

The city is a mutable entity, its lines continuously redrawn and contested. Measured at spatial and political borders, urban territory is also defined by its ecologies and character. In Vancouver, tract repetition, commuter veins, and industry form part of the city's terrain as it pushes its way up mountains, over agricultural lands, and skywards in the form of glass towers. The city is also measured and judged by its "liveability," which includes rights and freedoms, healthcare, education, culture, and access to nature, amongst myriad other factors. There are multiple cities within Metro Vancouver: North Vancouver, Richmond, and Surrey are places that are simultaneously distinguishable from Vancouver *and* part of its metropolitan spread. Within their pockets of distinct socio-economic cultures exist particular identities. These so-called fringes and outlying areas find articulation in municipal policies, laws, ghettos, as well as in the weedy lots and disused easements. How city limits are tested and who lays claim to them is a key aspect of defining cities. And how urbanites, as individuals and as members of society, negotiate the staking and ceding of territory is, like the city itself, constantly in flux.

It is this condition of flux that *Territory* sought to examine. In an attempt to encapsulate the contemporary experience of the individual in the city,<sup>1</sup> the original title of the project was not *Territory* but *Civis*. Themes that shaped the project included the shifting definitions of the citizen (individual versus social identity); alienation and belonging; surveillance and counter-surveillance; and public and private space. It was a response to the fact that over half of the world's inhabitants are urbanites and that direct local experience is increasingly impacted by global conditions. (At the same time, the metropolis has become globalized, with the individual caught somewhere between a direct local experience and a larger reflective understanding of the urban.) *Territory* aimed to reveal aspects of these issues in the specific locales of Vancouver and North Vancouver by presenting artists with global perspectives on urban experience.

Any understanding of a city is at once collective and individual. It is based on shared social codes of conduct. Like other ecologies, diverse urban populations occupy niches where they can best survive. Whether flourishing or displaced, these communities are constantly negotiating their position. Within this territorial struggle, notions of civility are also contested. The urban denizen, by definition a citizen, both follows and disrupts codes of civility.<sup>2</sup> The identity of the urban citizen has long been a subject of inquiry in Western thought. From Aristotle to Manet's depictions of *fin de siècle* Paris, investigations into civic behaviour have been inextricably linked to reflections on the human condition.

*Territory* reflected on a number of ideas: that a coherent social fabric is built on a sense of belonging; that you can claim public territory as your own; and that the citizen has a responsibility to engage with social mores in order to help shape society. Aristotle first articulated this understanding of citizenship: "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god."<sup>3</sup> Here, citizenship is based on obligations of individuals toward their community, rather than rights given to the inhabitants of a community. During Aristotle's lifetime, Greek citizens were both the rulers and the ruled. Political and judicial offices were rotated and all franchised citizens had the right to speak and vote in the political assembly. However, this "polis" (the body of citizens comprising a state) was exclusive (non-citizens such as women and slaves were excluded), and methods used to determine citizenship were based on wealth, political participation, and heritage. Many aspects of this system still hold today in democratic countries, with perks including voting privileges, social benefits, and security protection.

Aristotle's positioning of man between beast and god provides a conceptual axis that allows for a consideration of the grey zones of social experience. The individual gropes along the guy-wire between alienation and collectivity, at once separate from and part of the masses. The ranking systems of ancient Greece that have carried over into our contemporary moment activate the collective need to continue to

struggle for a voice and representation. In this struggle, “acting out” becomes crucial to articulating the social fabric. Whether protesting in the form of unity marches against unjust wars and poverty, or lobbying corporations and governments, criticism through language and action remains a tangible and necessary way of shaping civic life. Without taking up polemical positions, the artists in *Territory* draw on these tensions to consider their impact on urban experience.

In her essay, “Talking to strangers, asking directions, acting out, and other civic duties,” Germaine Koh examines the practice of participating in society through deliberate actions that provoke an awareness of our social codes. She highlights the idea that the stranger—as opposed to the familiar neighbour—can be an important social agitator or catalyst. For Koh, the artist can serve as precipitator through the social tactic of “acting out,” as is often the case in her own practice. In *Transplant* (2006), her project for *Territory*, she questions and disrupts the role of the “good” citizen by purposefully transgressing substance and border controls, and by physically introducing foreign materials into Vancouver’s terra firma so as to provoke the psychic spaces of fear and insecurity. Koh’s transplantation of soil samples from around the world not only addressed fears around immigration, social patrolling, and disease, but also rendered the artist vulnerable to personal interrogation.

While acting out signifies the potential for change and critical reflection, its formalized manifestations can be ineffective. Yael Bartana’s work reveals the pantomime of protest, showing crowds of demonstrators and military personnel to be almost indistinguishable from one another as they carry out their cyclical rituals. In a state of war or political unrest, codes and ethics are often in flux. Thomas Hobbes asserted that self-defense against violent death is the highest human necessity, dubiously purporting that in the state of nature, rather than in a social state, there is a war of all against all.<sup>4</sup> Modern socio-cultural theories of evolution counter this easy distinction, and ethics debates continue to return to the danger in reverting to some notion of “evil” or “terror” that can be mitigated by some notion of “good.”

Ethics discussions resurface when considering surveillance. Social surveillance—whether collective or individual, state-sanctioned or guerrilla—incurs a kind of counter-surveillance that watches the watchers. The double remove of watching, with its productive skepticism, is often the position taken by contemporary artists. Roy Arden’s billboards, for instance, reflect urban spaces back on themselves, whether presenting a photograph of a billboard in situ from previous decades or bringing attention to proposed development sites as a result of economic change. Walid Raad’s documents of war-ravaged Beirut are recast as archeological records, while Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla’s surveillance—from the position of river turtles floating downstream on loose logs—watches the development of the Pearl River Delta. Counter-surveillance can also be an alternate method of navigating the city, adhering to the codes of another social reality. Cao Fei’s anime characters offer an otherworldly perspective. Her actors dress and pose as warriors, performing war games and enacting a reality within a reality. They experience the city on a level mitigated by fantasy—perhaps as a form of critique—and then return to the mundane, work-weary reality shared by their decidedly uncostumed parents.

Caught between public and private realms, the citizen is at once a participant in and a product of the larger social fabric. *Territory* sought to reveal this intersection—the sense of simultaneous belonging and alienation—through media works that exposed complex urban realities and public projects that physically engaged with the city. Our aim was to call attention to the subtleties of urban languages and to map the narratives of the city. Such an aim required viewers to search out experiences of the city with an altered awareness. Alternative maps offering reflections on behavioural patterns and hidden historical trajectories reflected the literal fabric of built environments and revealed the disastrous repercussions of global crisis.



Cao Fei  
*Deep Breathing (COS players series)*, 2004  
Chromogenic print  
Courtesy the artist and Lombard-Freid Projects, New York

*Territory* also suggested that the city is a space for potential: it is a commons where the codes and operations can be shifted. It is here that contemporary art can reveal individual and society's discontent in order to provide ways to understand our unsettling position between beast and god.

#### NOTES

- 1 The city is used here as a global referent. However, the works in the exhibition refer both to specific conditions of place as well as to more global conditions.
- 2 The term "civil" is derived from the Latin *civilis*, which in turn comes from *civis* or "citizen."
- 3 Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in the Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html>
- 4 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hobbes/thomas/h681>.

At the heart of the *Territory* project is the notion that cities are informed by social geographies that are constantly reconfigured as much as by built environments. Urban landscapes are shaped by ever-shifting constellations of spatial politics and contested social terrains demarcated by frontiers, danger zones, and margins. More than ever, urban cartographies are seen to be perpetually in states of transition and incompleteness. Cities have become vast entanglements of erasure and renewal. Seemingly ungovernable, chaotic, and fragile, the contemporary metropolis is far from its promised ideals. The notion of the commons, for example, has evolved from meaning an open civic space available to everyone to a term applied to shopping malls and gated communities. With the increasing privatization of "public space" and a reliance on information systems, not to mention the psychological weight of heat sensing devices and surveillance cameras, civic domains have become highly managed, often imperceptible, territories.

