

# HOW SOON IS NOW

KATHLEEN RITTER

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"When you say it's gonna happen 'now' / Well, when exactly do you mean?" croons Morrissey in the classic 1984 song "How Soon Is Now?" by British rock band The Smiths. While the rest of the song's painfully earnest lyrics narrate the anxiety of being alone—"How can you say / I go about things the wrong way? / I am human and I need to be loved / Just like everybody else does"—it is not the fear of loneliness that prompted the choice to appropriate this title for an exhibition of contemporary art. It is the poetics of the title itself that evoke a strong sense of immediacy. The words *soon* and *now* name two conflicting ideas of time: the first as something about to happen, the second as something currently underway. The collapse of these two notions of time into a single, specious present, combined with the interrogative insistence of *how*, produces an urgency. What could be sooner than now?

It is fitting to start with an absurd proposition—the notion of a sooner-than-now now—for an exhibition of contemporary art. The incongruity of the two ideas of time lends itself to the inherently heterotopic nature of a group exhibition—a disjunctive *mélange* of objects and spaces brought together in productive collusion. This collapse of space and time into the present is key to a selection of new work by artists from this province, if only for the reason that an exhibition of this kind poses the question of what is happening here now.

*How Soon Is Now* presents work by thirty-four artists and collectives from the province of British Columbia. Employing divergent aesthetic and conceptual approaches in a range of media, the diversity of work reflects the vitality of art from this place and recognizes important shifts in contemporary art that privilege practice over discipline, process over product and immersion over observation. These shifts mark the complex terrain for artists that has taken shape in the wake of 1960s Conceptualism, examining the contextual/situational nature of art and questioning the traditional role of the art object as static and contained. Following this line of inquiry, artists turn a critical eye toward all aspects of art production and exhibition, including the institutional structures that surround and mediate the reception of art: the architectural space of the museum, the roles of the curator and the artist, and the conventions of spectatorship. Today these structures, among others, form the narratives that artists rework in the broad field of contemporary cultural production.



SAMUEL ROY-BOIS

Ugly Today. Beautiful Tomorrow. 2009

Encompassing these distinct tactics, *How Soon Is Now* is not organized around a single theme, but through shared connections between works. This is envisioned as a distributed network, where the routes from one work to another form a constellation of meanings and modes of viewing. A list of adjectives—unexpected, resistant, immediate, improvisational, theatrical and irreverent—can be used to articulate some persistent sensations produced by the work. The decision to bring together work based on similar affect rather than similar content reflects a parallel shift from examining the work itself to our experience of it. Just as artists in this exhibition challenge the basic conventions of representation, questioning the dominance of the visual in relation to our experience, the curatorial framework of the exhibition invites a varied viewership in a number of ways: by placing work in close proximity so the experience of one work folds into the next, by including works that require audience involvement to complete them, by inviting artists to activate different parts of the building, or by simply situating work in unlikely locations. Indeed, artworks occupy a number of sites inside and outside the gallery proper—on the grounds, at the entrance, in the lobby, in the windows, on the ceiling and behind the walls—extending the exhibition beyond the frame of the gallery and inviting incidental rather than expectant encounters with works of art.

These shifts in how and where one encounters art are part of a longer historical trajectory in art from the early twentieth century on, where artists have re-evaluated the standard choreography of museum viewership and in response have asked audiences for their involvement or invited them, in one way or another, to look away. Likewise, the idea of the spectator as a collaborator in the production of meaning has been articulated in critical theory from



MARINA ROY      Harnessed, 2009

Walter Benjamin to Michel de Certeau among others, and most recently in the writings of Jacques Rancière. Rancière elaborates that the emancipation of the spectator begins:

when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that "interpreting the world" is already a means of transforming it, of reconfiguring it. The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets.<sup>1</sup>

In rethinking spectators as active producers of meaning, even through the act of looking, Rancière attributes a politics of participation in the encounter with the work of art where hierarchies of active production and passive reception are overturned.

Alongside this idea of active viewership, a number of threads run throughout the exhibition and form the points of intersection between works. For example, images of recording studios and rehearsal spaces proliferate, everyday objects are transformed into the unfamiliar and the extraordinary, traditional signifiers of craft subvert expectations of so-called high art, popular music is used to political ends and standard architectural features appear as adjuncts to artworks.

In *How Soon Is Now*, a number of artists—Cedric, Nathan and Jim Bomford; Christian Kliegel; Germaine Koh and Antonia Hirsch—create works that challenge the singularity of the gallery's architecture. Other works by Abbas Akhavan, Mark Soo and Erica Stocking are situated outside the traditional exhibition



LAIWAN PDA for Your PDA, 2009

space, while still others—Samuel Roy-Bois, Instant Coffee and The Music Appreciation Society—create alternative environments for social interaction within the gallery.

