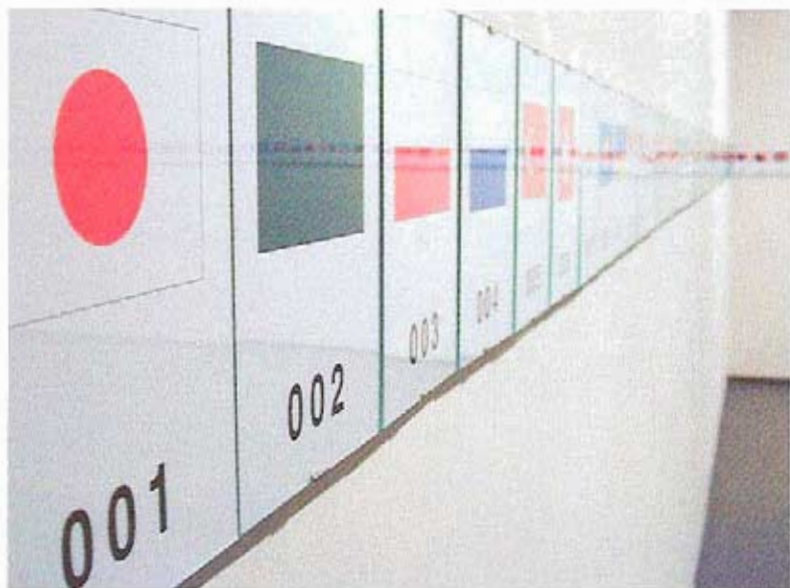


FEATURE

Law and Ordering: On Evaluating Recent Canadian Neoconceptualism

By Earl Miller



Michael Euyung Oh, *192 National Flags* (2001–2002), 192 digital prints, 10.2 × 15.2 cm. Image Courtesy of the Artist and Pari Nadimi Gallery, Toronto

MICHAEL EUYUNG OH is a ranker of the offensive and the mundane. In 200 *Sex Offenders* (2000–2001) he rated a series of photos of sex offenders (100 males and 100 females) by the visual appeal of their faces. Likewise, in *100 First Degree Murderers on Death Row* (2000) he ranked criminals' faces according to the vague criteria of the "sympathy" he feels for them after seeing their photos. In both pieces the rankings are pointless.

After this series Oh made list-based judgments about national flags, names and national anthems—*192 National Flags* (2001–2002), *100 Popular First Names* (2004–2005) and *National Anthem Favorites* (2005)—according to his aesthetic preferences. Ultimately there is, again, no reason for an artist to make these evaluations; the viewer, if she or he really wants to, can pick favourite anthems without his help. Given that the criteria he uses for ranking are ridiculous,

Oh raises, via satire, suspicion about the process of ranking anything.

By drawing attention in an art-gallery context to the possibly arbitrary underpinnings of evaluative judgments, Oh implies a critique of the evaluation of art. Discussing Oh's work in this light stresses, I believe, how important it is that art writers and critics maintain an awareness of how their own role as evaluators or rankers, is perceived, an awareness that it's a role often interpreted as elite if not authoritarian—as art police.

Perhaps in some cases this suspicion is a response to the dense prose appearing in some journals and catalogues. There's also the Marxist argument that art writing is inherently tainted because it is the spawn of a hierarchical, capitalist culture where elites determine things for the masses.

Remedying the elitism of art theory and criticism, however, should not mean abandoning academic thought, reverting to anti-intellectualism or just leaving art to work its "magic" without theory and without vigorous written debate. As Mark Cheetham stated in 2004 at the panel discussion *Critical Voices/Critical Writing* held at the Ontario College of Art and Design, "Debate needs a context of contestation, and that needs to be staged." A remedy to this problem, I believe, is not to remove the theory from the practice or the evaluation from the interpretation, but rather to regularly question how evaluative choices are made.

It is in this spirit that I have chosen to discuss artists who present everyday, unpretentious materials and situations that cogently question elitism, truth value or both.



