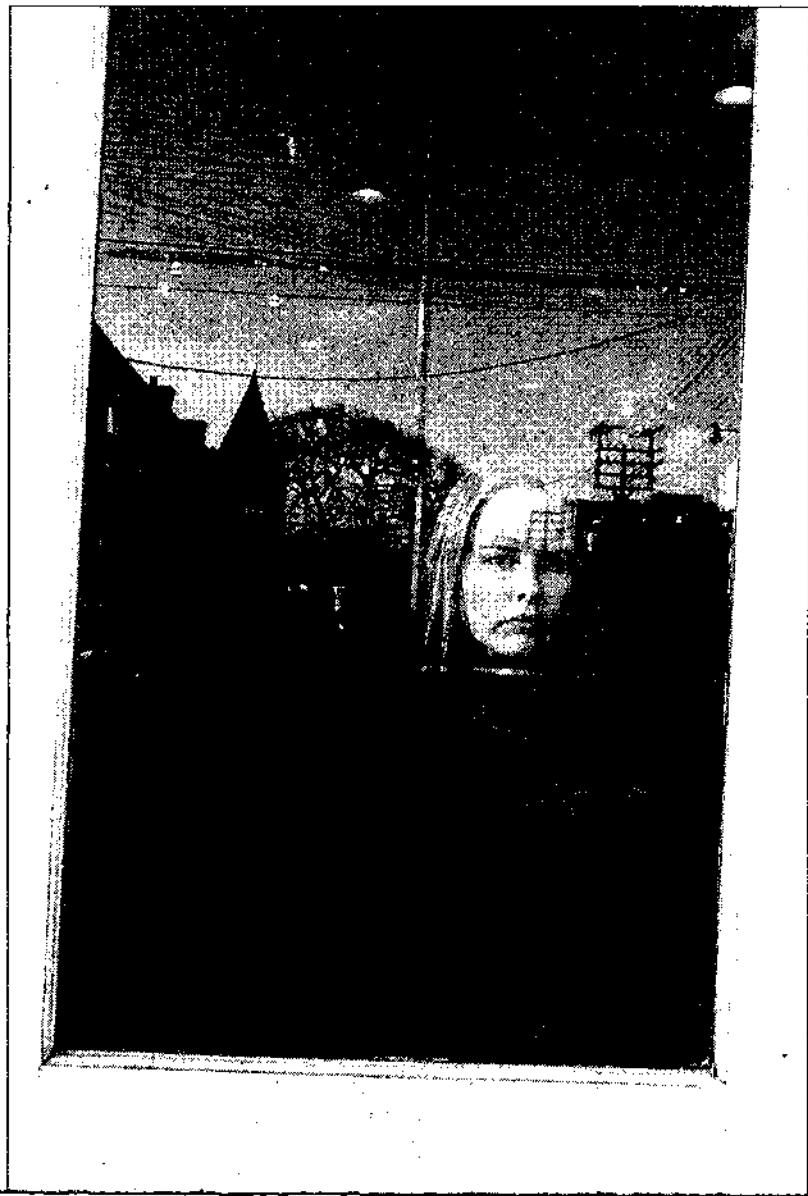


# What's up with that woman in the window?



FIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Columnist McLaren (left) making a spectacle of herself in a café window, on instructions provided by artist Germaine Koh (right).

To the passerby, I am just a young woman sitting on a chair and staring out a café window. What you aren't aware of is that I am also executing a work of neo-conceptual performance art. Because it turns out to be a surprisingly dull pastime, this experimental-art stuff, I am also composing this column in my head. I've been sitting here making art for *forté* than an hour. I got the idea from a woman in my neighborhood.

A couple of weeks ago, I was walking down Queen Street West in Toronto, to buy some canned anchovy fillets and spaghetti, when I noticed a young Asian woman sitting in a narrow window looking out onto the street.

The space she was sitting in, a scrawny display case wedged between an antique store and a cake shop, was not attached in an obvious way to any particular business. Though her clothes were plain, I automatically assumed she was a model — one of those "real-people" models clothiers sometimes stick in their windows because they attract more attention than fibre-glass mannequins.

Obviously some local designer had taken a cue from Miss' behavior, the sex shop across the street, which, on Saturday afternoons, pays fleshy gals to perch awkwardly on a swing set in the window wearing thigh-high boots and various ill-fitting lace garments.

I've always avoided looking at those sex shop models for more than a split second. The prospect of being on the receiving end of one of those beauty-contest-runner-up waves mortifies me beyond words.

On closer inspection, however, it became apparent that the woman

## LEAH McLAREN GENERATION WHY



in this window was a different sort of creature. As I puzzled over her — I pretended to be searching for something in my bag — I noticed that she was watching me, too, only more openly. She was attentive, but unresponsive. There was eye contact, but no communicative impulse in her expression.

Poor kid, I thought, she's obviously high. Hadn't I just read somewhere that models shoot heroin under their toenails? I decided it was time to move on.

Little did I know I was looking at the new face of public art.

In the program for her solo exhibit,

Germaine Koh describes *Watch* as a performance piece in which she spends "office hours for several consecutive days in an enclosed storefront display window, actively observing passersby and the life of the street."

"The activity," she muses, "requires a surprising level of vigilance on my part to avoid becoming either object or aggressor. The presence of the window provides both me and the passerby the security and distance to observe each other freely, in a relationship fraught with unspoken responsibilities."

"The situation acknowledges but also reverses usual codes of voyeurism, rendering the situation active while confusing the roles of spectator and object."

If you're not conversant with the latest artspeak, Germaine Koh is willing to be patient. When I managed to track her down for coffee last week, the 33-year-old artist clarified for me. A former assistant curator at the National Gallery who has exhibited internationally (and most recently at the Art Gallery of Ontario), Koh practises a kind of inconspicuous public art based in found materials and everyday processes. It's almost impossible not to overlook, but once found, it is magical.

In her 1999 exhibit, *Prayers*, Koh attached a word processor in the National Gallery office to a smoke machine. Anything typed on the keyboard was translated into morse code and released out the window in puffs of smoke. From time to time, Koh also keeps a daily diary in the classified section of the Toronto Star.

She showed me a photocopy of a recent entry; under an ad for a phone psychic was a small box that

read: "2 July. Dentist says I need a crown. Had good day yesterday, after all. Shouldn't have played Back bad."

Koh refuses to record her work, as a way of "insisting on the immediacy of it." She told me that *Watch* was a kind of anthropological field work. It ran for three eight-hour days on Queen Street, and was previously "realized" for a full business week last December on Ontario Street in downtown Montreal.

"How often do you get to just sit and look at specific street scene for eight hours at a stretch?" she asks.

Koh said she had no delusions about the process: "I didn't really go into it thinking it would be an interesting thing to do. It was a way of getting people in the neighborhood to talk about what's happening out there — getting people to ask, 'What's that woman doing in that window?' as a way of opening up larger discussions about a neighborhood in transition."

When I told Koh I was eager to try it out, she was skeptical. "I do know if you want to do that." When I insisted, she gave me instructions: Find a window overlooking a high traffic area, and pull up a chair. Wear nondescript clothing. Be actively attentive without responding to the scene before you.

So here I sit. It's been over an hour and I'm starting to twitch. That ham sandwich frozen to the sidewalk is making me terribly hungry. An old man with a walker loc up and smiles. Before I can stop myself, I give him my best beauty-contest runner-up wave.

Like Koh, I'm making art for a generation. It's just that, in my case, it happens to be bad art.

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