

Threshold*

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It is a truism that with R. Mutt's contribution to the Society of Independent Artists Exhibition in 1917 Duchamp irreversibly transformed the basic categories of both aesthetic experience and artwork by displacing object by thought; by proposing that thought and decision are essential to the work largely indifferent, at best secondary. But this is only half of the story. The other half, of course, is that the artist's thoughts or decisions must be recognized, and thereby legitimated, by the institution. However, once the basic subjective and objective conditions governing the nature of objects as art objects is fundamentally trans-valued, conceptual art is confronted with the question, always, of what next? How can the recognition of the constructive, indeed, ontological role of the institution in the production of art be made further productive for art-making practices?

A compelling answer to this question is provided by the work of Germaine Koh — an artist, of "no fixed address." Koh's impulse is to draw attention to the ever-shifting constellation constituted by work, viewer and environment. Being of "no fixed address," forces Koh to take seriously the specific relations to the various places she nomadically traverses, in such a way that enables her to be carried along by the fugitive spaces she briefly inhabits in a kind of Debordian *dérive*. On the one hand, she pushes her work in a direction where it seeps through the walls of the museum and into the public space, as in her numerous public installations, provocations, and interventions produced in a variety of Canadian cities, Mexico City and Berlin. On the other hand, and from the opposite direction, she breathes life deeply into the gallery space, transforming both art and life in the process. It is as if her very lack of an address, her nomadic status, has the effect, at the same time, of de-centering the place and role of the museum with which she is constantly and often productively engaged.

Exemplifying this dual strategy are two works, *High Noon* (2004) and *Sleeping Rough* (2003). In the former performance piece with collaborator Jane Rude, Koh stages a boxing match in the heart of Toronto's Bay Street. In *the latter*, Koh, literally "sleeps rough," in a sleeping bag on the floor, at a nightclub party for C Magazine on November 14, 2003 and at the Toronto International Art Fair on November 15, 2003.

If this performance literally brings art to the life of a bustling street in Toronto's financial district, then, *Sleeping Rough* (2003), brings the harsh life of the street, to the art institution in such a way as to test what the kind of ethical response is possible on the basis of its dominant assumptions. In the process, Koh shows the strange dependency of "art" and "life" on one another while at the same time keeping them separate, distinct, almost in a state of suspended animation. While occasionally seeking to be reunified with life, art repeatedly marks its distance from precisely that with which it wishes secretly to be re-united.

* I would like to thank Germaine Koh for discussing her work with me and Catriona Jeffries and Charo Neville for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

But it would simply be mistaken to think that Koh's work confines itself to a Duchampian view of art – art as chess by other means – rather, in her excessive gestures, in seeking to exceed the space of the institution, she brings into visibility certain determinate material effects on specific bodies located in identifiable social spaces. Taken together, therefore, *High Noon* and *Sleeping Rough* effectively map the divisions of a society increasingly driven by growing contradictions, contradictions which are written violently, like Kafka's horrible machine in *In the Penal Colony*, directly onto the social body. Since the 1980s, capital has undergone a pronounced and perhaps irreversible process of restructuring, synonymous with increasingly ruthless competition between individual firms. Accordingly, the physical fitness of its senior management personnel — as a kind of *pars pro toto* — has been a key concern to North American capital. This has led to a pervasive trend towards the steeling of individual bodies of its managers against an increasingly hostile and unforgiving global economy in part as a result of increasing competition from West Germany and Japan due to the massive rebuilding of these economies in the post-war period (today, of course, India and China are vying to take their place). Koh reveals the increasing muscularity of the body of the corporate manager to be a thoroughly *pugilistic* body, that is, one that was battle-ready for the dawning era of Darwinian struggle as human societies revert to their origins in a kind of simian blood-sport. At the same time, and from the other side, *Sleeping Rough* shows that just as this new regime of competitiveness leads to a kind of natural selection of only the hardest, most ruthlessly impervious of bodies – human and institutional – it unleashes, at the same time, an iron rationality which disciplines the growing numbers of those excluded — many of them, like Koh, without a “fixed address,” exiles, refugees, migrant labourers — from participating in the new global economy, steadfastly weakening and disintegrating the physical integrity of those forced to live and “sleep rough,” precariously on the mean streets of the city. In other words, it is possible to see written into the flesh of particular human bodies, the direction of a historicized nature and a naturalized history. I shall return to this chiasmic relation between nature and history.