Brian Joseph Davis, *Yesterday* (2006), production still, *Image Courtesy of the Artist*

Like Oh, **BRIAN JOSEPH DAVIS**—a poet, musician and artist—critically explores notions of ranking. Consider his CD *Greatest Hit* (2005), which compiles recordings by eclectic but radio-friendly acts such as Whitney Houston, the Carpenters, the Rolling Stones and Metallica. With an antiformalist abandonment of a decipherable end product, Davis has layered entire greatest hits albums into single tracks, cancelling out the individual songs with the resulting excessive noise. What had been considered great and worthy of hierarchy is trumped by the egalitarianism of noise.

Davis applies a similar strategy in *Yesterday* (2006), produced during an exhibition held this spring at Mercer Union gallery in Toronto. The work consists of recordings of gallery goers' renditions of the Beatles' classic lament "Yesterday," the most-recorded song in music history and arguably one of the most annoying. In a single take in a vocal booth located in the gallery, volunteers sang from memory over an instrumental version of the song. As with *Greatest Hit*, each take was then layered over the others to form a cacophonous choir whose performance played like an off-tune Gregorian chant.

In *Invasion USA* (2005), Davis also requested the participation of the public, but on the street rather than in the gallery. Taking his portable version of the presidential press conference stage—that blue-draped podium with bald eagle logo—to various Toronto locations in spring 2005, Davis invited passersby to audition for the job of American president by standing on the stage and speaking. Davis' sarcastic accompanying statement, "Complete wish fulfillment for the applicants, the audience and artist guaranteed," indicates how desire for fame perpetuates rather than questions political authority; that is, being the president rather than contemplating the difficulties of, say, pulling out of Iraq is the predominant dream. Indeed, the general response of participants was not to critique Bush II but to earnestly carry out his presidential role, if only for a fleeting moment.

Far Right Derek Sullivan, *Endless Kiosk* (2005), MPF, gatorfoam, printed paper (h. 7m) *Image Courtesy of Raphael Goldchain*



Like *Invasion USA*, **DEREK SULLIVAN'S** sculpture *Endless Kiosk* (2005) encourages the public's collaboration via a temporary system of public address. Sullivan invited people to paste handbills and posters on a kiosk he installed in the public lobby of Toronto's Power Plant gallery. In a similar work, *Kiosk* (2005), he commissioned specific artists—Maura Doyle and Annie Dunning, Althea Thauberger, Andrew Reyes, Zin Taylor and Clint Burnham—to add posters to the kiosk he installed in the Toronto Sculpture Garden (2005–6), along with the public. *Endless Kiosk*, despite the Brancusi reference highlighting the gallery's proximity, appeared out of place at the Power Plant, pasted with multicoloured handbills typically seen on the street. Similarly, with the Sculpture Garden piece, by basing the kiosk on an early 20th-century Parisian design, Sullivan ensured it effectively disrupted the space surrounding it, its anachronistic design raising questions about whether the public milieu is real, vibrant and spontaneous or an artificial construction.



Kevin Schmidt *Fog* (2004),
slide projection, 243.8 x 243.8 cm
Image Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries
Gallery, Vancouver

KEVIN SCHMIDT also makes absurd, artificial interventions, but in the natural environment. In *Fog* (2004), for instance, an installation comprising two 8' x 8' slide projections of night shots of the BC forest near Chilliwack, Schmidt enhances the natural landscape with a fog machine. The fog along with the photos' dramatic lighting lends the landscape an artificial and a surreal appearance recalling the dry-ice, stoner spectacle of classic-rock concert culture. The work is a bizarre hybrid of Spinal Tap and Emily Carr. Similarly juxtaposing nature with fakery, *Burning Bush* (2005) is a five-hour video of a bush in a desert-like landscape near Osoyoos, BC. Appearing to burn, the bush remains miraculously intact because the "flames" are made of silk, lit by orange halogens and blown around by fans. An illusion that has a blatant biblical reference becomes, in an art context, about artistic as well as spiritual artifice.