The intention of *Territory* was to draw out these dynamics through engagements with the idiosyncrasies and immaterial realities of the modern metropolis. The question of how art can make sense of the complexities and extremes of the urban is certainly not new. Moving beyond the totalizing perspectives of cityscapes, early twentieth-century artists developed abstract languages to reflect the contingencies and spatial experiences of modernity. By mid-century, members of the Situationist International were using the city as raw material to experiment with new techniques for transforming everyday experience. Acknowledging that citizens were no longer able to map their own conditions, they developed political and aesthetic strategies intended to provoke critical responses to the totalizing chaos of urban spectacle. This interest in wandering through city streets to chart the "unmappable" has since been taken up by artists interested in investigating urban disorder, sprawl, and industrial development as primary subject and material conditions.

The artists included in *Territory* negotiate urban conditions from their particular geographic and cultural dislocations. Their artworks call for a navigation and psychological mapping of both real and imagined terrains. Through acute observations of places as diverse as Beirut, Mexico City, Guangzhou, Tel Aviv, and Vancouver, they bear witness to global urban conditions. They draw out the contingencies, palimpsests, and incidental factors that define urban fabrics, investing them with implications that extend well beyond the specifics of locale. Cities, here, are seen as montaged fragments that are tied to the past, anticipating an imagined future, but always revealing the present.

A point of departure in conceiving this project was the premise that a *dérive* (as a non-optical apprehension of urban space) was a fruitful method for understanding modern urban environments. The concept of *dérive*, literally meaning "to drift," was first articulated by the French Situationist Guy Debord as "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances [that requires being] drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters (found) there [...] From a *dérive* point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points, and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the works in *Territory* register subtle changes in atmosphere, fissures, and psychological climates, as well as clearly visible demarcations. The artists are involved in tracking the passage of urban flow through engagements that extend into the charged realm of spatial politics, and provide the viewer with a sense of agency.

The project's film and video works are based on direct observations encountered in city streets. Using slow motion footage to focus on the incidental, the artists capture the stream of fleeting impressions by "taming" the peripatetic vision that comes from trying to decipher urban cacophony. Unlike the controlling gaze of the voyeur, their peregrinations with the camera track urban phenomenon through the engaged perspective of a walker. As the notion of the *dérive* implies, these works take into account the idea that the city can be a space of reverie where chance encounters momentarily bring dream and reality together. From



Seripop  
*Territory* poster, 2006  
Silkscreen print

the viewpoint of turtles slowly drifting down a river, Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla's camera surveys the shoreline with its layers of disjunctive economies. The slow pan that records quotidian river traffic speaks volumes about the impact of global economies and rapid industrialization in China's Pearl River Delta region. The steady gaze of the artists over the course of a day reveals the spatial networks of this region, Gonzalo Lebrija also exploits the impact of slow motion to create new spatial and temporal configurations. From a surveillance perspective, he records a crowd outside of a sports stadium in Mexico City that takes on a surreal, dreamlike quality. Yael Bartana's footage of a political demonstration in Tel Aviv, drained of colour and projected over a doorway, is transformed into a type of commemorative bas-relief procession.

The notion of cities as spatial imaginaries that are reanimated with each encounter was most evident in the site projects. In placing artworks throughout the city and by engaging its previously undisclosed histories through walking tours, *Territory* set out to disturb the conventional narratives of Vancouver's urban landscape. The series of commissioned walking tours constituted actual "drifts" through Vancouver streets that brought to light remnants of an urban archeology of sidewalk chronologies, forgotten riots, and the history of Carrall Street. Through poetic means that triggered cultural memories, these walks offered clues to the city's real

and imagined histories. Similarly, Jayce Salloum's photographic installations in storefronts located in a downtown Vancouver neighbourhood functioned as a type of guided walk that was animated by the distracted gaze of a *dérive*. These photographs were also circulated through various distribution and display systems—including bus shelters, inserts in a community newspaper, and free souvenir prints in the galleries—that amplified their currency. Salloum's project took on questions of spatial colonization through a process of mapping trajectories.

