

Small Gestures and Acts of Grace: An Interview with Germaine Koh

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RTIST Germaine Koh sits at the top of a flight of white marble stairs. She curls strands of green and pink wool around giant wooden needles, each a metre long. Before her, a mass of colour cascades to the floor of the Great Court at the British Museum. To produce such a work an artist must have a wry sense of humour, for *Knitwork* currently weighs over 400 pounds, and required a large crate in order to transport it from Canada, where Koh lives and works. Since 1993 *Knitwork* has snaked its way across institutional space, through art galleries in North America and Australia. But as much as it bewilders, *Knitwork* is visually rich and poetic. The mood of the piece varies, from murky greens and browns to thick bands of individual colour—bright red, yellow, purple, turquoise—and then painterly mixes of scarlet and emerald, rust and blue, black, orange and white, like magnified pointillist brush strokes. Each section a geological layer, each stitch a transparent record of a decision.

Knitwork was conceived in February 1992 as a lifelong project, generated by unraveling cast-off garments—socks, scarves, sweaters—and reknitting the yarn into a wide blanket. To begin with the garments were bought from charity shops, but increasingly they have been donated by people intrigued

Pennina Barnett spoke to Germaine Koh about *Knitwork* and its relationship to her other projects, while Koh was in London on a residency at Gasworks studios during April 2002. She is grateful to the Contemporary Arts and Cultures Programme at the British Museum for permission to reproduce the photographs of Koh's work.

by the idea of their clothing being transformed into art. The piece bridges public and personal spheres: sometimes Koh knits alone, privately; and at other times, publicly, when the piece is on display, transforming it from object to performance. By 1998 the piece had ‘consumed’ more than 260 garments and was over 60 metres long. By 2002 it had grown to 80 metres, including nearly 300 garments. The performance at the British Museum celebrated its tenth year.¹

At first sight, *Knitwork* seems to be a feminist comment on the devaluation of craft, particularly the textile work traditionally associated with women.² The early work of US artists such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro or the Feministo group in Britain come to mind,³ for their validation of the ‘hidden’ domestic work traditionally carried out by women. Koh intends this reading. However, seen in the context of the work she has exhibited over the last decade, *Knitwork’s* references—and resonances—are far wider. For it is one of a series of what might be described as minimalist conceptual art projects in which Koh focuses on the ways in which we invest time and effort in seemingly mundane everyday activities. What she describes as ‘the weighty psychic accretion of everyday habits and mundane debris’. Yet her humour is not cruel. It is rather that she finds ‘finds grace in the everyday’.⁴

1 *Knitwork* was exhibited and performed at the British Museum, as the launch event of the conference ‘From Materials Things: Art and Artefact in the 21st Century’, presented by the Arts Council of England and the British Museum, February 2002, and again during April 2002.

2 For a discussion of the devaluation of women’s textile work within the discourses of western art history, see key texts such as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses. Women, Art and Ideology*, London: RKP, 1981, ch. 2, ‘Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts’; and Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London: Women’s Press, 1984.

3 Specifically, Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, first shown in San Francisco in 1979, and *Feministo*, shown at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1977.

4 Jan Allen, ‘Germaine Koh, Getting Personal’, *Art/Text*, no. 59, 1997.

PB: What is the conceptual frame of *Knitwork*? Are there certain ‘rules’ that determine its production?

GK: *Knitwork* began as—and remains—a speculative piece: sort of, ‘what if I did this for the rest of my life . . .’ In that way it was conceptually fully formed when I first started it, but its actual realization, what the output of a lifetime will really look like, is another matter. The rules are that it be human in scale—it is basically the width of a blanket—and that once I start with the unraveled yarn of a particular garment, I use it all, though the garments may overlap. Those are basically the guidelines. The stitch and texture changes, and the method of combining yarns and colours evolves. It is as important that there be a certain flexibility built into the system, because otherwise it would be unsustainable as a project or entity in my life.

PB: What is your relationship with the piece?

GK: It is inevitably like me. It has stamina and patience and tolerance. And it revels in its absurdity. As much as there is tragedy built into it, in its very condition, it is also a comical object, squatting between the sublime and the ridiculous.

PB: What is it like, sitting at the top of the steps beneath the great dome in the British Museum, that great trail of knitting in front of you? Can working on the piece still ‘surprise’ you, even after ten years?