PASCAL GRANDMAISON also reveals the illusory aspects of photographic and videotaped images, through the use of light and portraiture. *Diamant* (2006), a DVD transferred from Super 16 mm film, centres on a closeup of a rotating imitation diamond. The diamond is a gem that has authenticity and shimmering light as its salient features; *Diamant's* convincing knock-off makes it an ideal symbol of how photography can still be mistaken, post-Photoshop, for a mir-

ror of reality. Grandmaison debunks the reality of the photograph even more straightforwardly in an earlier piece, *Daylight* (2002), for which he casually propped a pair of unplugged neon lights near a window partially blocked off by a black curtain but letting in enough sunlight to illuminate them. Light becomes a mix of the real (natural light) and the illusory (artificial light), mediated by the photographer's staging of the picture. Grandmaison's portrait series *Verre* (2004-2005) literally shows how photographic staging won't result in a transparent view of the subject. Each image features a waist-up portrait of a casually dressed young man or



Pascal Grandmaison, *Verre*
(2004-2005), Image Courtesy
of the Artist

woman against a sparse, off-white background. Each subject holds in front of them a glass pane. They stand in somewhat awkward positions, highlighting how the glass, although transparent, divides the space between subject and photographer—a division accentuated by the light-green tinge of the pane and the reflections on it. Grandmison reveals that a state of transparency between photographer and subject—necessary if one is to believe that the photographer can accurately express the sitter's essence—is illusory. Instead of seeking the real individual behind the subjects, in Verre Grandmison portrays them as nearly generic icons. With each gesture only slightly different, each subject wearing simple clothes such as t-shirt and jeans, each subject remaining somewhat expressionless, these pictures bear a serialized uniformity. While repetitive, the images' sparseness grants them a lack of pretense that's refreshing, especially given that their large scale (71" x 71") is typically associated with slick advertising and fashion photographs.



RHONDA WEPPLER, collaborating since 2004 with **TREVOR MAHOVSKY**, likewise focuses on serialization with a Minimalist influence. Wepler and Mahovsky typically abstract commercial package design to mimic the reductive geometric configurations of hard-edge abstraction. In *Bucket and Gravies* (2004) Wepler and Mahovsky make direct plaster and resin casts of the immediately recognizable red-striped KFC bucket, plus three Styrofoam cups for the Colonel's gravy, which are stacked on top. More recently, in *Boxes (Striped)* (2006) Wepler and Mahovsky reproduce striped Hudson's Bay Company, Adidas and

Gucci packages at an approximate 1:1 scale using wood and paint, arriving at an abstract sculpture by placing the copied boxes atop one another. What's noticeable about both boxes and bucket is the absence of all packaging text—an emphasis on formal design elements over the language of advertising that results in a distancing of the reproductions from the original products. Furthermore, the grain of the solid wood the artists build the boxes with is visible. Neither discrete abstractions nor commercial products, the sculptures occupy a grey area—a dead zone.



Like Wepler and Mahovsky, **JENNIFER STILLWELL** uses everyday materials and products in her performances, videos, installations and media. In *Drift* (2005), a three-monitor video documents a performance in which assistants tear up sheets of paper towel and place them in piles around the same gallery space the video is later screened in, forming an abstracted landscape recalling snow drifts—even mountains. In a small photograph (30" x 40") of the work at Stillwell's 2006 exhibition at Toronto's Pari Nadimi Gallery, the paper-towel landscape exudes surprising pastoral beauty. In contrast, sections of paper towel lying in a corner of the gallery have a much humbler appearance, more in line with the material. Similarly, in the DVD performance document *Wall Plow* (2006), Stillwell pushes an 8' x 4' section of drywall through a hallway, to "plow" a length of roofing tar paper covered with plaster chips. With the artist hidden behind the drywall, viewers simply see the wall closing in on the camera until it fills the entire frame, as if to form part of the gallery wall the DVD is projected on. Using the wayward drywall to imply first the tearing down of