The site projects in *Territory* were not so much interventions as subtle disruptions in the urban fabric. They animated the streetscape in ways that drew out the relational patterns of cities as physical, social, and psychic spaces. Not necessarily recognizable as art, these works implicated passersby in an exchange, triggering thought processes that might have remained unconscious otherwise. Seripop's silkscreen posters that advertised the project on hoardings were activated by the mobile glances of street traffic. Their graphic and disruptive imagery temporarily claimed civic space and engaged public opinion. Similarly retooling the materials and vocabulary of urban sign systems to distract passersby, encounters with Ron Terada's signs functioned as subliminal messages that momentarily interrupted the thoughts of commuters. Through a changing series of cryptic messages on vernacular sign boards and a landscaped sign that spelled "Temporary," his disguised language works had a fugitive presence. Having no fixed meaning, they were open to interpretation, animated only by the imagination. Terada's fleeting disturbances injected into the urban landscape confronted the zones where public and private spaces overlap.

Also relying on the fleeting attention of commuter traffic to provoke a social imaginary, Roy Arden's three billboards in downtown Vancouver brought to the surface a city in a state of transformation. By superimposing photographs from a decade before into the urban landscape, Arden's work bears witness to the city's ongoing state of transformation. The battlegrounds of spatial representation become apparent in the disjunctions of how the city imagines itself, putting the very notion of urban regeneration into question. Always tied to the material residue of the past, the city's inventions and reinventions of itself allude to socio-economic conditions. Arden's billboards activated by their context provoke a type of involuntary collective memory.

Walid Raad evokes the illegibility of cities by performing a type of homeopathy on the dystopian imaginary. The Atlas Group's series of photographs, *Sweet Talk*, charts a traumatized urban landscape through a sequence of architectural fragments of war-torn Beirut. In revealing the dynamics of ruination and renewal, Raad exploits the illegibility of cities as a methodology for understanding the present. As he has stated: "These forms and ideas seem to me to be as much about the Beirut of yesterday and today as they are about the London, Madrid, Baghdad, Gaza City, and New York of today and possibly tomorrow. Place is a conjectural foundation, a ritual of and in time, capable of fixing a point of particular intensity in the universal chaos of our metropolitan civilization."<sup>2</sup>

This prescient reminder that global conditions arise from the particular was made evident throughout the project. The artists perform a type of archeology of spatial settings that brings to light the territorial imperatives that impact our world. They patch together urban fragments and what the Situationists called "psychic atmospheres" into new spatial and temporal configurations to map the ephemerality of civic terrains. Inspired by the idea that urban spaces are largely constituted by social relations, the *Territory* project brought psychogeographies to the surface to provoke collective imaginaries.

#### NOTES

1 Guy-Ernest Debord, *Theory of the Derive*, <http://www.library.nothingness.org/articles/ell/en/display>.

2 Walid Raad, *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König): 108.

## GERMAINE KOH

Concerned with the significance of everyday actions, objects, and places, Germaine Koh's practice calls attention to the quotidian. Her installations and public projects often disrupt systems of transmission and exchange in order to propose alternative networks. Koh provokes poignant relationships between the individual and society's highly codified systems of communication.

Koh works the slippery realms between art and non-art. Through a conceptual approach that favours the evocative nature of material, she brings the everyday into the gallery setting and inserts art back into the public realm. Her strategies reveal tensions between the individual and the collective, the private and the public. Past projects have included the distribution of blank slogan buttons that created mutable, open-ended communities of button-wearers; the disruption of a pedestrian path by placing a metal fence pole directly in the middle to force new traffic patterns; and the re-creation of an empty lot (with soil and weedy grass) in a gallery to consider the notion of fallow-ness for productive growth. These projects reframe our understanding of (and participation in) everyday codes of behaviour.