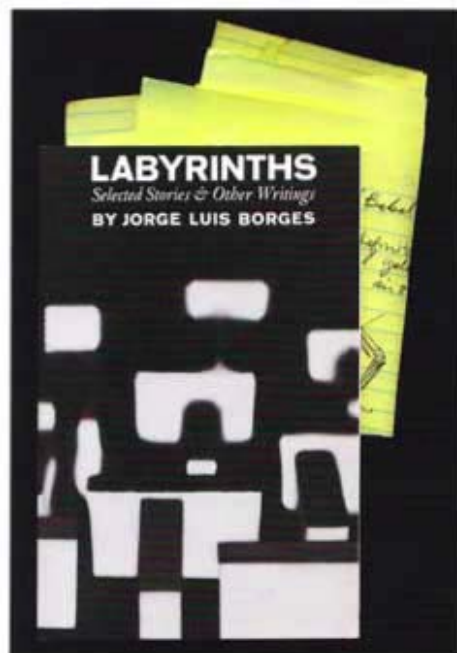
Also in the exhibition are works that reflect a renewed interest in process, figuration and materiality, by such artists as Marina Roy, Kristi Malakoff and Allison Hrabluik. The works of Aaron Carpenter, Luanne Martineau and Raymond Boisjoly question traditional ideas of mastery and craft, while Lucy Pullen, Paul Wong, Kevin Schmidt, Jackson 2bears and Laiwan perform or record an event, incorporating experimentation and risk while marking a unique moment in time.

Still more threads bind other artists exhibiting here. Works by Damian Moppett, Kathy Slade and Hadley+Maxwell use strategies of irony or inversion to subvert some of the aesthetic and political goals associated with late Modernism. Ken Singer, Kara Uzelman, Kyla Mallett and Dan Starling make work that operates in the gallery as an index to activities or production that occur elsewhere. Artists Sonny Assu, Brendan Lee Satish Tang and Holly Ward re-evaluate the conventions and politics of value through the formal and signifying potential of objects. Finally, the works of Noah Becker, Carol Sawyer and Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky share a strong sense of theatricality.

This list is not comprehensive and could easily continue, with artists occupying multiple places within it. While there are contiguities and overlaps between the currents that run through the exhibition, the relationships between works are not continuous nor necessarily compatible when situated in the same space. What happens when one artwork that intervenes into the architecture of the gallery is placed next to a work that assumes the same walls as a framing device? What is produced when the sound of one installation bleeds into the next room? How do viewers respond when invited to interact with one work but expected not to touch another? What effects are produced by the deliberate proximity of different forms and intentions?

The museum—already a place in which several competing spaces coexist—is best described as heterotopic, in terms of Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopia as a space "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."<sup>2</sup> Foucault's concept of heterotopia is prompted by an outburst of uncontrollable laughter, apropos a text by Jorge Luis Borges which, when read, "shattered all the familiar landmarks of





KYLIA MALLETT

The Library, 2009

my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things.”<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s laughter belies a moment of discovery and wonder, of something that exceeds the thinkable and opens up the possibility for thinking *otherwise*. In this way, heterotopia is foremost a means to conceptualize difference outside of inherited classifications and categories that form the common basis of knowledge.

Heterotopias are real places (unlike utopias) in which space is collapsed and time is conflated and all other sites are “simultaneously represented, contested and inverted,”<sup>4</sup> such as those found in cemeteries and gardens, ships and museums. They appear frequently in the writing of Borges, notably in stories like *The Aleph*, where he describes a site in which everything in the universe can be seen from every angle simultaneously, without distortion or confusion. Foucault elaborates:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together.”<sup>5</sup>

It is through this idea of heterotopia that one imagines an arena in which several conflicting spaces can productively coexist, forming a constellation of affects that are not reducible to a single framework. The general resistance to categorization in the artworks and the framework of the exhibition is not restricted



HADLEY•MAXWELL 1+1-1, 2007

to the institutional parameters of exhibiting art, but is a broader response to a dominant cultural and global economy that privileges the singular, the whole, the complete, the product, the frame, etc. as means to contain variation and difference. *How Soon Is Now* is a collection of spaces, incongruous propositions, competing activities and varied sensory moments juxtaposed in the singular arena of the museum. In this spirit of heterotopia, one can summarize the different modes of viewing that run throughout the exhibition.

It is in this particular environment that ceramic vessels can be placed next to an audio work whose low-frequency, booming bass makes the wall vibrate; or the emergency alarm of a free-falling airplane can be heard in an otherwise silent room of elegant sculpture; or a set of stairs can lead up to a window with a view to the trees outside; or a large mound of earth can move to different locations, parasitically invading other works. It is in this suspended reality that the lights in one gallery can fluctuate according to the daylight outside, at the same time rendering them useless; or a flag can be raised on the outdoor plaza with an ambiguous message to insomniacs; or a particular floor of the building can appear to have an unusual number of elevator doors. It is in this peculiar arena that dark, flickering lights of a video installation can be seen behind an ominous image of a skull rendered in brightly coloured flowers; or an installation that uses surveillance mirrors can reflect every other object and person in the room; or the elevated view from the platform of one installation can extend into another exhibition on the floor above.