RIGHT Rhonda Wepler, and Trevor Mahovsky *Bucket and Gravies* (2004) plaster and paint, 40.6 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm
FAR RIGHT TOP Jennifer Stillwell, *Drift* (2005), sculptural installation (Bounty paper towel rolls, cardboard tubes, packaging, 3-channel video, orange power cords), Image Courtesy of the Artist
FAR RIGHT BOTTOM Jennifer Stillwell, *Wall Plow* (2006), performance video installation, Image Courtesy of the Artist

a section of gallery wall and then the subsequent replacement of it, Stillwell proposes an expansion or alteration of the institutional gallery space. Perhaps this physical reconstruction stands as a metaphor for opening up the present tense of the gallery viewing experience to memory; both *Drift* and *Wall Plow* reference Stillwell's prairie childhood through allusions to snow and harvest.

Stillwell arrives at personal narratives by mining varied art-historical sources: the basic materials of Arte Povera, the pared-down forms of Minimalism, the actions of performance and the institutional or gallery critique of Conceptualism. The other artists I discuss here also look back to earlier Conceptual art. Oh, Davis, Grandmaison and Wepler and Mahovsky utilize the first-generation strategy of serialization (Hanne Darboven, On Kawara, Ed Ruscha). Schmidt recalls west coast Photoconceptualism, notably Jeff Wall's and Rodney Graham's incorporation of the Vancouver and greater BC landscape into photography and video. Sullivan's installations in public and institutional space reference Dan Graham's interventional outdoor installations to subtly question the surrounding space.

Certainly, this current referencing of Conceptualism, often referred to as Neoconceptualism, is far from unique to these artists and is far from a new tendency (the same term was applied to Jeff Koons, Ashley Bickerton, et al. in the mid-80s). However, the work I've chosen stands out for, above all, its lack of pretense: an often absurd and always satisfying reverence for the banal (Oh and Wepler/Mahovsky), a revitalization of the everyday (Stillwell), an avoidance of spectacle (Grandmaison), an extension of what is too often ivory-tower gallery space (Stillwell and Sullivan) and a humorous critique of power and elitism (Davis and Oh).

One predecessor who may be seen as a central reference point for the varying approaches of these artists is **GERMAINE KOH**. While not a direct influence, Koh produces such a wide range of work that her output at some point relates to all the work discussed here. It does so through the refreshing simplicity of her material and situations, the nonsensical humour of much of her work and her questioning of the split between public and private space.

Koh rides on a fast flow of information and a variety of readymade strategies, rearranging and furthering old paradigms into an eclectic body of new work. If she is not particularly concerned with developing structures and contexts, it's because she doesn't have to, because earlier artists working with Conceptualism have already done this. Koh's emphasis, therefore, is not always on the novelty of the initial strategy she uses but on how it applies to her chosen site.

Take, for instance, *Shell* (2005), which uses the Conceptualist strategy of opening private gallery space to the public milieu (recall, for one example, Dan Graham's piece *Yesterday/Today* (1975) in which, in the public part of the John Gibson Gallery in New York, he screened the private space of the adjacent office). Koh, at Catriona Jeffries' former Granville Street location in Vancouver, in an upscale shopping district

popular with tourists, built a shelter structure resembling a bus station onto the front of the gallery out of aluminum, plexiglass and wood, making a floor space previously part of the gallery accessible to people 24/7. Specific to the work is the Vancouver street, with a visible homeless problem at the foot of glimmering boutiques and condos.

Indicative of the sheer number of Conceptualist strategies Koh has at hand is an eclectic series of works known as *Fortnight* (2002), produced during a residency at the Boréal Art/Nature Centre in La Minerve, Quebec, where she made or performed a new piece almost every day. One of these pieces is *Photosynthesis*, in which Koh mimics the natural process of photosynthesis—the conversion of light to energy—by installing an electronic circuit with a solar panel and a green LED column in a tree trunk, allowing it to indicate how much sunlight is shining on the tree at a given time. The machine, in Koh's words, "reiterates the obvious," providing a ridiculously unnecessary piece of public information in an isolated location where it may only

LOSE unsightly incnes effortlessly,
EMS/Tens affordable home units.
Call 1-800-265-3354.