GK: There are lovely moments in it, lots of very nice moments, things like particular colour combinations. I have some control over that, and it's one of the things that continues to make the work interesting. A physical area is equivalent to a period of time. The vocabulary I use to speak about it confuses physical form and time. I also have a physical attachment to it, and an intimate knowledge of it, but I do sometimes experience it as an emotional burden.

PB: Why is it an emotional burden?

GK: Well, just the thought of the time that I've invested in it. But in fact we all do similar things. Actually, here in Britain, I have encountered one particular question more than ever before: people ask me whether I am going for a world record. And to me, it is really important to tell them, 'no, I am not at all interested in that', and that what is important about this piece is that it makes visible the sorts of things that we all do. I am sure that there are plenty of, mostly older, women who have generated this amount of knitting in the course of their lives. But we don't usually think of this work as remarkable. It is only collecting it together in a single place that provides the impetus to think about it in such terms. So I think it's important to emphasize that it is a means of showing us how remarkable we all are, how remarkable are the things we all engage in.

PB: Does it feel more burdensome as it grows?

GK: It is a thing to be reckoned with. I mean, that was the idea from the start: that it be a manifestation of the massiveness of everyday activity, the massive presence that mundane concerns come to have in one's life.

PB: Rather like seeing statistics about how much water a single household uses in a year, or how many tons of rubbish it produces. But isn't there a contradiction between this monumental piece of knitting, and many of your more ephemeral works. *Knitwork* is vast and solid, in contrast to *Prayers*, for example, in which you translated an everyday office activity—the keystrokes typed on a computer—into Morse-encoded smoke signals.

GK: I am interested in revealing the monumentality of everyday objects, and the ways in which we behave and interact. But that doesn't necessarily correlate with the physical scale of the work. A grand or monumental idea can often be realized in a fleeting form, and vice versa. Both *Knitwork* and *Prayers* are concerned with paying attention to labour that usually goes unnoticed, but each takes a form appropriate to the specific idea I was generating.

PB: Why did you chose to use knitting for a commentary on labour?

GK: Knitting is, of course, just one of many repetitive activities. Yet it is one type of labour that tends to be invisible, perhaps because it is usually done

by women, and for that reason seemed particularly rich ground for the kind of contrasts of visibility and presence that I was considering. It's also the kind of work in which the 'humanness' is unavoidable, so that the errors and inconsistencies that inevitably appear in it are a good measure of its feasibility.

PB: It also has associations with the home and the domestic, which tend to be marginalized and devalued, despite the fact that they are so important in most people's lives.

GK: I am interested in what one thinks of as a domestic process becoming unruly. I like the idea of a seemingly well-behaved activity becoming unmanageable, becoming excessive.

PB: Excess has a number of different connotations: in some modernist discourses, excess is associated with decoration; then there are psychoanalytic theories in which it is associated with the feminine, hysteria and disorder. Paradoxically, your work is determined by particular rules, and also by the width of the needles. I suppose it could be called controlled excess!

GK: There's something terrifying about *Knitwork*, in that it reveals something of the sublime, which has been associated with terror, that inhabits the seemingly innocuous things we do. . . .

PB: The idea of process is intrinsic to *Knitwork* because it is an ongoing project. The times when you stop work on it for a while are like 'unfinished closures',⁵ a term that Stuart Hall uses to talk about identity. He sees identity as an ongoing narrative, but with moments of 'arbitrary closure'. Without these moments, it's impossible for there to be any kind of action or statement; they are like the full stop at the end of a sentence that produces sense out of a group of words. But then along comes the next sentence, and the process begins again. So the full stop has only been provisional—as if to say, 'right now, this is what I mean and this is who I am . . . but that may change'—because subjectivity itself is a process. As a lifelong project, *Knitwork* seems to parallel or be analogous, in some ways, to these conceptions of subjectivity and discourse.

GK: I like that metaphor. Certainly *Knitwork* involves a perpetual rewriting or revision, though one that still cannot escape its past. Actually, I would suggest that the crucial process in *Knitwork*—and in some other of my projects—is not the physical activity through which it is realized, but more importantly a process of suspension, of accepting and maintaining a state of contingency.

PB: Amongst your other projects, which is closest in its concerns to *Knitwork*?

