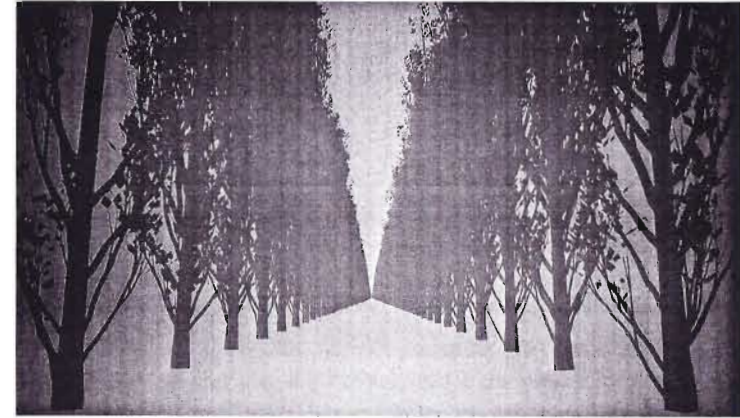


— Xandra Eden

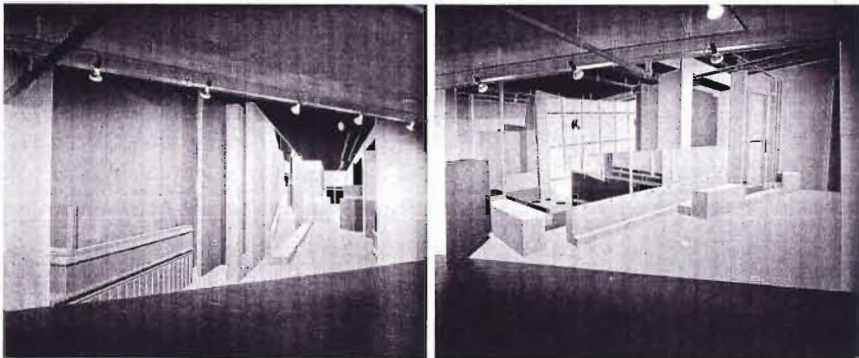
The title of the exhibition, In Through the Out Door refers to a common figure of speech that conveys a refusal to conform to conventional patterns of behaviour and suggests a crossing of boundaries — physical, social or intellectual. It connotes a way of experiencing the world from a critical perspective, a phrase that embodies my encounter with the work of David Armstrong-Six, Germaine Koh and Nestor Krüger. Using a variety of media — including painting, sculpture, digital media, photography, video and performance — these three Toronto-based artists turn our attention away from the idea of the discrete art object, so that we focus instead on our physical and mental perceptions of space. Some thirty years ago, artist Michael Asher instituted a vigorous analysis of the relationship between viewer, artwork and architecture. It is Asher's contention that, "Modernist tradition has created cultural boundaries within which aesthetic production is viewed as being autonomous and particularized: usually those of institutions such as museums and galleries. There the works of art, as objects, are solely interactive with the viewer, disallowing any other routines or reality to take place within the field of the viewer's perception."¹ The focus of Armstrong-Six, Koh and Krüger is in keeping with this idea in so far as they share a keen interest in altering the viewer's perception of space within a gallery context. However, another layer of complexity has been added to the examination of the phenomenology of the gallery space through the artists' deft incorporation of other points of reference, such as found objects, representations of the natural world and historical and cultural indicators.

Nestor Krüger — *Poplars*, 2001



Nestor Krüger

— Known for his large-scale wall paintings that incorporate the architecture of the presenting gallery, Nestor Krüger frequently uses context as a point of departure for his artistic practice. Yet, he initially creates much of his work within the virtual space of a 3-D computer-



modeling program. For his installation Misfit at Optica in Montreal in 2000, Krüger presented the structure of Eye Level Gallery in Halifax as it would appear if it were cut up into pieces and inserted into the space of Optica, then cut up again and inserted into the space of Eye Level, and then subsequently re-inserted into Optica. Shown in the form of two twenty-foot long wall paintings, the work thwarts our efforts to position ourselves perspectively, with flatness taking precedence over perspectival illusion. The work produces a frustrating visual dilemma since parts of the paintings are clearly recognizable as parts of the space we are standing in, yet we can never get the painting to conform to a common visual logic. Recently, the artist has been investigating issues of perspective through the use of rural landscapes, in particular country roadways and groupings of trees. For Poplars at Goodwater Gallery in 2001, Krüger presented twenty-five variations of spatial trajectories through an imaginary roadway lined on either side by tall poplars. Up a hill, down a hill, a sharp curve left, a sharp curve right, and straight ahead, these five viewpoints are also produced in five gradations of grey, one of which is, curiously enough, white on white. These

tonal gradations create entirely different perceptions of the distance and depth inferred by the poplar-lined path, continuing Krüger's analysis of the limitations of perception and the spatial tricks to which our minds are subject. Seeing is only believing, after all.

two turntables (2002) at The Power Plant is a dual-screen projection for which the artist has again employed trees as a formal device. This sound and video work consists of a two-minute digital animation sequence that circumnavigates two fictional forests of wintry, leafless lindens. Rendered in his trademark shades of grey, Krüger's trees are silhouetted against a slightly lighter silvery-grey background. One projection presents a view into the forest while circling around its perimeter in a clockwise direction. On the opposite wall, the movement in the second projection is counter-clockwise. As the two forests slowly begin to move, the audio component makes a low, rumbling sound, similar to that of large engine lumbering into motion. The tempo of the sound and the circular movement of the two forests increase in tandem. After about thirty seconds, the mechanical drone transmutes into the ambient sounds of a rural landscape. This transmutation in sound has the surprising perceptual effect of opening up and deepening the space, not only within the two videos, but within the gallery space itself. The work's two separate audio tracks are an assembly of the calls of eight different species of birds, a dog's bark, a motorcycle, a car, an airplane, etc. As the sound component slows down again, these distinct sounds blend together to form a reverberating drone as the projections of the two forests simultaneously come to a slow stop, followed by an ever so slight return in the opposite direction. The loop immediately begins again. two turntables produces alternating and contradictory physical/perceptual sensations of being caught in

a large machine and then released into a pleasant virtual landscape. When the animation begins, the low, vibrating rumble produced by the two subwoofers makes it seem as if the entire world is being put into motion. The palpably different spatial effects produced by the sound in combination with the two projected animations is surprising since the forest, although seen from different points of view, remains essentially unchanged. The accompanying prints, lindens (2002), provide an aerial view of the forest in the animations. But what we see is small, white, points in space set against a pitch black background — the forest as a fantastic constellation in space. As Krüger states, “what distinguishes two turntables is that the trees exist as points in space, in the same way that the birds in the audio track are points in space.”² This work, Krüger's first endeavour into sound and moving image, questions our understanding of space as static and exposes how sound greatly influences visual perception.

Germaine Koh

Germaine Koh's work explores abstract forms of communication whereby the viewer must negotiate a transaction or physically encounter a situation that the artist has staged. For example, in 1999, Koh installed a simple metal fence post in the middle of a commonly used dirt pathway along a grassy expanse. Over the course of several months, pedestrians were compelled to choose which side of the pole they would walk around. Their choices were made evident by the trodden grass on either side of the pole, creating a physical representation of a public Poll (the work's title). For her performance Watch (Montreal, 2000 / Edmonton, 2001 / Toronto, 2001), Koh stood in a storefront window on a busy street for three to five full



eight-hour workdays, looking out at the world in an active way. Individuals walking past may not have noticed her at all, but those that did experienced a subtle disruption in their daily experience of the street. Rather than the street being a site for their own visual consumption, with shops and restaurants offering items for purchase, these pedestrians became aware of themselves as part of the display — implicated as representatives of the social character of the street. The work recalls French theorist Michel de Certeau's idea of the tactic, an action that creates a space for an ephemeral subversion of power: "A tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash, shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike the hearer."³ Koh gently encourages viewers to increase their consciousness of their involvement and contribution in even the most mundane of circumstances.

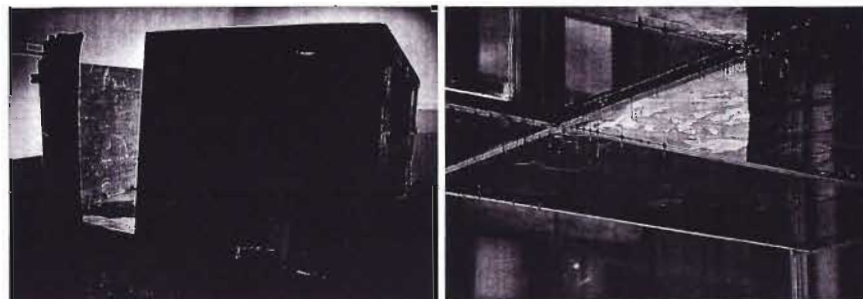
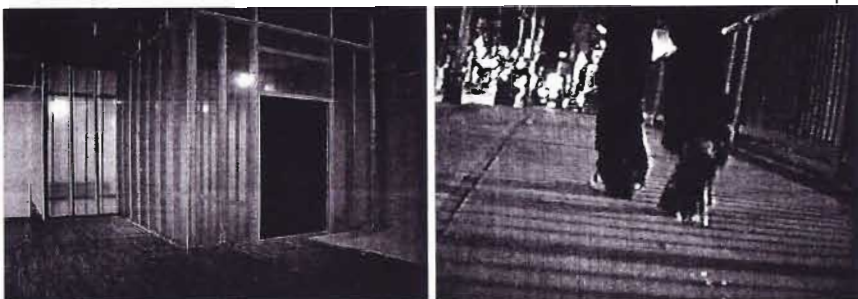
The context for Koh's work is even more critical when positioned within the gallery since this space is set up to attract and capture the viewer's full attention. For this exhibition, Koh's Fair-weather forces: wind speed (2002) brings the effect of outside weather conditions into the otherwise controlled conditions of the gallery's interior. An anemometer, a small device that measures wind speed, is attached to the roof of The Power Plant. Signals from the anemometer are sent to a control box that triggers movement in a standard metal turnstile that Koh salvaged from an old bookstore in Montreal. The turnstile is positioned in an area near the gallery entrance and, so, is encountered directly after paying admission. Fair-weather forces can potentially restrict the flow of visitors within the gallery since, in high wind conditions, it spins at such a rate that passage through it is deterred. The work not only implies that weather conditions actively inhibit attendance at cultural institutions, but calls attention to issues of access to high culture.

While with Fair-weather forces the exterior world produces effects that are experienced inside the gallery, Koh's second work in this exhibition offers a reversal of this dynamic. Prayers, first exhibited in 1999 for the Ottawa Art Gallery, links activity generated within the office of the gallery to the more public realm. At the Power Plant, in the administrative offices above the gallery, data produced during the course of the day by a staff member (in this case, the curator of the exhibition) is relayed to another computer in the exhibition

space. Each time the staff member strikes a key on her keyboard, it is transmitted to the computer in the gallery below where it is translated into Morse code and subsequently, sent out into the world. Each letter is released as puffs of smoke from a smoke machine located on the northwest corner of The Power Plant roof and is visible from the surrounding area. By sending the signals of a staff member's labour out into the world — labour normally invisible to gallery visitors — Koh highlights the way the gallery architecture functions as a structure that privatizes information.

David Armstrong-Six

In 1999, David Armstrong-Six produced as model in a temporary exhibition space in downtown Toronto. In this work, the artist reproduced the architectural structure of the exhibiting gallery, but reduced it to half its size and suspended it from the ceiling of the gallery. During construction, Armstrong-Six applied yogurt to the wooden frame before sealing it in industrial strength plastic and placing a sheet of green Plexiglas at the model-gallery's entryway. Over the course of the exhibition bacteria grew and infested the pristine interior. Upon entering the exhibition space, the viewer encountered a levitated and afflicted representation of the space in which they stood. Similarly, for Leak into space (first installed at Mercer Union in 2000) Armstrong-Six situated a large, open dumpster within a small gallery leaving just enough room for the viewer to move around the perimeter of the dank, rusted trash bin. A brown, gooey substance (cooked up from a combination of corn syrup, cement, detergent and Vaseline) lay in pools in the bottom of the dumpster and, over the course of the exhibition, oozed out onto the gallery floor through the many holes rusted through the dumpster's sides and base. On a video monitor set into the back wall of the gallery alternately played two videos: The Soup (excerpts), which shows the goo being concocted; and Track it around, which follows the artist's feet through the nighttime streets of downtown Toronto as the goo, a viscous, formless matter that is a physical representation of what the artist terms "impure thought," mysteriously drips in his path, leaving a sticky trail, like the secretions of some giant snail. In another variation on this theme, also titled The Soup, Armstrong-Six dumped a similar substance over a drop ceiling of clear Plexiglas.



Throughout the exhibition period, the brown goo dripped through the sides and fissures between the panels of the ceiling, over time creating small stalagmatic forms from seepage through the ceiling and small reflective pools on the gallery floor below. Armstrong-Six states that “the architecture (in this work) is only significant in so far as it acts as a support system for other concerns.”⁴ His incorporation of an element of change — a bacterial growth or a slow liquid ooze — that invades a setting of clean lined sculpture is tangentially related to the idea of mental cognition as fluid and mutable.

Armstrong-Six’s new work for this exhibition, Antimatter Island, incorporates the viewer’s physical encounter with the concept of the work. Antimatter Island is a large geodesic dome built from steel and smoked Plexiglas. The structure’s references span time and space, from the facets of an organic crystal, to mid-19th century

greenhouses, to the cockpit of a futuristic vessel. In fact, a reptile’s skull — that of a primitive sea turtle — provided the model for the dome. Reflections generated by artificial and natural light bounce through and across the smoked Plexiglas; however, the interior is dark in comparison to the surrounding pristine white walls of the gallery. Something alien has settled here. Entering the work, the viewer is enveloped in a mammoth cranial cavity; the comings and goings of a multitude of individuals within this empty skull imply an uncontrolled and fluid passage of thought. The accompanying All Around is a miniature self-portrait of the artist situated in a smaller gallery at the northern end of The Power Plant. Sporting a Joy Division T-shirt, this forty-two cm high representation of the artist has a direct correlation to the viewer’s physical experience when standing within Antimatter Island — small and transitory in

comparison to the gargantuan skull, and a blip on the proverbial radar screen in comparison to the vast expanse of time that has come before us and is yet to come.

The reflexivity encouraged by Minimalism is evident in the work of Krüger, Koh and Armstrong-Six. Minimalism sought a heightened level of critical thinking and open-mindedness from the viewer. Hal Foster writes, in Return of the Real, “the viewer, refused the safe sovereign space of formal art, is cast back on the here and now; and rather than scan the surface of a work for a topographical mapping of the properties of its medium, he or she is prompted to explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site.”⁵ More than the perceptual, this new generation of artists integrate a trove of references (a skull, a spaceship, a group of trees, a starry night, a turnstile, a puff of smoke) that move their work beyond the phenomenology of the gallery space. They investigate and create associations with the world outside. The artists in In Through the Out Door apply the spatial and perceptual strategies first brought into play by Minimalist sculptors, but produce entirely different situations by binding together the familiar and the unfamiliar, content and context, the material and the intangible — providing us with a space in which to become more aware of the complex web of meaning all around us.

Notes

- 1 Michael Asher, Benjamin Buchloh ed., Michael Asher: Writings 1973-1983 On Works 1969-1979 (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design / Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983), 65. Although Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke were developing ideas along similar lines, Asher's efforts to alter the circumstances of the viewer's encounter in order to increase their consciousness of the contextual parameters differ. He challenged, not the ideology or financial interests of the museum, but its spatial and sensory apparatuses. The artists involved in Arte Povera took a similar stance, in particular, Luciano Fabro, whose work encouraged a perceptual reflexivity and called attention to the forms he presented as being “nothing so much

as themselves, inverting the logic of representation.” (from Richard Flood, Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1967-1972 (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center / London: Tate Modern, 2001), 17).

- 2 From an interview with the artist (May 10, 2002).
- 3 Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 37.
- 4 From an interview with the artist (May 24, 2002).
- 5 Hal Foster, Return of the Real (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 38.