196690

817

Personal Messages

JANET

TO a woman with a great name,
whose only got 6 years on me,
warmest wishes on your 12th, Jan.

244838

96.2.28 Mom's birthday. She hasn't
even called since we moved. I
guess I'll have to call her, as usual.

244731

PERSON SEARCH

BIRTH brother, birth name William
James Laska, born June 14, 1964
at Ottawa's Grace Hospital. Call
collect, 613-938-2042, Kim.

200682

be viewed by a few hikers. In one of the ephemeral pieces in the series, *Matchmaking*, Koh found a small stone and then looked for another similarly shaped and sized one, discarding the first match upon finding an even closer pairing. These two pieces recall, among other works, Vito Acconci's absurd videos from the early 70s, in which he performed a simple, ephemeral and often silly activity such as plucking all the hair from his chest, the activity determining the duration of the piece.

Koh, however, has managed not only to draw from an array of Conceptualist strategies but also to broaden

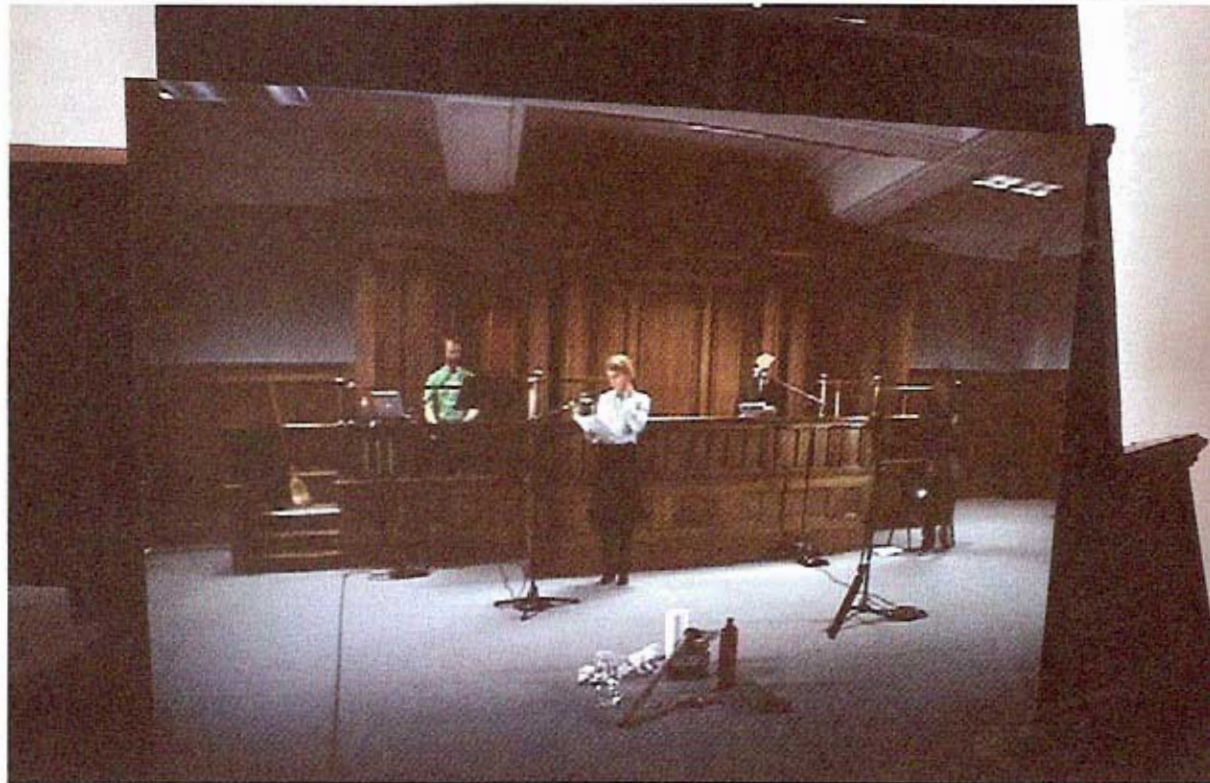


LEFT & ABOVE Germaine Koh, *Journal* (project ongoing since 1995), journal entries placed in newspaper classified ads and on public billboards, Image Courtesy of the Artist

