

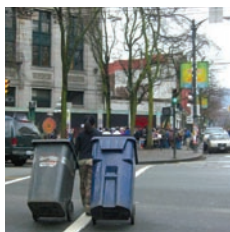


germaine kon

OVERFLOW

germaine koh

## OVERFLOW



When Germaine Koh proposed the idea of collecting bottles, it was clear we would need a lot. Our first visit was to United We Can, the community driven bottle depot across the street and one of the neighbourhood's leading institutions. After a few conversations we were able to work out a system. It would mean turning the gallery itself into a kind of a bottle depot for a few weeks. We also talked to the people who pick up our empties and help out around the gallery. Trish, Jeffrey, Kenny, Rick and Brenda all had something to offer and it was Randy Pandora who really got us started with hauling the large totes over from United.

With this humble idea, Germaine Koh has brought together an unusual team of partners and at the same time exposed some of the defining forces in Vancouver's economic and cultural development. We're not in Lotusland anymore. Tough questions relating to ecology, health, and housing compete with glowing descriptions of the 'world's most liveable city'. Yes, the mountains are beautiful, "but some ordinary Vancouverites," noted *The Economist* (July 6, 2006), "wonder whether their increasingly gritty city is worthy of all the accolades."

Centre A is located in the midst of this contradiction and negotiates the space between rhetoric and reality every day. The story has two sides — poverty and addiction on one



side, recycling and recovery on the other. One thing you learn working on Hastings Street is that we all carry around some sort of a monkey. It's just that many of us can't see it. For Centre A it's like this: we have a beautiful deal with the landlord, a huge downtown space virtually rent free. Although we could get the boot with short notice (like most other people around here) for the moment it's great. We've opened up the windows and brought a lot of light onto the street. And this could go on for a long time, if, and here's the rub, the landlord gets to build a condo tower upstairs. In exchange for this permission, the City of Vancouver and (its new best friend) Centre A would get the gallery space. Could this work for the people of Pigeon Park? Maybe. With our unusual team it's worth a try. Centre A wants to be on the recycling and recovery side of the story. Yes, housing is important, but so is light.

The first step to recovery is getting to know your monkey. See it, then you can start to work with it and get yourself onto the healing path. Art helps.

Centre A is grateful to its landlord MacDonald Development, for making this gorgeous space available, to everyone at United We Can, to all the binners who contributed to this art work (even without knowing about it), to our volunteers and supporters. And especially to Clint for his inspiring essay and Germaine for making it visible.

**Hank Bull** - EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*Overflow* develops in two consecutive stages. The second is a flexible, changing installation responding to the architecture, socio-geographic location and history of Centre A's space, built using glass drink bottles obtained during the first stage, in which the gallery participates in one of the more visible unofficial economies of the neighbourhood — the recuperation and redemption of bottles from across the city.

Centre A is located in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, an area marked by poverty and mental illness, substance abuse and drug traffic, increasing redevelopment and gentrification, tourism and entertainment consumption, and socio-political frictions arising from the economic disparity and divergent interests of the various local users and stakeholders — including poor residents, the transient population, homeowners, business people, real-estate developers, consumers, tourists, cultural groups, and social-service organizations — and those in the underground economies, such as drug dealers and users. One of the most visible trades in this neighbourhood is the considerable number of poor citizens making a living by gathering and returning bottles for refunds, an aspect of the ad hoc local economy that has over the years become regularized, as well as recognized and widely supported by the city population.

The gallery occupies a historic building that architecturally retains evidence of its former use as a streetcar terminus. It is positioned to become one of an increasing number of cultural, heritage and social organizations whose below-market-cost locations are a result of concessions granted to developers by the City of Vancouver in exchange for housing such groups — a process widely understood to be the soft edge of gentrification, even though the process is not controlled by the groups in question.

# OVERFLOW

One of the gallery's neighbours is United We Can, the largest bottle depot in the Downtown East Side. UWC is a successful private enterprise that regularly operates over-capacity, and whose principals have developed a proposal for a full-scale recycling centre to be located underneath a nearby highway overpass on the edge of the neighbourhood.

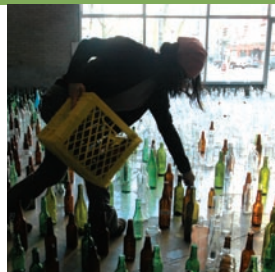
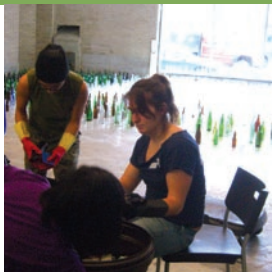
In the months preceding the installation, through the 2006 holiday season, Centre A will buy bottles from several local collectors and collaborate with United We Can by relieving them of incoming bottles that cannot be recycled by breweries. The re-use of materials that would otherwise be a liability for UWC — pure excess — supports the argument that a considered plan for local processing of all kinds of reusable waste is not only crucial but also right — a proper response to locally-generated consumer glut.

The installation itself will be a flexible mass of glass bottles arranged on the concrete floor and around the brick pillars and office furnishings of the vast space, lit primarily by the natural light from the wall of windows overlooking Hastings Street. With their labels removed, the bottles appear both as abstract tokens for human presence and as a sparkling, seemingly liquid volume. In keeping with the moveable nature of the materials, the arrangement will likely change over the course of the exhibition, perhaps ranging from an unordered mass spreading across the space like an encroaching tide, to an obstructive yet contemplative presence, to more orderly patterns that might recall the sorting of railcars or the movement of goods through the nearby port.

In any configuration, however, there will be tension between the now-pristine bottles and the fact that they represent not only a humble yet economically valuable raw material that is a precious local resource and a subject of street-level expertise, but also alcoholism — one of the neighbourhood's scourges. It is possible that the attractiveness and apparent value of the materials, displayed in all their uselessness in the somewhat refined gallery space, could draw out some of the neighbourhood's underlying interests, economic incongruities and incommensurate social facts, including the gallery's uneasy position as a possible contributor to the gentrification of the neighbourhood.

**Germaine Koh**

Vancouver, November 2006





## THE GALLERY IS FULL OF empties

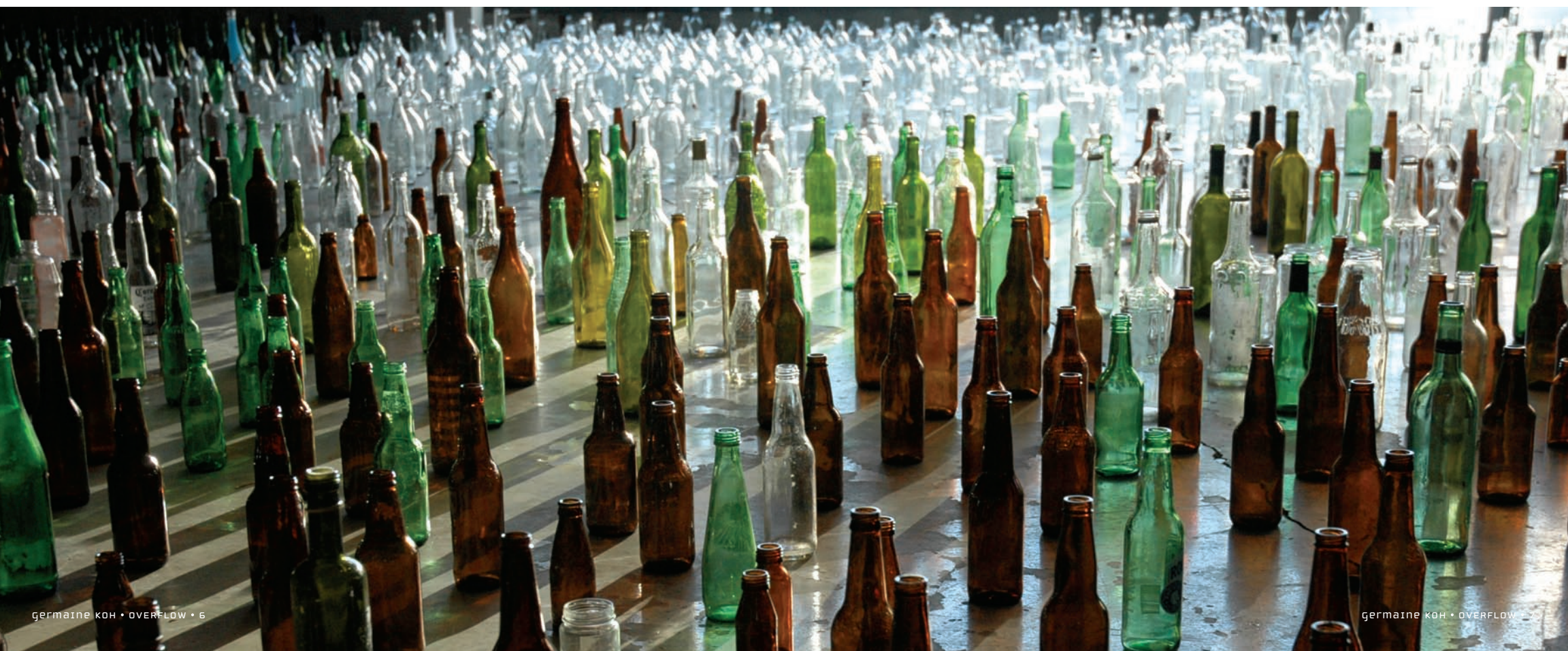
*Overflow*, Germaine Koh's new project at Centre A, engages with two problematics: the relationship of the gallery to its neighbourhood, and the practice of public art. The first problematic is local, the second international.

