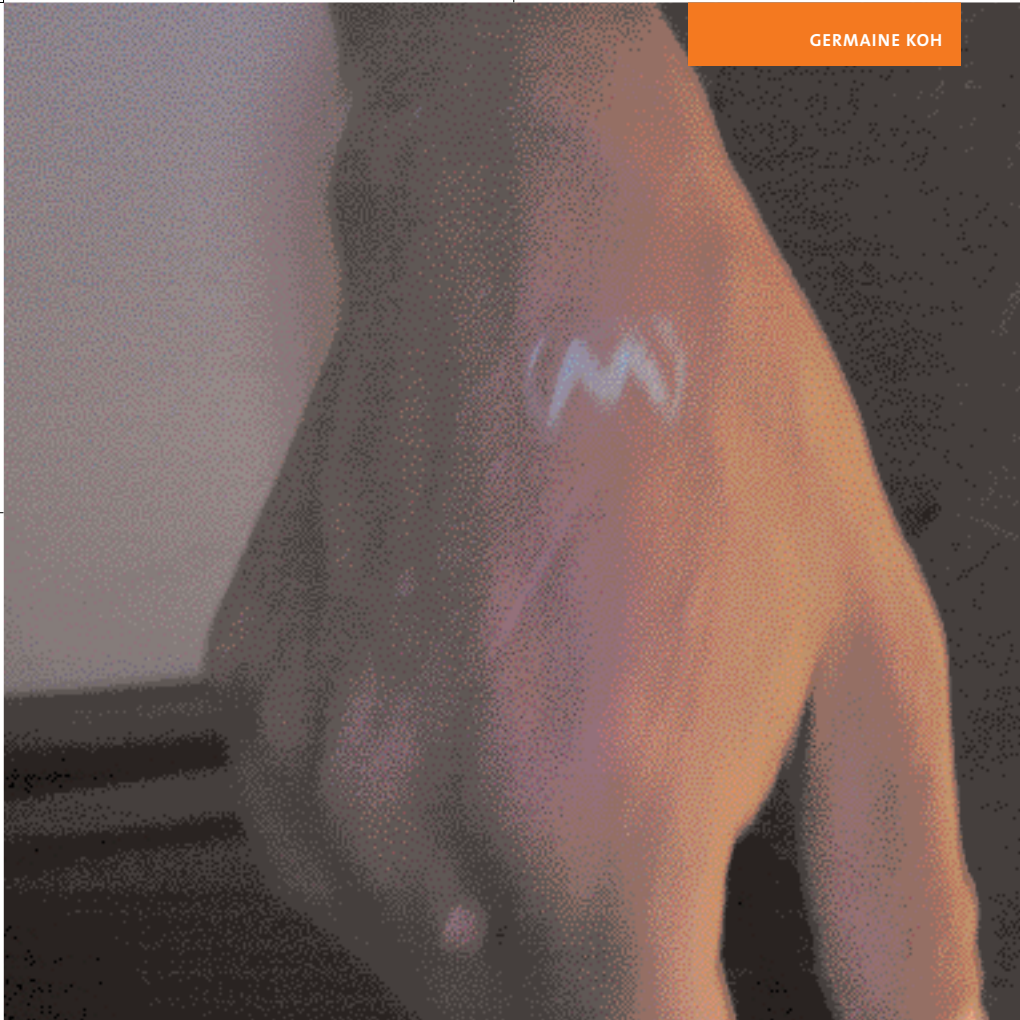
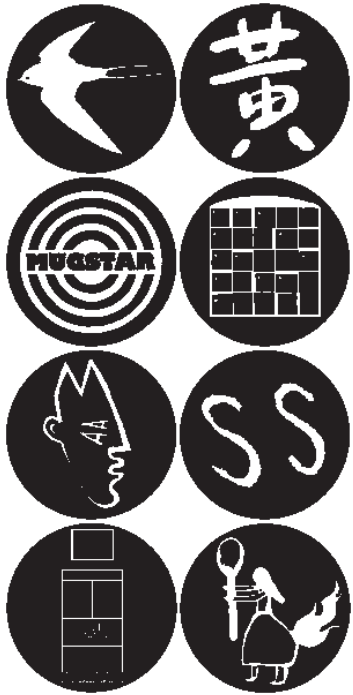


GERMAINE KOH





Research image for *Marks*,
2004
Hand stamps designed
and applied by Tate
Liverpool staff, UV light
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries
Gallery, Vancouver
Photo: Germaine Koh

Employees of Tate
Liverpool
Selection of designs for
hand stamps for
Germaine Koh, *Marks*
2004 project
Designs submitted by
(left to right, top to
bottom): Edward Bruce,
Brian Wong, Steven
Ashton, Julie Robson,
Jason Richardson,
Ray Carney, David Woods,
Soup group
Courtesy the participants
and Tate Liverpool

Research image for *Relay*,
2004
Digital photo
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries
Gallery, Vancouver
Photo: Germaine Koh

Germaine Koh

Marks and Relay

What does it mean to be marked? This is the question Koh's work asks and, it seems, many answers can be condensed into just one – to be marked is to identify ownership or possession and in turn power.

Koh's initial investigations, in preparation for *International 04*, gave rise to a complex of issues linking the history of the port of Liverpool with the current burgeoning urban youth culture. Koh became fascinated by diverse references to marking she encountered within a comparatively small geographical location. Tate Liverpool's proximity to the old customs buildings emphasised for Koh the city's role as an international port and further research revealed numerous systems of marking import/export documentation for goods as well as passports for migrants.

Graffiti artists' tags, the very fabric of the city as a canvas, fix an identity in the social consciousness and simultaneously define a territory. The continued renaissance of tattooing identifies the power of individuals over their own bodies – the skin being their canvas. Marks made on a body by another can be celebratory,

indicating a successful rite of passage, a transition to adulthood or commitment to an ideology or a group. Such marks confer authority and power; however, just as often, marks can define ownership and in that way become disempowering.

Less permanent marking of the skin can also bestow certain rights – the use of UV ink stamps to signify admission to certain venues, for example, identifies the individual as worthy of that club or the VIP lounge and thus 'cool by association'.

Working with the admission staff at Tate Liverpool, Koh produced a series of self-inking personalised monogram stamps, given to staff with the option of marking the hand (or any agreed body part for that matter) with one of the designs. The designs and information on the person who created the stamp are presented in book form, printed in ink visible only under UV light. Such subtle, almost invisible actions are central to Koh's artistic practice. The fact that the same stamp can mark many people, its continued use and re-use, are important motifs. The potential for visitors to return to the gallery with the aim of 'collecting' the marks is an element of the work, as is the fact that these stamps are carried away from the building, extending Koh's reach beyond the gallery walls.

The physical boundaries of the gallery are no concern for Koh's other work *Relay*, one part of which is presented at Tate, the other in Liverpool Town Hall. A utilitarian lamp, seemingly innocuous among the many light fittings in the gallery, blinks on and off in a series of long and short flashes. A loose electrical connection, maybe – but for those with the right cipher these rhythmic patterns can be easily translated from Morse code. Mobile phone messages sent from the city centre (or from anywhere else in the world) are converted to code and flashed out for the world to see, messages from Tate Liverpool sent to the Town Hall. Source and destination may be miles apart but, perhaps unknowingly, participants create an invisible connection between two distinct points in the city. Intimacy – a mark on your body, a private message sent to an unknown recipient. Invisibility – a mark seen only in certain lights and messages only recognised when decoded. Koh's work has its roots in the everyday but through her subtle gestures marks the everyday as uncanny.

Adrian George