them. Consider, for instance, *Journal*, an ongoing piece since 1995, in which Koh uses commercial signage and newspaper classified ads to place diary entries in public, a public exposure of personal information typically shunned in Conceptual art. Moreover, the series *Signs* (2002), along with Conceptualist public-intervention strategies, shows a culture-jamming influence: Koh partially blocks the text of public signage with self-adhesive vinyl. "Help Wanted," for example, just reads "Help."

Journal and *Signs* stress the ongoing need not only to repeat but also to expand the paradigms of Conceptu-

Gallery (the gallery used to be the city court house) that the gallery has left intact. The video is surrounded by a pile of courtroom prop pieces that the VAG makes available to film companies to augment the often-filmed courtroom. The video, reflecting Farmer and Radul's mutual interest in recreating events, is a mock trial in which characters read a script derived from court transcripts, found text (including airplane wreckage analysis and an excerpt from a poem by Francis Ponge) and original text by the artists. Outside the camera frame viewers hear the artists directing the characters—lawyer, judge, witness and guard. In front of the courtroom set, evidence and objects used for



alism. Indeed, in this post-original society, expansion as opposed to the replacement of existing approaches is the much more likely possibility. Unlike many artists of the 60s, such as Dan Graham and Acconci, Koh and the emerging artists I discuss here are not working with the belief that institutional critique, or critique of the art context in general, will eliminate the institution of art—an aspect of the idealism of the earlier era that Acconci highlighted in a 2006 talk at Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. Sullivan's *Endless Kiosk*, in contrast, proposes opening the gallery to the streets, yet, like a wayward kite on a string, remaining tied through art-historical reference (Branconi's *Endless Column*) to institutional space. Building upon rather than eliminating the institution of art, Oh, Davies, Sullivan, Schmidt, Grandmaison, Wepler/Mahovsky, Stillwell and Koh exhibit the deliberately provocative, merge Conceptual art with experimental music, break down gallery walls, open the gallery to public space and reconsider what constitutes art.

On a final note, consider *Room 302* (2005), a collaboration between **JUDY RADUL** and **GEOFFREY FARMER** that, like Oh's work, parallels the evaluative process of art. The *Room 302* installation includes a video that's set in a former courtroom at the Vancouver Art

Gallery (the gallery used to be the city court house) that the gallery has left intact. The video is surrounded by a pile of courtroom prop pieces that the VAG makes available to film companies to augment the often-filmed courtroom. The video, reflecting Farmer and Radul's mutual interest in recreating events, is a mock trial in which characters read a script derived from court transcripts, found text (including airplane wreckage analysis and an excerpt from a poem by Francis Ponge) and original text by the artists. Outside the camera frame viewers hear the artists directing the characters—lawyer, judge, witness and guard. In front of the courtroom set, evidence and objects used for

sound effects—wood flooring, knives and cabbages—surround a microphone. Through these objects, the courtroom set, the text added to the transcripts, and the fact that the characters switch roles and that one can hear the actors being directed, Radul and Farmer repeatedly stress that this trial is not a real one. Yet traditionally the courtroom, like the theatre (which Radul often references in her performance-based artwork), seeks to discover truth through testimony and evidence. However, like the theatre, Radul and Farmer's installation is a representation of apparent truth rather than reality. In a gallery context the installation references the evaluation of art, perhaps the critic putting art on trial to determine truth value, with the trial turning out to be decidedly unreal. In this way Radul and Farmer's installation exemplifies the work of the other artists I've analyzed here. It scrutinizes art, enacting a perpetual trial that is unlikely to reach a verdict but is still necessary to question the parameters of both art and criticism. ❧

Judy Radul and Geoffrey Farmer, Installation view, Artspeak Gallery Vancouver, Room 302 (2005), courtroom furnishings and ovd projection, dimensions variable. Image Courtesy of Aina Rognstad and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver