

Smoke and Buttons

Germaine Koh makes art that's easy to overlook even when you are very close to it

BY CATHERINE OSBORNE



Photograph found
17 May 1993.
41 Street at
Dyer Avenue,
NEW YORK.

Verso imprinted
"11 +00 NNNNN
818 +02"; marked
"Fujicolour paper";
and inscribed
in black ink,
"Christmas 1991/
(seated) Peter,
Elizabeth, Rosie/
(foreground) Claire"

When I tell people about artist Germaine Koh's work and how some of it can be difficult to find even when you are very close to it, they often ask: why is she making art that's easy to overlook? Good question. There are answers, mostly having to do with gaining access to a wider public beyond the gallery-going crowd, and leading us into the work as potential collaborators. Germaine Koh's work

falls into many niche categories: exchange art, public art, found material art, interactive art, neoconceptualism; I've also read "minimalist pack rat." The monikers all work, but none really addresses fully how her work challenges the idea of what "looking at art" is.

One way of describing her decade's worth of art production is imaging the intangible being made tangible as a way of

turning the everyday into something amazing. Last fall in Ottawa, for instance, Koh set up an installation entitled *Prayers* in an elevated window of a city building. *Prayers* was, from the viewer's perspective, perceptible only as a tiny billow of smoke coming from the open window. Behind the scenes, the puffs were being orchestrated through computers that turned keystrokes into Morse code and converted the code into smoke through a fog machine. Essentially, what was evaporating into the outdoor air was information being input from office computers. Koh describes *Prayers* as "an exhaust system," a kind of visualization of human energy being expelled as smoke signals.

Passersby may or may not have figured this out, but the potential for her art to be found by the person on the street is its salient charm, like a small epiphany of the everyday insisting on being noticed by taking form, even if that form may seem incidental.

Prayers follows through on many of Koh's other projects, each of which shares in the idea of setting up opportunities where the artist, the viewer and the city might connect. Among her more discrete projects is a series of business cards with six lines on each that represent the 64 hexagrams of *I Ching*. She has on occasion installed them in public spaces such as phone booths where "viewers" can use them for whatever purpose they choose, saving them knowingly as art or using them to scribble down a phone number.

Her button series, similarly, is a pile of campaign buttons without slogans that are given out as freebies — you are invited to wear the blank statement on your lapel to be explained whichever way to whoever might ask. *Tokens*, another take on dissolving the boundaries between physical and mental spaces, is an assortment of bronzed twigs and pebbles that Koh instructs us to carry around in our pockets, to be rubbed while viewing the rest of the exhibition and then returned for another viewer to use. They are art objects given out on the premise of trust. As such, they bring us much more physically in touch with art, while breaking down the gallery taboo of not touching art by virtue of its value.

The chance of making a connection or not with her viewers is fundamental to her work, but Koh for the most part isn't too interested in documenting or talking about how that work has been interpreted. It is safe to assume that she doesn't regard any interpretation as being incorrect, which may be

the point. She is more taken with constructing the potential for something to happen. "What do people do when they are given carte blanche?" she has asked in regard to the principle behind projects like her website *For You* (www.artengine.ca/gallery/), where you can receive a fortune or write one to someone unknown by clicking on the image of a fortune cookie.

How we interact with her open invitations to borrow, wear, take, buy, use, or script a fortune really depends on how much "art" we see in it. (For better or worse, I have stashed away a Koh button, business card and postcard, all in mint condition.)

Koh's long-term project *Sightings*, which started back in 1992, is probably the best example of the serendipitous impact of her setups for random occurrences when art and life actual-



Germaine Koh, *Lumber*. Installation.

ly do converge. *Sightings* consists of 23 postcards reproduced from snapshots Koh has found in various cities. On the back of each she has documented where and when the snapshot was found and any extraneous bits of information that might give some revealing information about the otherwise anonymous image. The postcards have been displayed in postcard racks and sold at postcard prices.

At the 1998 Biennale of Sydney, which Koh participated in, one person in a postcard was recognized by a gallery visitor. Through that connection, Koh got in touch with the Australian woman who appeared in the picture. They traced the lost photograph to a reprint the woman had sent to her cousin in Connecticut, though how the photograph ended up in New York City's Off-Broadway district where Koh had found it remains a mystery. "She took it well," says Koh. "It was the last image she had of her father before he died. She saw the picture's reappearance as a sign that he was fine."

This series raises issues around private and public, just as the encoded smoke puffs of *Prayers* do by expelling information not designed for public consumption. The personal is removed from the work enough not to be invasive; what is captivating is its transference to a new form. Koh regards what she finds as art objects and considers them more generic than personal. The postcards do have the general appearance of bad amateur photography — lack of composition, blurriness and the dull look of some unidentifiable person's life being documented.