This triangulation of work, viewer, environment with a particular emphasis on those excluded from participating in the “legitimate” economy of exchange was made thematic in Koh's installation entitled *Overflow* at Vancouver's Centre A in 2006-07. In this site specific work, done in collaboration with United We Can located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Koh participated in the economy of recycling beer bottles by accumulating several hundreds of empties from local bidders and collectors. She then assembled them in Centre A in shifting patterns, illuminating them with only the available light from the wall of windows facing Hastings Street. In so doing, Koh's gesture here, as elsewhere, for example in the installation *Shell*, shifts the orientation of the museum, to materially open up its space up architecturally and economically and in the process, to transform both the subject position of the viewer and, as a result, the work's meaning or legibility. In both cases, such legibility is closely tied to the short-circuiting of the closed circuit of exchange according to which objects circulate on the basis of a general or universal equivalent, namely: money.

This is precisely the line of continuity that ran through her most recent show at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery (2008). All of the works comprising this exhibition demonstrate a marked continuity with her previous works which aim at exploring the liminal edge – the boundary between inside and outside – of the institution. However,

such an exploration is far from merely academic or conceptual but exuberantly concrete and site specific. *Broken Arrow*, a work produced in collaboration with Ian Verchere, explores and draws makes visible a form of technology designed to identify, reveal and display the identities of all the blue-tooth devices that come within a certain radius of its location. Significantly, as is suggested by its title, this installation suggests the hidden origin of this particular communications technologies in the detection of unaccounted missiles and “broken arrows.” This pushes into the foreground the way in which the often indiscernible, hidden flows of information that swirl everywhere around us, themselves, have a hidden ground or origin in a certain Will to Power — in dominating human beings and nature through “rational” planning, calculation, manipulation and control. Such a drive reaches its culmination in technologies of surveillance and war. *Volume (Traffic)*, reminiscent of Dan Flavin’s use of light as a formal device, is comprised of a household fixture that has been modified with an LED device, placed inside the gallery’s washroom. *Volume (Traffic)* actually tracks the volume of traffic in the gallery, in the hall area approaching the washroom, which, of course, makes explicit the flows of visitors to the gallery and the workers within it. If this work tracks the traffic inside the gallery space, the flows of visitors circulating within its interstices, then in her intervention dating back to 2000, which makes it possible for commuters to/from Mexico City to listen to the sound of their own traffic transformed into the sound of wind, this work mirrors the volume of traffic outside of the gallery. Again, Koh aims at an effective complication of the relation between the inside and the outside. She shows the homology of the circulation of bodies both inside and outside of the gallery space and draws attention to the often subtle and ambivalent tracking and surveillance of these flows of bodies in and through specific social spaces.

Such a gesture of complication is continued in *Call* (2006) which is comprised of a rotary phone that has been modified with a programmable micro-controller and when the receiver is picked up the phone automatically dials the next number on a list that has been solicited from participants in the project. This work literally takes the form of making a call (911?) beyond the gallery to a highly individualized and “privatized” public and perhaps inadvertently draws attention to the deeply precarious condition of the art work in the present. In a certain sense the work wants to transcend the limits of the gallery space in order be present in its pure randomness – if only briefly, fleetingly, perhaps even under false pretenses – within the “white noise” of an endlessly distracting, media-saturated public sphere. Whether it succeeds, whether the *call* of the art work in the early 21st century is heard, is, of course, an open question.

