigative tradition that seeks collaboration of its subjects. The canons of a photographic genre can’t be applied to carry out such a strategy, and therefore the artist must draw on other sources to acknowledge her process, sources such as anonymity and absence.

The performative nature of Koh’s work can be acknowledged as a species of “modern ritual” that is not unrelated to the revival of interest in artists’ archives as living cultures that systematically operate as cues to the contextual reading of artwork.² The archival process does not suggest closure but rather signifies a living cultural organism. The first moment in this transformation of material occurs when a place is marked off from its surroundings by the simple captions on the *Sightings* postcards — in fact, it is not the action of finding the snapshot that gains importance; this action is less authentic and can be fabricated endlessly. Although the artist’s listed space of address on the card suggests some unknown spatial and psychological potential, it is the “empty” garbage-strewn space, the space that receives all the revolutive matter from human, machine, and animal contact that is signified and becomes ultimately the active space of importance.

It is the site that is framed (through protection and enhancement), elevated (reproduced as a postcard and encased in the white cube art gallery), and enshrined (consecrated for artistic sanctity or perverse touristic pilgrimage). Taken together, the marking, framing, elevation, and enshrinement of a location make up the ensemble of semiotic practices that serves to inscribe this or that pond scene or beach party, anonymous body, face, urban/suburban backyard, or vaguely familiar streetscape as a sacred site (regardless of its banality) that exercises a “moral claim” on the collective artistic consciousness. Koh, in her attempts to describe and qualify the artistic process, creates a “miracle of consensus,” the shared sense that a particular locale is the source, the true sight (site) that must be seen (experienced) if not tacitly understood as a real place in time. This miracle of consensus that moves the viewer to believe in Koh’s art process reveals the workings of the mysterious conventional forces that isolate a specific image/site/location and auratically elevate it into an authentic attraction, a sanctified sign under which myriad natural, social, historical, and cultural meanings are collected and contained in a seamless “single representation.”

The nature of this single representation is of importance. The most striking feature of the snapshot/postcard image/card-as-object is its utter impersonality — they might well have been lifted from any standard photo album to which they serve as a sort of citation. Indeed, that seems to be Koh’s point. These images underscore the infinitely iterable and anonymous character of the snapshot suddenly found in a public, communal space. The generalized scopic code in which these images are inscribed precedes the gaze of both photographer and subsequent viewer. This specular code operates as a vanishing visual mediator of the recorded and remembered experiences for which the typical photo album is supposed to provide a personalized souvenir.

Although they are visual rather than discursive, the *Sightings* postcards subtly highlight the vexing questions of (authentic) subjectivity and individual experience popularized by mid-1960s chaotic and minimalist Fluxus art performances and related ephemera. If the often humorous Fluxus actions suggested a form of enlightenment of the subjective self by breaking free of the hegemony of abstract

expressionism, it is now the contexts of the *Sightings* postcards that preclude the realization of any contexts for the subjective self (be it the art presentation context, the context in the image, or the point of its finding). It is the active charting of the context for the subjective that is at the centre of much of Koh's work, including the earlier *Lumber*.³

One is left with an uneasy sense that the snapshots/postcards, although not identified and separated by type, are repetitive in nature. In fact, the act of finding and considering the found snapshot represents a repetition compulsion — to reassuredly know, to possess the intimately familiar. In *Sightings* no such repetition is necessary. The iterability that constructs the hidden "I" of the unseen viewer is implied rather than enacted by the very conventionality of the photographic image. The iterative aspects of the standard snapshot lie, above all, in its conformity to the images printed in magazines or popularized by media and photo industry spokespeople such as Kodak's Bill Cosby. Media-influenced experiences mediate the viewer-photographer's visual experience of any given site. The viewer-photographer does not directly shoot (or even see) the intimate, subjective scene before which he or she stands. The image photographed for his or her photo album is always already taken in advance. The intimate, subjective photo is in this sense merely the copy of a copy of what it purports to represent. The dependence of the recorded — codified — image on the generalized codes of photography forecloses any possibility of a singular perspective or an identifiable I/eye. Its impersonal order of representation is not a stable ground to which any one viewer can lay unquestioned claim. However faithful its reproduction may be (indeed, because of its faithfulness to location and even characteristics of the photographic paper as noted by Koh), the standard found snapshot also remains an anonymous space into which any viewer can be inserted, and from which any viewer can be erased. From the theoretical vantage point of Barthes (*La Chambre Claire*) one might say that the "flatness" or "platitudinous" nature of the photograph "arrests" the larcenous interpretations of any identity which, cloaked in the ideological mantle of universal meaning, attempts to rob the image of its contingency.

It is precisely this constitutive contingency — the “outside” of meaning beyond the frame of the photograph — that Koh engages so strongly in her archiving or patterning. Koh effectively upsets a return to the critical reading of snapshots as a sentimental, nationalistic, or ethnicity-based search for identity in the processing of found photographic images. This is not her concern. If notions of personal identity in reading photographic images were cast under a mantra of difference (race, class, sexuality, gender) in the 1980s, these notions are no longer relevant for Koh’s critical investigation. The development of the *Sightings* project is far removed from these notions and indicates instead a new, conceptual reworking. Koh’s fictions of identity stand as a figural formulation of a more generalized interest in how the active “attraction” functions phantasmagorically as an unmarked site of unqualified adventure.

Koh offers viewers a stark commentary on (and critique of) accounts of identity conjured through snapshot photography, a commentary that addresses the narratives of a desire to see and feel intimacy that commonly underpins its strong, suggestive possibility. *Sightings* therefore can be read as a rigorous aesthetic meditation on identity and the making of intimacy, where Koh’s actions/interventions in public spaces are key to a critical reassessment and questioning of the mechanics of photography’s constructed intimacy and personal identity.

Notes

1. A random selection of (found) texts on Koh’s work authored by various writers, artists, and curators including Germaine Koh, Daniel Sharp, and Nicole Thérien.
2. The ongoing recovery and maintenance of significant artists’ archives in Canada should be noted. Art Metropole, founded by the Toronto-based artist group General Idea, recently deposited one of Canada’s most important archives of contemporary art books, objects, ephemera, correspondence, and other materials with the National Gallery of Canada. Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov, with the assistance of curator Scott Watson and the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver, have worked to excavate and publicize a collaborative project called the Image Bank. Their enormous archival holding (begun collaboratively with West Coast Canadian artist Gary Lee-Nova in 1970) established a life-long individual and collective investigation of the cultural ecology, deconstructing and montaging, patching and transforming mainstream and fringe images of a living culture as influenced by omnifarious media sources. Simultaneously, artists such as Robert Filliou, Glenn Lewis, Tom Dean, Eric Metcalfe, Robert Cumming, Ant

Farm, Robert Fones and, more recently, artists such as Mark Dion and the artist teams of Leone and Macdonald and Lyn Lapointe and Martha Fleming have staked out territory to apply a process of artistic archivalism. Each artist is ultimately applying a reframing technique to give further “evidence” of the authenticity of any performative expressions in collected ephemera, photographic documentation, videotapes, or other materials.

3. The *Lumber* project of 1991–94 consisted of approximately 700 pieces of found 2”x4” lumber in varying lengths that lean against the gallery walls. Each piece has been carefully coated with diluted oil paint and varnish, “prepared” as a means to establish a “claim” to the work as artefact, making each piece less pedestrian and its characteristic surface nicks and cuts more carefully tended. There is some implied, shared history in the making of “the old” that may suggest a context for the subjective that is no longer a given.

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