### I. The Gallery and the Neighbourhood

For *Overflow*, Koh proposes to use, as the raw material of an installation piece, beer bottles that have been collected by binners (she has also been doing her own collecting, cleaning, etc.). Bidders are people who roam the streets and alleys of Vancouver, picking up recyclable material — be it bottles, cans, scrap metal, clothing — and then trading or selling the items to for-profit or non-profit agencies. In particular, Koh will work with United We Can, an important institution in the Downtown East Side that has returned millions of dollars to the local economy through its recycling service.

The first problematic, then, of Koh's project has to do with the relationship of the gallery with the neighbourhood in which it resides. This can only be understood if we look at the regional dialectics of art galleries in Vancouver, a regional dialectic that has everything to do with the typology of galleries themselves. Thus, while Vancouver itself divides in a dualistic way into the East side and the West side, the galleries themselves divide into the non-profit and the for-profit. These divisions — geographic and economic — are not absolutes; nor are they, strictly speaking, binaries.

In terms of Vancouver's geographic divisions, then, we have, on the one hand, a variety of places that are called the west: the West side, which generally means Vancouver south of English Bay/False Creek and West of Main street or Ontario street; the West End, which refers to the downtown peninsula west of Granville or Burrard, and West Vancouver, which is another municipality entirely. On the other hand, the East in Vancouver almost always refers to the same area: the East End, the East Side, and East Vancouver all mean the eastern half of the city. Sometimes, especially in the first half of the last century, the East End referred to the Strathcona area; and of course, since the 1970s, the Downtown East Side has referred to that area between Cambie or Hamilton and Clark, from False Creek to the waterfront.







But given that the “West” is all that is good in society, be it Western Canada (the wide open spaces, cowboys, etc.), the West Coast, or the global west in general, the dice are weighed in the west side’s favour. Historically, settlement patterns in the colonization of Vancouver meant that the west side has more and older trees, more parks, and was the privileged area of the upper middle classes. And, in like manner, the east side of the city is the criminalized zone, the demonized zone, the orientalized zone; it is the zone of the poor and the disenfranchised, either to be victimized by the state or condescended to by the social worker.