Continuing her interest in transmission and symbolic codification, *Transplant* (2006) frames the systems that control physical, cultural, and national exchange to investigate notions of inter-territorial cross-fertilization and contamination. Over the months leading up to the installation of the project, Koh had contacts in Australia, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, and other global locations gather small soil samples and ship them to Vancouver by regular post, FedEx, and in carry-on luggage.<sup>1</sup> It was understood that not all of the shipments would arrive successfully. Some individuals were more likely to be checked while others possessed knowledge to get controlled substances past border controls. The risk involved in shipping the soil samples was an important part of the conceptualization of the project. The results were thus informed by differences in class, race, and access to information in the world of global exchange.

The fear of contamination highlighted by *Transplant* is both physical and psychological, evoking debates on immigration, trade, security, and disease control. Koh's process not only challenged shipping controls, but also

further transgressed them in the covert transplanting of the soil samples into the ground in Vancouver. The source countries were chosen based on their loose relationship to Vancouver or because they have a history of stringent regulations around the importation of alien or foreign substances, organic matter, and people. The Vancouver transplant sites were chosen for their pertinent histories of development and immigration. For example, Koh transplanted Hong Kong soil on the former Expo 86 lands that have been developed by Concord Pacific, a plan instigated by an infamous Hong Kong developer Li Ka-shing. This site conjures up strong associations with the large number of Hong Kong immigrants that came to Vancouver prior to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China. Some of Koh's transplant sites highlight more incidental zones: easements, undeveloped public lands, or marginal green spaces. Each location calls into question not only public and private ownership, but also any claims that Vancouverites can lay to these pieces of earth, whether First Nations, recent immigrants, visitors, landowners, or developers.

Once the soil samples were transplanted into the ground, the artist marked the location with modest aluminum plaques, reminiscent of civic government markers, denoting the source of the soil and the date. Koh has described *Transplant* in terms of the "rhetoric of heritage,"<sup>2</sup> noting that discussions around heritage have consistently used the organic metaphors of naturalization, roots, and native soil. This project can be seen as a response to the implications of this language as well as a recognition that xenophobic or purist attitudes towards immigration, trade, and border control are often intermingled with the vocabulary of disease and contagion. As the artist has suggested: "The ideology of health has become an efficient means to justify social exclusion and criminalize origin."<sup>3</sup>

Typical of Koh's artwork that often relies on abstract forms of communication, *Transplant* functions in a mythical way in that the audience's experience is largely conceptual and operates through reading or word of mouth. Its physical traces are almost invisible. This secretive quality is in keeping with the political fear suggested by transplants of any sort. While this project is based on a conceptual understanding, the object is still maintained as a point of reference that serves as an indicator of actions. Forming



Germaine Koh  
*Transplant*, 2006 (detail)  
Soil transplant, engraved aluminium plaque  
Photo: Melanie O'Brien

a type of abstract cognitive map, the transplant markers turn our attention to the larger context, the shape of the city, and our place within it.

—M.O'B.

#### NOTES

- 1 The complete list of locations include Australia, Egypt, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. All of these sites resonate with the historical and current geo-political make-up of Vancouver.
- 2 Germaine Koh in an e-mail correspondence with Melanie O'Brien on 25 November 2005.
- 3 Ibid.

Germaine Koh (b. 1967, Malaysia) is an artist based in Vancouver. Her work has been featured in international exhibitions at De Appel, Amsterdam; Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; le Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal; the 2004 Liverpool Biennial; the 1998 Biennale of Sydney; La Biennale de Montréal 2000; Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong; Frankfurter Kunstverein; Seoul Museum of Art; Ottawa Art Gallery; The Power Plant, Toronto; and Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Koh was a finalist for the 2004 Sobey Art Award and is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.