Koh isn't alone in her interest in conceiving how the literal and abstract can converge. In the 1960s, German artist Joseph Beuys described his notion of the "social sculpture," which basically gives credence to the idea that cognitive thinking can

nervously folded origami, each made while en route somewhere by streetcar.

Koh's moment of conceptual reckoning came while she was at the University of Ottawa, which she praises for getting her to think beyond the representational. Before finishing her master's degree at Hunter College in New York in 1993, she produced *Lumber*, a collection of some 700 pieces of two-by-four which she scavenged from the streets of various cities. Leaning up against the gallery wall or stacked as a mass in a corner, *Lumber* is a remarkable installation of the "unseen" having visual impact through the process of collecting scrap as art objects rather than as discards.

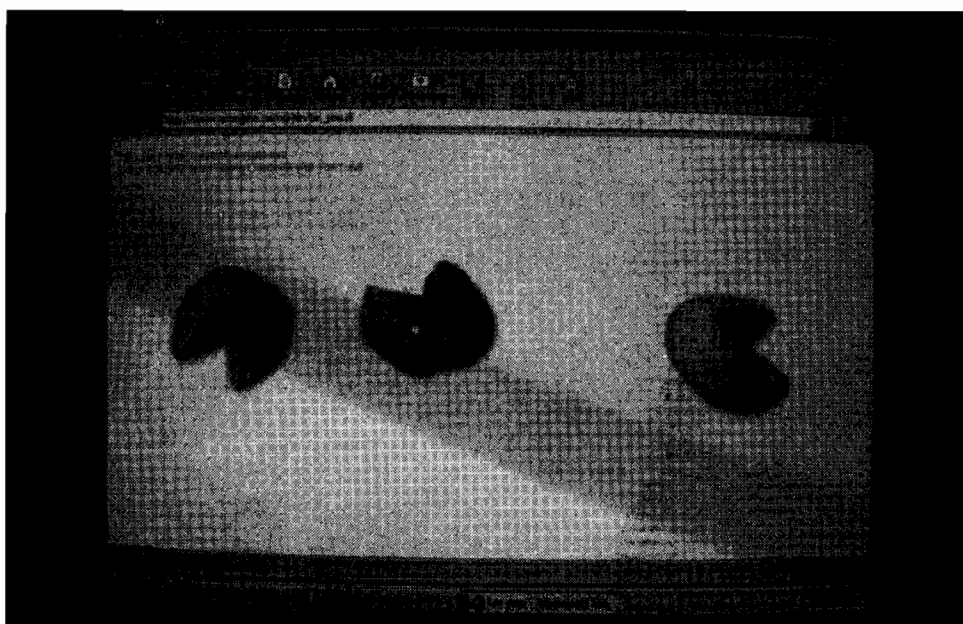
Lumber led Koh to her next "collecting" endeavour, *Knitwork*, which is probably her most recognized to date. It is

definitely her most exhibited, having been shown throughout Canada over the years, most recently as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's group exhibition "Waste Management." A lifelong project, *Knitwork* is created out of discarded sweaters reknit into a giant blanket that now incorporates 273 sweaters (also toques and mittens), and is over 80 metres long, more than double its length when the work was first shown in 1993. Koh calls *Knitwork* "a stubborn public manifestation of mundane activity," a testament to the everyday having the potential to be monumental. It is also a brilliant piece of measured time.

This month another one of Koh's ongoing projects, collecting dust into one massive ball (it is now the

size of a large grapefruit), is being shown at Vancouver's Catriona Jefferies Gallery. She also has a video work set up in the office area of the Kelowna Art Gallery. Entitled *Side Piece*, the six-and-a-half-hour video is a continuum of four men sitting and talking to each other around two park benches, a sight Koh witnessed daily and eventually recorded from the window of a studio she was using in Paris. With the soundtrack stripped down to the unscripted noises and rumblings of her presence in the studio while recording, *Side Piece* is a window onto urban alienation that again turns the mundanities of everyday life into a raw and romantic gesture of genuine experience. Like most of her work, *Side Piece* can seem weirdly stagnant until it is found. What you do with it is something else altogether, which is what looking at art is about. **CF**

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Germaine Koh, *For You*. Website.

be sculptural. The application of the ideas of Beuys and other similar-thinking conceptualists, among them On Kawara who is best known for his daily postcard mailings that are intended to acknowledge his own existence, has led to a number of substantial movements where the idea rather than the object is paramount.

Koh's work fits in with these foundations — hence her being billed a neoconceptualist. Many other artists are similarly interested in breaking down the confines of art being created for viewing within a gallery, or being trapped by its reverence as a valuable (and untouchable) thing. Life and art comingle in the works of artists like Ann Veronica Janssens, who produces coins that can be exchanged for various intangibles, such as 108 seconds of silence or three seconds of agreement. Or like Hamilton artist Kelly Mark, whose recent show at the Hamilton Art Gallery includes shelf displays of dozens of Toronto subway transfer tickets that the artist has twisted into