In terms of Vancouver’s gallery system, geography is also a predictor of category or typology or class. That is to say, commercial galleries or dealers tend to be located on the west side, especially the famed “Gallery row” of South Granville (SoGr) and non-profit artist-run centres in the east end (either the Downtown East Side or Mount Pleasant). But just as Vancouver’s geographic divisions are blurring (the real estate market is forcing west siders to encroach on Main street) so too the locations and purposes of galleries are changing. Thus Germaine Koh’s commercial dealer, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, moved this past summer to the industrial north east corner of Mount Pleasant; likewise, a few years ago, the artist-run OR gallery moved from Hastings to Yaletown.

What does this mean for Centre A? What’s interesting about Centre A is both its location and its mandate. First of all, neither an artist-run centre nor a commercial gallery, it instead works somewhere between larger civic galleries like the Vancouver Art Gallery and the ARCs. Too, its position in the Downtown Eastside, and/or “between” the DES and Chinatown, is a geographic allegory for its ambivalence toward Asian art proper. As its mission (posted at centrea.org) states, the institution presents contemporary Asian art, but also art by Canadians of diverse backgrounds, as well as art from abroad. Thus Centre A shows work by artists of Asian backgrounds (whether Canadian or not), art “about” Asia (whether the artists are Asian or not), and art by Asians “about” Asia. The only category left, presumably, would be art by non-Asians that has nothing to do with Asia. Through all of this, Centre A’s location in Vancouver’s East End adds a rich dollop of irony, the triumph of two subjugated peoples.

But I’m not so much interested in the machinations of identity politics as in what *Overflow* does to the Centre. First of all, Koh is moving the gallery more directly into the local economy through working with bidders and United We Can (and here we can distinguish between the marginalized subjects and a non-profit or NGO institution). So part of the artwork itself is a corruption or violation of the gallery’s non-commercial status. This is not strictly true, as, of course, the gallery has to pay for supplies and amenities as operating expenses throughout the year. But two aspects of Koh’s project push this further. First of all, by making the economic process part of her art, she is reintroducing the political economy — dare I say the commodity status? — of the artwork itself. Second, Koh’s actions also draw our attention to the gallery’s troubled relation with local development and soft gentrification. Koh is actually forcing Centre A to be “more commercial” than her erstwhile gallery Catriona Jeffries.

## II. The Artwork and the Public

But let’s look at the dynamics of Koh’s project a bit more closely. Koh takes bottles collected by United We Can, bottles that would have been rejected from the recycling economy because of defects, etc. (bottles that would ordinarily be off-loaded, at a price to UWC, to glass recyclers: breweries will only take bottles with labels on them, for example, to prevent American bottles from entering the system). These bottles have two important semiotic and economic values. Economically, they are between the commodity and garbage. An “empty” — a void — their essence lies not in their own thing-ness but in the service that they provide — carrying a liquid. They are the material trace, too, of the migrant, diasporic, unsettled lives of bidders — the men and women who roam the streets of Vancouver, retrieving empties from Dumpsters and blueboxes, from cases on doorsteps and less savoury locations. The sound of bottles clanking in a shopping cart is the music of Vancouver.

Beer bottles are therefore a worthless commodity. As such, they are an affront to capitalism — not because they are waste, but because they lay bare the contradictions of the commodity itself. For the bidder takes this waste object and obtains a return for it: an object with no use-value, that is, now has an exchange value. But is this not the classic description of the commodity that we find in Marx’s *Capital*? And, further, is such a commodity — a super commodity, an absolute commodity — is it not what the German philosopher Theodor Adorno declared the work of art to be in *Aesthetic Theory*? In effect, is Koh’s project not revealing the beer bottle, the empty, in its essence?

Beer bottles also have a semiotic value, what linguists call a connotative meaning, one bound up with nationality and masculinity — for Canadians of a certain generation, growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the stubby beer bottle (which was in use from ca. 1962–1984) was a hallmark of Canadian identity. Too, the plot of the Bob and Doug McKenzie film *Strange Brew*, in which they try to get free beer from a brewery by putting a baby mouse into a bottle. And empties are also, it has to be acknowledged, simultaneously a source of pride and shame: pride at having consumed so much beer, and shame at not having consumed enough.