Individual works inflect others as much through their commonalities as their disjunctions. This discovery and confusion, discord and pleasure, form the divergent spaces that bring work together in *How Soon Is Now*, creating the



INSTALLATION VIEW

Holly Ward and The Music Appreciation Society

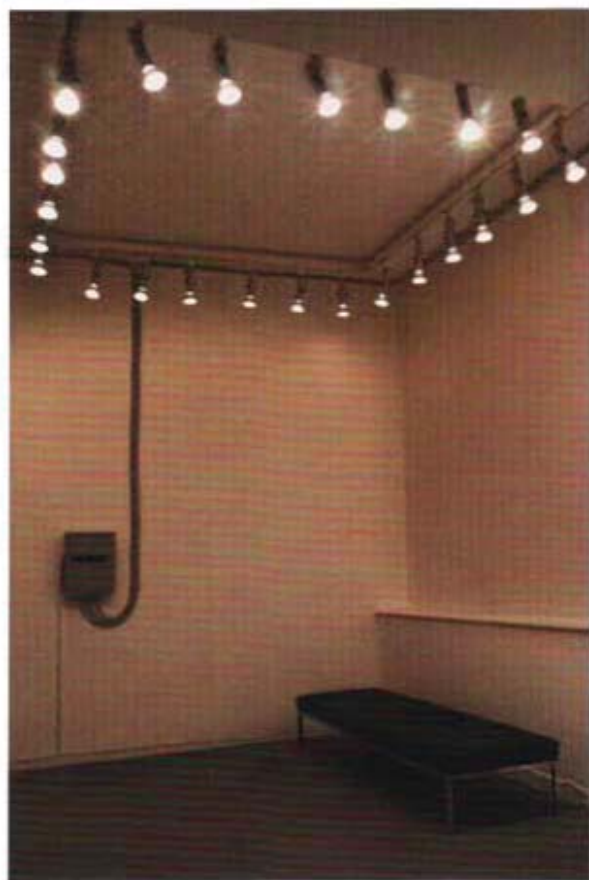
opportunity for an encounter in the present moment. Here, artists are concerned with not only *what* one is looking at, but *how* one is looking at it, inviting one to critically reflect on the practices of looking.

The heterotopic and linguistic play of incongruities embedded in a phrase like *How Soon Is Now* parallels this strategy of juxtaposition in the exhibition. Is it only in the space of language that we can consider the question: what can be sooner than now? Language itself drives a wedge between the now of the question and the now of the answer, the now of the time this is written and the now in which it is being read. The irony is that, in the time it takes to answer, now has already passed.

#### NOTES

- 1 Rancière, Jacques. 2007. "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* (March): 275.
- 2 Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring): 24. This text, originally "Des Espace Autres," was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967 to a group of architecture students in Paris.
- 3 Foucault, Michel. 2002. *The Order of Things*. New York: Routledge, p. xv.
- 4 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," p. 24.
- 5 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xviii.







# GERMAINE KOH

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Germaine Koh's practice quietly monumentalizes the quotidian. Drawing on a long lineage of conceptual art, Koh works with codified systems of exchange, reconfiguring the relationships between art and life. Koh examines the significance of the everyday by bringing ordinary objects, environments and systems into the space of the gallery. From found snapshots published as postcards, to a more than decade-long self-portrait project, to diaristic personal ads in the newspaper, to transposing the grounds of a vacant lot into the gallery, Koh reframes and transforms the everyday, revealing the arbitrary nature of the boundaries between art and non-art. Koh describes her work as "an attempt to be attentive to the poetics of daily life by focusing on those phenomena that shape everyday experience, often slightly below the threshold of notice."

A series of Koh's works bring the weather and other natural phenomena into the space of the gallery. For example, a line of museum stanchions rise and fall according to the tide in *Fair-weather forces (water level)*, and a turnstile spins at a speed that registers the level of wind outside in *Fair-weather forces (wind speed)*. In the work seen in this exhibit, *Fair-weather forces (sun:light)*, Koh transforms the interior gallery space into an index of the natural light outside by making the gallery lights fluctuate in direct relation to the changing levels of sunlight in real time. Four lighting tracks are hooked up to sensors on different sides of the building. With this gesture, Koh effectively defeats the purpose of artificial lighting, drawing attention to a central architectural feature of gallery spaces.

Koh's recent exhibitions have taken place at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver; The Ottawa Art Gallery; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany; Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong; Seoul Museum of Art, South Korea; Artspace, Sydney, Australia; The British Museum, London, England; The Power Plant, Toronto; Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg; Ex Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico City; and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. She has participated in the Liverpool Biennial 2004, 1998 Biennale of Sydney, and La Biennale de Montréal 2000. Koh lives in Vancouver.