5 Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Identity The Real Me, Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, ICA Documents 6, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1988, pp. 44–6.

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GK: In the sense of being in a state of continual unrest, I think the project titled with the three dots of the ellipsis symbol (...). It's an apparently empty room, in which it is raining ball bearings, which drip out of perforated tracks suspended from the ceiling. So you have the sound of these metal balls running in the tracks, the small impacts of them hitting you, and the physical hazard of trying to negotiate this room in which there are puddles of bearings. All this adds up to a potentially absorbing—but also contingent—experience. It's quite nice just to stand in the room and be rained on. The piece was first commissioned for an exhibition at the Japanese-Canadian Cultural Center in Toronto, and the premise of that show was what now is a well-known type of proposal, in which artists are asked to respond to objects in a collection. My starting point was a bunch of pachinko balls. I wanted to create an installation that would be like an abstraction of the conditions and emotions tied up with pachinko and other games of chance: the condition of chance, of hazard, of not knowing. A lot of the artefacts in the collection had been brought over from Japan, so a sub-theme of the exhibition was the distance between there and here. I tend to want my work to have a sense of restraint, to avoid obvious readings or strident political statements. So my resolution was to make a fairly abstract piece that ended up arousing feelings of displacement, of slippage, of being unsettled.

PB: Is that feeling of displacement something that is familiar to you?

GK: Being displaced, or not feeling that I have a place, is something that I feel quite strongly. I think I do deal with questions of identity, but in a quite abstract way. I never understood identity politics, because I never really felt there was a place for me.

PB: A place within identity politics?

GK: Yes. It seemed to be predicated on the idea that you could find the group that you belonged to, and it didn't occur to me that there *was* a group that I belonged to. Now I realize that there *is*, in Canada, a whole group of Asian immigrants of my generation who moved there as children, in the particular conditions of that time, that is, the opening up of immigration from Asia in the late 1960s. But, growing up in a small town, it took me a long time to become aware of that larger history, so it wasn't something that contributed to my identity. And then later, I was completely unprepared for the fetishized expectations projected upon me as an Asian woman. My felt identity was still simply that of not belonging anywhere, so that is how I continued to live, in this conditional and unrooted way. And now I don't live anywhere near any of my family. I don't have a home; I camp in my studio, mostly without possessions.

PB: Again, I find Stuart Hall's writing on identity politics helpful in thinking about the tricky area of culture and difference. In his writing of the late 1980s

he argued for specificity: for identity as *positioned* within a culture, language and history, so that every statement we make can be identified as coming from *somewhere specific*. He doesn't mean that identity is fixed and 'armour plated'; rather that it's contingent.⁶ These discourses have developed a great deal since the 1980s, but I still find this pertinent. Does your decision to own very few possessions relate to this sense of contingency?

gk: Yes. It is an exercise in remaining open to the world, and open to change and fortune. To luck and to chance. In fact, the desire to pass lightly through the world has been one of the conditions of my work since the beginning, notwithstanding pieces like *Knitwork*, which could be seen as a reflection of how burdened we all are by our daily lives, no matter how we choose to live.

pb: *Knitwork* has a range of potential readings, so how do you want the viewer to engage with it? Do you want to dislodge expectation, or to encourage viewing the familiar with renewed curiosity?

gk: I make use of objects that are absolutely commonplace, absolutely familiar, but in a slightly different context, or from which something has been abstracted or isolated, melded with something else, or dislodged. The process of abstraction is important to me, because I think it is a way of enabling us to see things. So in my work people will often encounter a known object that is in a slightly different situation or configuration. And that change of situation is calculated to stimulate thought about how such objects are normally used, and then about our usual forms of behaviour. I am also interested in means of transmitting and sustaining information, including the ways in which participants become aware of their own responsibility in formulating the meaning of events. This is emerging in different ways in my work. For example, a couple years ago I did a performance entitled *Watch*, in which I stood in a storefront window for a week, keeping watch over the street, without responding to anyone. I think that one of the results was that there developed a certain oral charge in the neighbourhood, as people talked about it, collectively trying to make sense of what was going on. So I am interested in setting up situations that involve the audience, and my work is a way of thinking about social exchange, how we interact, and the tokens or gestures we use. So it is important to use known objects, to underscore the immediacy of the situation.

pb: Your interest in social exchange reminds me of the Situationists.⁷ Is your approach influenced by their emphasis on the urban as a site of meaningful social interaction?

gk: The Situationists are an important reference for exactly the reasons you mention. Their emphasis on a kind of personal agency in—and responsibility for—reimagining the shape and conditions of the city is particularly pertin-

6 Ibid.

7 The Situationists International emerged as a group in 1957 from earlier avant-garde groups in France and Germany, concerned with analysing western culture, and continued until 1972. Among those most influential in the group were Guy Debord, whose book *Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967.

ent for me . . . To me, their actions were underpinned by a belief, which I share, in the power of conceptualization to effect real change. I think it is important to be an active participant in the contexts in which you find yourself, rather than being immobilized by the things around you. In my work I try to employ things that are already part of the world, and that bring with them a range of associations and vernacular meanings as the evidence or residue of actual social conditions. In part, it was a simple ecological choice to use existing objects, but because I am interested in how people actually behave towards and interact with each other, it seems natural to be using the stuff of the world.

PB: You said that the work was in part an ‘ecological’ gesture. You reuse or displace objects—again something that the Situationists did—subverting their meaning or signification in the process. There also seems to be a convergence between their critique of capitalism—how it makes people into passive consumers, rather than active participants in public life—and some of your projects about money and exchange. But you make gently humorous interventions into the transactions of daily life, and in your recognition of small gestures, what you call ‘acts of grace’, there’s a certain faith or belief in the existence of good will. In an article about your work, Jan Allen suggests that it enacts ‘fantasies of instant community’, and what she calls an ‘innocent sense of connection’.⁸ Do you think there is a certain idealism in your approach?

GK: When I have done currency-type projects, they have always been a matter of proposing alternate tokens of value that might be used in place of existing currencies, or inserted into commercial systems. For example, the project *Cambio* drolly proposes to augment commercial transactions with a measure of good will, by stamping the words ‘UN BESO’ (a kiss)—which is a common Spanish language salutation—on paper bills. There are other projects that try gently to trace out the hopes and desires that are embedded in lots of our daily transactions. We must all go to work for some reason, and it has to do with some kind of faith that this is the thing that we should be doing, and there’s something very touching about that. Throughout, my work is specifically and consciously non-commercial. The idea of making work that changes or disappears—or whose limits are difficult to identify—is all part of tracing out patterns of exchange and behaviour. Making work that is aware of the pervasiveness of commercial exchange, and complicates it, is part of this process. For example, *Knitwork* might be perceived as being a disruptive piece, in that it doesn’t play by the conventional rules of commercial exchange. It is a piece that continues to change, and so must remain tied to me. It stubbornly remains in the present, rather than being an object that is easily packageable. Incidentally, it was recently acquired by a museum, conditional upon a contract I negotiated—one which is pretty

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much unheard of in museum circles—that guarantees me continued access to it, so that I can work on it. The idea of a museum collecting something that is not fixed, that is specifically in progress, doesn't have many precedents, and I thought it was worth proceeding with the sale because it would force this issue.

PB: Given the conceptual base of your work, which artists are important to you?

GK: Perhaps the best model for me was Felix Gonzales-Torres. He was so good at distilling all the hopefulness of social exchange into the offering of a candy, for instance. His work was always full of consequence, but realized with a simplicity of means. I am trying to make works that are physically quite simply stated, but which can be unfolded to reveal layers and layers of connections.

PB: Are there women artists whose work has influenced you?

GK: Yoko Ono, but in quite a different way. Some of the conceptual statements that she has made—pieces realized through a few words or a simple proposal in the world—contain so much possibility. For example, her *Wish Tree*, in which you write your wish and tie it to a tree. Or even the piece in which she invited people to cut off her clothing. Both are very simple statements that contain implications that people have to consider for themselves. . . .

PB: Can we talk about the different ways in which *Knitwork* explores temporality. It records (past) time, in a narrative fashion—like a diary or series of film frames—as well as implying the future. In a way, it's like the changing self-portrait you started in 1994.