Taken together, these works respond to the aesthetics and conceptual problems of minimalism which approaches them by way of emphasizing the often hidden flows of information that permeate the walls of the institution. While minimalism has been correctly criticized in the past for relying on the very institution it seeks to make visible and therefore problematic, Koh’s work consistently probes and, indeed, extends the threshold between the institution and what lies beyond it. Koh pushes far beyond the institution insofar as what is going on in her work is that attention is being drawn to the subtle ways in which this triangulation, the spatial relation itself, has a specific temporality of its own, that it is, itself, historical. This itself has to do, paradoxically, with that which, while deeply historical, wishes to erase this history itself, becomes naturalized as technology. Hence, the space of art has undergone a series of subsequent

displacements. Technological flows of information, analog, digital and otherwise, have complicated – both dramatically enhanced and diminished – the institution’s role in making, un-making and remaking art. Indeed, in making explicit such a complication of the institution’s role, Koh’s practice opens up a consideration or perhaps a re-consideration of the relation between subjects which oscillates continually between communication and coercion — often being one and the same simultaneously. This is made no clearer than in the centre-piece of the exhibition itself.

Upon entering the gallery, one is confronted, in the space of the large white, open space of the gallery, with five cold metallic stanchions connected by four black velvet ropes running in a diagonal from the building’s north-west to south-east corners. While extremely conspicuous, it would be easy for the viewer not already familiar with Koh’s work to walk past the installation, thinking that the work wasn’t a work at all but simply a random object left over from another exhibition. Then the strange realization dawns that what initially appears to be part of the mechanism that typically mediates between the institution — not just the museum or gallery, but also the public library, the cinema, indeed, the “media event,” per se—the means by which the flow of human traffic is itself channeled, directed and managed, is, in fact, part of the exhibition itself. And now, here, it is being given to be seen as an object rather than dissolving and disappearing into the background. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that this installation (the third in the *Fair-Weather Forces* series of works), plays subtly yet concretely with the institutional space of the gallery. It shows that the inextricable relation between the communicative nexus between the work, viewer and environment is itself framed by an irreducibly coercive, if not directly violent, edge. Call this a frontier of exclusion, which, again, is referenced in other works, in particular *Sleeping Rough*. Such a work enables Koh, in a way, to circle back to what seems to be a key concern for her: the inextricable relation between nature and history.

The cold austerity of the stanchions is strongly reminiscent of Judd’s minimalist box sculptures from the 1960s. Yet where minimalism constituted a kind of echo effect through which the work comprised a reflection on physical presence of the museum, of its articulation and organization of space, lighting, etc., Koh pushes this gesture far beyond the museum. Connected to the stanchions is a sensor that causes them to be raised or lowered in proportion to the ebbing and flowing of the tides in Vancouver’s False Creek via a signal sent electronically. Here, as in *Broken Arrow*, a new dimension enters into the way in which the gallery space is re-situated vis-à-vis work and world, namely, this space is now shown to be subjected to, and thoroughly saturated by, an imperceptible *fluxus* of information. The wall separating what lies within and what lies without is transgressed by such flows. It is here that Germaine Koh’s hidden affiliation with Fluxus comes to light. Perhaps more so than any post-Avant Garde movement, *Fluxus* sought to be itself kind of *solvent* that would carry out to completion Dada’s *dissolution* of the Institution. However, rather than the chaotic and anarchic gestures of Zurich Dada of Cabaret Voltaire or the explicitly political abrasiveness of Georg Grosz’s caricatures and John Heartfield’s revolutionary photomontages as well as the nihilistic jokes of Duchamp in New York, Fluxus sought perhaps in a more canny way perhaps to unleash the flows that would move effortlessly through the threshold separating the institution from the life beyond it.