Koh’s art then utilizes the material culture of Vancouver’s dispossessed, working, in a way akin to Kelly Wood’s *Continuous Garbage Project*, with the antinomy of trash and art. Like Wood’s photographs, which stake out the utopian position of being simultaneously garbage and art, Koh’s installation will be simultaneously garbage (doubly so, since the bottles are the rejects of the recycling system: garbage) and art.

But what kind of art? In a way, *Overflow* references the contemporary (90s and post-90s) practice and theory of Relational Aesthetics, as theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud. Relational Aesthetics typically seeks to involve the community or gallerygoer in either the production of the art work (such as Jeremy Deller using a brass band to record acid tracks) or its reception/consumption/ culmination (such as Rirkrit Tiravanija using the gallery as a restaurant). The British academic Julian Stallabrass has been quite critical of RA’s claims at creating new communities, in particular noting that the state welcomes such practices which compensate both for its own shortcomings and for the deleterious effects of capital.

Now, no one is expecting B.C. premier Gordon Campbell or Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan to wax rhapsodic over *Overflow*. Koh’s project bears some important differences from relational art. First of all, she is plugging in to an existing community/economy: rather than the Promethean task of presuming to create a binning practice, she is acknowledging its participation, and in effect rendering the bidders and United We Can into suppliers for her art. Thus *Overflow* brings attention to the simultaneously marginal existence and economic necessity of binning in our post-industrial city. Second, *Overflow* connects with other projects of Koh’s own artistic career: notably, *Side piece* (1999), for which she filmed homeless men waiting at a corner outside her studio in Paris, incorporating sounds from her own “waiting” (art making as a form of non-alienated labour) in the studio. And in *Prayers* (1999),

gallery workers' keystrokes triggered a smoke machine outside the building. Like these two pieces, *Overflow* seeks to blur the boundaries of inside the gallery and outside: but what comes into the gallery, what "fills it up" to "overflowing", is nothing less than ... nothing. An emptiness. The sublime void of consumerism, of the commodity, of binning. The gallery as empty, the empty as gallery.

Germaine Koh's work offers a chance to make and look at art that is between the everyday and the ethereal: both material and sublime, graspable and ineffable. Graspable literally, in that Koh enacts the binning practice — she has become a binner, in her studio practice, in hauling in bottles herself, washing them and soaking off labels, sorting and accumulating.

*Overflow* also nods towards hope, a kind of hope also enunciated in Mr. McBinner's poem "The Golden Bin," first published in the 15 January 2001 issue of *The Carnegie Newsletter* and reprinted in a collection from the newsletter, *In the Heart of the Community*:

*I pray this year that I will win  
The chance to dive that Golden Bin  
The Golden Bin holds no tin —  
Has coffee, brass, and maybe gin  
it just might hold a dream or two  
A lotto ticket ... trips to the zoo ...  
— TVs, radios, computers old,  
There's just no telling what it may hold.*

Clint Burnham - November 2006, Vancouver



## OVERFLOW

2006-07

Process-based site-specific installation of recuperated glass bottles  
Germaine Koh

A project for Centre A, Vancouver  
Produced in collaboration with United We Can

Germaine Koh would like to thank Ken Lyotier for his inspiring opinions and collaboration; the workers of United We Can for their assistance; Hank Bull and Joni Low of Centre A for capably shepherding the project; Clint Burnham for his thoughtful and informed writing; Randy Pandora for his participation; Michael Bryden for design; Centre A's enthusiastic volunteer corps; and the Ontario Arts Council for financial assistance.

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United We Can

This exhibition booklet accompanies the solo exhibition "Overflow" by Germaine Koh, held at the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Centre A), January 13 – February 17, 2007. "Overflow" is curated by Hank Bull.

**Photographers:** Michael Bryden (p. 2, p. 4 centre); Hank Bull (p. 4 left); Germaine Koh (p. 3 all; p. 8); Elsie Sands (cover, p. 4 right, p. 5, p. 6-7, p. 10, back cover)

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CENTRE A

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