

DIANA NEMIROFF PICKS GERMAINE KOH

'The crucial issue is one of communication'

Diana Nemiroff, 53, is the curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Canada — in theory at least, the official repository of the best of Canadian art-making. So she keeps closely in touch with creative production across the country, and beyond our borders. In her 16 years at the National Gallery, she has curated many major exhibitions of Canadian and international art, including *Crossings*, the impressive spread of installation art she organized in 1998, and the 1991 retrospective of prominent Czech-born Montrealer Jana Sterbak.

The Globe and Mail: What is the place of Germaine Koh's work in today's art world?

Nemiroff: I think that certain issues being foregrounded in it, such as its modesty and its involvement with everyday activities — as opposed to

a sequestered studio practice — are probably quite indicative of current directions in art. You could say that this work is riding the crest of a wave, in its emphasis on communication, in its engagement with the everyday, in its involvement with ephemeral experiences.

G+M: Does that mean there is a rejection in it of what is sometimes called the commodification of the art object — of the notion that artists should make deluxe objects meant to be hung in museums?

Nemiroff: Yes, but only in part. Along with many artists of her generation, whom we could call neo-conceptualists, there is a real desire to work in a more modest way. In a way that isn't necessarily limited, in its interaction with the public, to the institutional context. But there's no programmatic opposition to art objects.

A lot of classic conceptualism of the sixties and seventies was about the same kinds of issues that painting and sculpture were about at the time — which is to say perceptual issues. It was about art. Whereas Germaine and other young neo-conceptual artists like her, are really trying to go out into the world.

A lot of Germaine's work is simply about putting private moments into the public domain. The crucial issue really is one of communication. And I think this is going to be a major issue in the future. Art's going to be more about information, and more loaded with information, and it's going to be able to use arenas, such as the Internet, which were not available to the object-based work of art.

But in Germaine's work, while a kind of communication or exchange is invited, it's always invited in a very open-ended way. Sometimes, it's like a message in a bottle — it goes out into the unknown. Most often, she would have no way of knowing how people interact with a piece. I think that's very much part of the premise from which she works. There is a kind of

hopeful attitude that the signal will be received, but at the same time a kind of resignation to the possibility that it might not be. Germaine sends out very open-ended messages. What you decide to do with them is obviously going to differ from person to person, depending on how seriously you want to respond. What it actually means is up to you, because it has a lot to do with how you receive it.

One of the things that I have been noticing all over is more and more emphasis on the interactive aspect of the creation of a work of art. While the viewer will complete any work of art with his or her interpretation, learned from his or her life lessons, this interactive aspect is now a much more important part of art-making.

G+M: A lot of people have problems with works like Germaine's, that they're expected to complete. As a curator, how do you find that playing out in the public's interaction with contemporary art?

Nemiroff: When people find themselves in directly interactive situations (with the artist present), most people are interested in responding, and may in fact take pleasure in it. When confronted with a more ambiguous work of art, like one of Germaine's, their reaction understandably will be ambivalent. They have the choice to ignore it or to interact with it, as they prefer. Because all art is open-ended there is always the risk of confusion, frustration, even rejection. Anyone who's interested in furthering art will try to address this, but in and of itself it's not a problem. It's part of the nature of art. It's part of what makes it different from a football game.

G+M: So in the end, is Germaine Koh's neo-conceptualism really that different from more traditional art forms?

Nemiroff: No it isn't, is it? In the end, you send works out there — sculptures in bronze, or words on paper, or puffs of smoke — and then stuff happens.



thanks

many thanks

THE ART: GERMAINE KOH'S SMOKE SIGNALS

Conceptual artist Germaine Koh prepared this composite artwork specially for *The Globe and Mail*. The bottom half is a multiple called *Thanksgiving* — cut it out and keep it for your very own piece of contemporary Canadian art. The top half shows a re-

cent Koh installation, called *Prayers*, that just closed at the Ottawa Art Gallery. A word processor in the gallery office was attached to a smoke machine; anything typed at the keyboard was first translated into Morse code, then realized as puffs of smoke sent

drifting on the wind.

Koh was born in 1967 in Malaysia and grew up in Armstrong, B.C. She went to the University of Ottawa for her bachelor of fine arts and received her MFA at Hunter College in New York in 1993.

THE EXPERT



Diana Nemiroff, curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.