What is especially interesting here is the way in which technology is the medium of communication, but the signal actually comes from nature itself in the form of tide patterns. This can be understood with the help of the concept of “natural-history,” developed in the early 1930s by Theodor W. Adorno, which shows the mutual implication of history and nature. These reflections ultimately culminate in the notion of a “dialectic of enlightenment,” that the enlightenment aspiration to totally dominate nature itself turns into the very mythology from which it seeks to break.

Since the elaboration of Christian theology in the wake of the disintegration of Rome, we are accustomed to thinking of history in linear terms as the time of the new, the unprecedented: think of Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon, the Fall of Rome, the Storming of the Bastille or Lenin at the Finland Station. Of course, such a conception of time culminates in what Harold Rosenberg calls modernism’s “tradition of the new.” While nature is fluid and constantly in flux, its regularities are predictable and unalterable as in, for example, the basic physical laws that govern the motion of falling bodies. So, if history constitutes the realm of the “new,” nature, understood in non-evolutionary terms, is the space of the always-the-same, as the space of repetition.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly evident that the relationship is inverted. Which is to say, human affairs often seem frozen in time, unchanging, calcified; while nature seems to be precisely the space in which the new appears, think for, example, of the splitting of the atom and the event’s ambivalent legacy; think of the Genome project and the future prospects of genetic engineering. More recently, under the sign of global climate change, we are becoming increasingly aware of the quickening of nature’s own temporality as changes within the climate system are increasingly traceable to anthropogenesis. At the same time, human social relations, which are historical and therefore contingent, become naturalized and as a result subject to the “always-the-same.” Indeed, the unending repetition of society in its current form, paradoxically, produces unprecedented and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, causes massive soil erosion, flooding, etc. The resulting acceleration and change in direction of human and non-human migration patterns takes the appearance of a kind of natural catastrophe.

Such an insight is already intimated in an installation Koh produced while in residency in Berlin in 2005 and since exhibited at the Charles Scott Gallery (2009) entitled *Fallow*, which, one is tempted to read as an homage to Joseph Beuys, well-known author of the revised *Fluxus Manifesto*, whose impact on the West German art scene, in general, and Berlin’s Free University, in particular, was profound. Here Koh installed soil and flora onto the floor of the Künstlerhaus. During the course of several months, nature was permitted, from within the heart of culture, which is to say from within *history*, to take its course. At the same time, the nearby site from which the materials were gathered was developed as part of the larger post-*Wende* reconstruction of the city, history takes the form of nature. As the German sociologist and philosopher of money Georg Simmel indicated, the ruin is where nature and history converge. Berlin is a ruin in reverse.

Fair-Weather Forces (Water Level) dramatically brings home the connection between the historicity of nature and the spatiality of history in so far as increasingly into the future the necessity of social control and surveillance, social exclusion and domination will be ever more closely tied to historically unprecedented changes within the natural environment. As the pace of natural climactic change quickens, massive

effects will be brought about in the organization of historical societies as populations are forced to fight over ever-more scarce resources. For several years now the CIA has modeled scenarios based on the assumption of massive social dislocation, famine and civil war caused by climate change, particularly in especially vulnerable Asian and African states. The point where nature and history touch is a dangerous flashpoint. It also hints at the manner in which it is precisely the rendering of social arrangements as a kind of natural fact — that is, an inevitability, which is how globalization is viewed (irrespective of the collapse and abjection of its international financial infrastructure) — while at the same time science and technology creates ever newer and more effective means of controlling the natural world. Yet this raises difficult questions for the situation of an artist such as Germaine Koh. That is, it raises questions about whether the “call” of art work can succeed in a world that is so saturated by the flows of information and the distraction to which it inevitably gives rise and to a flattening out of experience. The reason for this is that the work, despite its Zen-like simplicity of inflection and gesture makes considerable demands on us. It demands care and attentiveness to its framing of the Threshold, to the relation between the inside what lies outside. How is the art work, in other words, able to open up a space beyond the eternal return of same — a history that has become “second nature”? This was the question posed in the early part of the 20th century. It has returned again very much as the question of our century.