GK: *Knitwork* is a piece that has both its past and its future written into it, so the present is almost like a 'sliding' moment that continually reveals more of itself. In some ways it seems like a superhuman effort, but in other ways it is very much human, in that it is a measurement of a life. Not only the output of a life, but also its duration. The self-portrait is a painting that is periodically over-painted with a new picture, so it's a sort of contingent record. It is accompanied by photographic documentation of previous states, so that there is the possibility that a scholar could eventually decide that some previous state was the definitive one, and perhaps even 'excavate' back to that state. The photographs also therefore have built into them some sense of the death of the photographic subject, described by Susan Sontag.⁹

PB: Although *Knitwork* is a rich and lyrical piece, it has a melancholic feeling. As you age, its reading may take on a greater sense of loss. Do you think about the presence of loss and death when you work on it?

⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin Books, 1979.

ГК: Yes I do, consciously. I mean it's morbid for someone of my age to think of death, but I do consciously leave the piece each time at a point that would 'make sense' if I were to die before I came back to it. And I'm sure the emotional impact of the piece will change as I age, both for me and for the viewer. Because now, it seems like a brash statement for a young person to say: 'I am going to do this for the rest of my life.' But I think that that will resonate differently when I am sixty.

РВ: So are you sometimes anxious to get back to it? Julia Kristeva makes links between subjectivity and creativity in that she believes that it isn't the artist who makes the work, but the work that makes the artist. In the sense that when the work is finished, the artist is at a loss, or experiences loss to such an extent that he or she is compelled, or driven by compulsion if you like, to make another work. Without making art, they experience a sense of emptiness, because the work makes them feel alive. I am sure this operates for all kinds of people in all kinds of ways, not just artists.¹⁰

ГК: I don't think that a sense of emptiness and loss is specific to art-making. I try not to mystify the process of making art. To me, the job that I set for myself is one of looking at the world and thinking about the world, and trying to find interesting ways of reformulating or reiterating the things that exist out there, in order that we can have fruitful discussions about them. I think that that is a task shared by people in lots of different fields. I'm much more interested in outlining the minor compulsions that shape our everyday lives than I am in reflecting upon art-making as a discipline. With regard to *Knitwork*, I suppose there is a certain loss built into the piece, the condition of future loss. I don't always feel melancholic working on it, though I guess I do occasionally feel some nostalgia, because the piece and I have been through a lot together. There are a whole range of emotions that I have, and loss is just one of them. I'm just as likely to feel bored working on it. And boredom can lead you to other mental states, to reflection, for instance.

РВ: Loss is normally regarded as something negative, and so is vulnerability. But vulnerability can also be positive. Being 'armour plated', as Hall puts it, prevents the possibility of change, whereas vulnerability suggests openness to affect. There's a nice phrase that Max Kozloff uses, writing about Claes Oldenburg's use of soft materials. He says that 'an object that gives in is actually stronger than one that resists, because it permits the opportunity to be oneself in a new way'.¹¹

ГК: I'm also interested in the value of vulnerability and weakness. I think of vulnerability as a strength: the strength that it takes to let things slip away, or to open oneself to things. I believe that situations of potential loss can be valuable, in that they may prompt us to pay particular attention to the present.

10 Perry Meisal, 'Interview with Julia Kristeva', translated by Margaret Waller, *Partisan Review*, no. 51, winter 1984, pp. 131–2.

11 Max Kozloff, 'The Poetics of Softness', in *Renderings. Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art*, London: Studio Vista 1968.

PB: You said that the piece and you have been through a lot together. Is the role of memory important in your work?

GK: More the idea of attentiveness, perhaps. I once wrote this sort of manifesto—a very low-key manifesto—that read like a kind of manual for modest urban subversives. It proposed things like privileging forgetting over remembering. I guess I wanted to argue for valuing the present, rather than dwelling on the past. I think that is somehow related, politically, to focusing on commonalities rather than differences. I think there might be something stoical in this.

PB: You mentioned earlier that you have very few possessions, which suggests a lack of attachment to material objects. Is there also a spiritual dimension in your decision to own very little?

GK: I guess I meant stoical in that there's a certain will to just get on with things, to make do with what you have. I'd say that, in the particular set of moral and social guidelines by which I act, there is very little difference between what you could call 'spirituality' and other kinds of reflection. There's a will to find grace in daily activity and minor things, and to try to be respectful. My work is less about altering conditions, than making them visible in a slightly changed form that might enable conscious action. Or making them more readily available to our attention. I guess that is something that I am trying to formulate through my work. A theory of attention.¹²

¹² Germaine Koh's website is at www.germainekoh.com.