

GERMAINE KOH

GETTING PERSONAL

Jan Allen

Personal Messages

96.6.10. A good day at work. At home, our fire alarm keeps sounding. Warm, humid. Summer now. 086277

ANYONE knowing the whereabouts of June or Carl Raymond, parents of Richard Morris Raymond, please contact Laurie at 725-6113. 20475

ANYONE knowing the whereabouts of Angela Trevena-McConville, please contact T. Roy, 747-7800 ext. 2823. 068286

REWARD: For correct DNA match for biological son born in Ottawa, June 6, 1963. 416-593-4065. 268895

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Personals

PERSONAL MESSAGE 96.6.10, CLASSIFIED AD IN THE OTTAWA CITIZEN. COURTESY AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE, KINGSTON, ONTARIO, AND THE ARTIST.

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, Germaine Koh has made a body of concept-driven work that probes the notion of intimacy and finds grace in the everyday. Using deliberately low-tech means, this Ottawa-based artist has investigated the possibility that empathetic connections between strangers might short-circuit the social conventions in flux in the communities facilitated by, if not grounded in, high-tech communication. Inspired by On Kawara, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Stan Douglas and Sophie Calle, Koh works to uncover our appetite for ties to others, that which promises respite from the self while circumventing the overdeterminations of mass culture.

Although Koh plays down the voyeuristic aspects of her work, three recent pieces exploit our taste for the minutiae of strangers' lives. In *Personal Messages* (ongoing since 1995), Koh inserts into the classified section of the daily newspaper diaristic musings on the day's incidents, worries, and triumphs. Two examples: "Things went smoothly in Halifax. I tried to be outgoing. I'm getting a bit better, I think." "Mom's birthday. She hasn't even called since we moved. I guess I'll have to call her, as usual." Koh presents these morsels of personal experience in the classifieds' clipped language, a Beckett-like strategy in which absence of context allows her to encompass accepted patterns while leaving room for extrapolation and imagined identification.

In an artist's statement about the piece, Koh writes: "I employ the real time and repeti-

tion embedded in the newspaper to relate ... the passing of time, gently magnifying its banality and arguing for the monumentality of daily (pre-)occupations." Repetition, that is, marks the passage of time while at the same time suspending it, enacting the endless cycle of the everyday.

Most affecting, however, is the way the project deploys not the seamy, improbable confessions of daytime talk shows, but the reader's native curiosity toward even the most mundane experiences of strangers. In effect, these banal entries open up spaces for bemused reflection upon our own lives. The other outcome of this project depends on a primary identification with unknown subjects. As with, say, Adam Chodzko's *The God Look-Alike Contest* (1992-93), buying and selling commodities whose value is symbolically exhausted may be nothing more than a pretext for social contact. *Personal Messages*, in turn, solicits neither companionship nor commerce but the empathy of a chance reader for the anonymous author.

A similar dynamic operates in two photo-based projects, *Sightings* (ongoing since 1992) and *Memento* (1995-96). *Sightings* is a series of postcards, 19 to date, based on snapshots Koh finds on sidewalks, in vacant lots or trash cans. Whether the image is a carefully posed record of family life or an incidental, damaged, or overexposed print, its specific history is obscured. Koh documents the date and location of the find on the back of each card, thereby offering a trace of the photograph's previous life and a record of her own passage through the streets of New York, Montreal, and Ottawa. Images of sunbathers, day-care toddlers, a barely discernible cat, a saucy nude,

or a dull moment at a suburban party displace the usual postcard fare of mountain scenery and urban monuments. *Sightings* affirms the capacity of the discarded for renewing value and accumulating associations, a capacity fueled in part by anonymity, and in part by lack of pretension: the clumsiness of the images guarantees their grounding in daily life as well as their endearing opacity.

In its use of found photographs, in this case wallet-size portraits, *Memento* seems at first to be a variation on *Sightings*. But the former works in the opposite direction in that Koh presents the reproduced 5-by-7-inch images in off-the-shelf frames typically used for family snapshots, graduation or baby photos. Thus, *Memento* injects the strange into the context of the familiar, as opposed to *Sightings*' insertion of the intimate into the public. Like *Blade Runner*'s staged photos, designed to substantiate replicants' implanted memories, such evidence of connection seems fundamental to humanity. But the status of these works as orphaned portraits is accented by the trophy plaques mounted on their frames; ambiguous annotations of time and place, these refer to their own recovery or loss, or to some rite of passage in the subjects' lives.

Koh's photographs share with Richard Billingham's riveting *Ray's A Laugh* (1994-95)—a series of color photographs portraying his parents' impoverished, near-dysfunctional lives—a willing submission to the disorderly facts of daily existence. As in Koh's projects, here the photographer betrays an intimate relationship with his subjects, one ripe with ambivalence. But there is, of course, an important difference: whereas Billingham selects images himself for circulation within the art system, the unknown photographers responsible for Koh's images have lost or abandoned control. Koh's subjects speak through and across this gap. Set adrift and now recaptured, they are chosen and thus somehow privileged.

The fascination with strangers' lives, explored in Sophie Calle's remarkable *Suite*

vénetienne (1980), is today given free rein in proliferating web sites, phone sex, and zines. The Internet, conceived not so long ago as an information superhighway, has evolved from purposive tool to garden of delights, a place of dalliance and exchange: a recent survey identified some 3,000 sites as personal journals. Real-time, mini-cam feeds of ordinary individuals' lives have likewise found their on-line niche. Willing exposure teams up with audience fantasies and inevitably this phenomenon inches its way into mainstream entertainment: a new TV series called *In the Dark* tempts viewers with "High-tech cameras [that] follow a couple as they perform routine tasks in darkness."

Koh's various projects magnify the significance of life's coruscating moments, those infinite digressions upon raw experience that we all hold in common. The unstable poses, damage (many of the source photos are worn away or creased), and plaintive snatches refer to the precariousness of such moments in a world that increasingly favors abbreviated governance and shrinkage of the public domain. Koh intervenes in the process of loss by rescuing personal expression from the brink of extinction, at once exposing and defying the casual interchangeability of people's lives. It is the very irrationality of her work, its core gesture, that constitutes its greatest appeal. Koh enacts fantasies of instant community, of unfettered responsiveness leashed to an inane but innocent sense of connection.

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SIGHTINGS (PHOTOGRAPH FOUND 11 MARCH 1996, CORNER OF YORK AND CUMBERLAND STREETS, OTTAWA), 1996, POSTCARD, OFFSET LITHOGRAPHY. COURTESY AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE, KINGSTON, ONTARIO, AND THE ARTIST.

MEMENTO, 1995, FRAMED COLOR PHOTOGRAPH WITH TROPHY PLAQUE. COURTESY AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE, KINGSTON, ONTARIO, AND THE ARTIST.

