

Pachinko is one of those human inventions that, as Marx noted, comes to stand over its inventors; though since it is a game, this subjection is a quality players accept and perhaps enjoy. The translation to ball bearings allows Koh to make more explicit the machinic quality of pachinko, as does the elaborate mechanical contraption (a bricolage of spare parts from Toronto's Active Surplus) that ejects the BBs. She amplifies pachinko's chance element by causing the steel balls to rain not in the confines of a machine but from the heavens themselves (or at least, the ceiling...), perhaps in an evocation of the prayers that players mutter as they watch the pachinko balls spill through the pins. In subjecting contemporary art goers to the hail of BBs, Koh rematerializes the willing subjection of pachinko players. We become aware of ourselves as parts of a machinic ecosystem, and aware of the system's emergent intelligence, as the fallen BBs gather in patterns on the floor.

Koh makes sense of objects that are defined by their lack of specificity. By "making sense" I mean returning particularity to things that are considered abstract.<sup>6</sup> Koh chooses objects that are interchangeable: computer keystrokes, ball bearings, and bottled water are defined by their sameness. It's no accident that the actions and objects that are easiest to abstract are those associated with postindustrial capitalist society. This is a society that requires that things be interchangeable, from dollars to workers to countries where labour is cheap. Koh builds many of her projects around work that is wholly instrumental, a means not an end, be it word processing or pachinko playing. Her work makes sense of these objects and actions by rescuing them from the general purposes they serve: it is this specific keystroke, this tossed water bottle, this hurtling ball bearing that is meaningful in its materiality. Regardless of the content of the computer work done, the smoke trail of *Prayers* makes every effort manifest.



*Lumber*, 1991-4

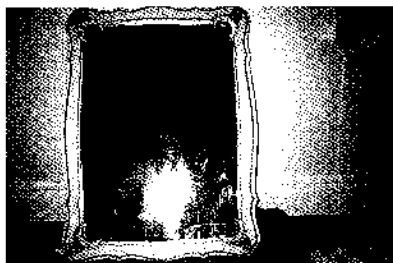
A similar act of making sense is Koh's early installation *Lumber* (1992), a collection of scrap 2x4s, painted gray and leaned against the gallery wall. *Lumber* made sense of the labour of building by making visible its discards. Similarly, for the long-term found-photo project *Sightings* (1992-98), the artist collected photographs that had been lost or discarded on city streets and reissued them as postcard multiples. One which I love features a man in white tuxedo and turquoise bow tie, reflected in a mirror leaning against the wall among scattered footwear.<sup>7</sup> He gestures proudly as he shoots his own portrait in the mirror, but the flash obliterates much of his image and highlights the smears on the mirror surface. Of course the photographer threw the picture away: it did not represent his ideal image of himself. But Koh, in keeping the photograph, valued it for its materiality, for the evidence of the effort

involved in self-idealization, which the tuxedoed fellow, understandably, wanted to erase.

Recently Koh made sense of a public artwork, *La Torre de los Vientos*, a monumental concrete sculpture by the Uruguayan sculptor Gonzalo Fonseca, built on the peripheral highway in Mexico City for the 1968 Olympiad. Her work *by the way* (2000), housed in the sculpture, involved capturing the live sounds of passing traffic, transforming them electronically into wind-like sounds, and transmitting these sounds back over low-power radio. Commuters on the jammed highway could listen to their own passage in a gentler manifestation. Many people resent monumental sculpture for its seeming lack of connection to their everyday lives: witness the furor over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981), which was removed from its site on Federal Plaza in Manhattan in 1989 when too many lunchtimers complained;

One of six photographs found 14 December 1989, 24 Street between 6 and 7 Avenues, New York. Was marked "Koh's P/PCB"

published by B.Koh, 1996  
Box 20032 KIV BNR Canada



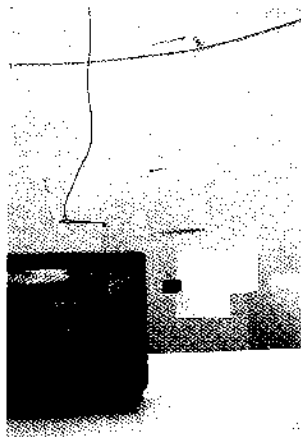
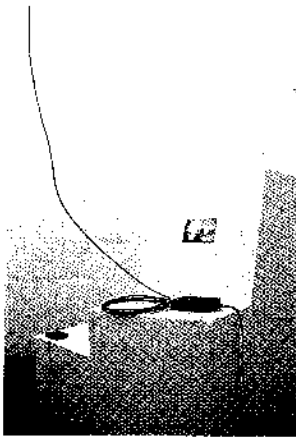
or witness the general-mischief assignment in the movie *Fight Club* to destroy public monuments. While I cannot make the same claim about *La Torre de los Vientos*, it is evident that Koh reinscribed the sculpture's function as art by making it the site of something quite transient and ephemeral. She makes the sculpture sensible, meaning she both makes sense of it and makes it apparent to the senses.

Koh works with objects devoid of individuality so that she can demonstrate that they too encode histories of human activity as much as more unique and precious objects, if not more. A painting or photograph is more likely to be the record of conscious human activity; a BB, keystroke, or plastic water bot-

tle is the record of an absence of consciousness, and is thus, for Koh, more interesting. Consider that the majority of human activity occurs prior to consciousness, and certainly well below the threshold of rationality.<sup>8</sup> Yet Koh's works point out that humans, in interaction with other organic and non-organic life forms, generate emergent self-organizing patterns. An earlier project, *Teams* (1997, 1998), invited visitors to exhibitions to choose one of two colors of blank publicity buttons to take away (red and yellow, at YYZ Gallery in Toronto; blue and green at the Sydney Biennale). Visitors implicitly organized themselves into teams on the basis of this modest preference. Similarly, *Poll* (1999), one of my favorite of Koh's works, consisted of a standard 6-foot galvanized steel fence post planted in the middle of a heavily trafficked footpath. Over the months, pedestrians organized themselves into groups who detoured around the pole to the left or to the right. Koh punningly "polled" people who

did not know they were participating in a work of art to contribute to an emergent self-organization.

Koh's works operate much in the way rivers do, valuing the way humans behave like pebbles in rivers. Koh draws on human activity in its pre-conscious, thoughtless, or we might say mimetic state as a source of communicable meaning. She organizes what seems random in order to identify its emergent patterns. In groups, we humans behave like riverbeds. We take part in, though we are not wholly responsible for, many more patterns than we are consciously aware.



*by the way, 2000*

1

*Poll, 1999*

## Notes

- 1 Leah McLaren, "What's up with that woman in the window?," *The Globe and Mail*, March 3, 2001, p. R3.
- 2 Manuel de Landa, *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* (New York: Zone, 1997), p. 55.
- 3 de Landa, p. 60.
- 4 Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
- 5 Germaine Koh, e-mail to the author, March 9, 2001.
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia, 1990).
- 7 *One of six photographs found 14 December 1993, 34 Street between 6 and 7 Avenues, New York* (1995).
- 8 For Narretranders, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*, trans. Jonathan Sydenham (New York: Penguin, 1998).

Many thanks to Cathy Busby, William Echard, and Germaine Koh for stimulating conversations in the course of this writing.