

Germaine Koh

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston

Since 1991 Germaine Koh has trained her sights on city-sidewalks, trash-cans and empty bus-seats and found there a surprising number of lost or discarded photographs. They are the kind of banal everyday images churned out by one-hour photo shops all over the world. In a continuing project titled "Sightings," she has so far printed nineteen of these photos as post-cards in editions of 1000 to 2500. On the back of these cards is recorded the date and site where the photo was found, a description of identifying marks, as well as Koh's name and post office address.

For the "Memento" series, she enlarged and framed wallet-size portraits she'd found, labelling them with brass plaques that indicated the times and places of the find. On the gallery wall they form new families: a grinning six-year-old girl beside a baby she has never met; a woman and a man, found in different places, hanging side by side as a couple. More than the postcards, in which people are attached to a setting, "Memento" points up an existential loneliness. Since we don't know their story, these people convey nothing but an unspeakable nub of being; only the viewer can provide a story for them.

Koh demonstrates in a playful way the philosophical dilemma of identity through alterity. Her compulsion to play out the dialectic between the personal and the communal in her various projects points to a desire for – and fear of – freedom from dependence on representation.

Koh's projects show an acute awareness of the impossibility of being "present" without representation. She herself is only present in these projects through traces left for others to read. We can trace her trajectory on the back of her postcards: "found 13 December 1992, west side of 5 Avenue at 66 Street, New York;" "found 11 March 1996, corner of York and Cumberland Streets, Ottawa." She also shows up in the Personal columns of newspaper classified sections where, amidst the palm-reading announcements and appeals for lost relatives, she has since 1995 written a personal diary of sorts.

Reads one: "96.2.7 Things went smoothly in Halifax. I tried to be outgoing. I'm getting a bit better, I think." These cryptic messages, buried in the daily paper's mass of print, are fragments of a real life-story that Koh wants to be read, reminding us that so much of our life seems lost because it isn't read by anyone.

The poignant wit of Koh's art not only shows that alterity is at the centre of identity, but also betrays a lingering and contradictory desire for authenticity. Her work is infused with a desire for such sublime presence. She stands at the edge of an ocean of snapshots and a towering mountain of words. The ungraspability, formlessness and endless production of words and images in our contemporary technological world becomes a new metaphor for the sublime.

Petra Halkes



Germaine Koh – Above, from "Memento," *Evan* (1995), colour photograph, plaque, frame, 7 x 5 in, photo courtesy Agnes Etherington Art Centre / Right, from "Sightings," photograph found 17 May, 1993, 41 Street at Dyer Avenue, New York (1997), colour photograph printed on postcard, text on reverse side, 3 x 5 in, postcard courtesy Agnes Etherington Art Centre



Photograph found 17 May 1993, 41 Street at Dyer Avenue, New York
Verso imprinted "11 - 00 NNNNN 819 - 02", marked "FUJICOLOR paper", and inscribed in black ink, "Christmas 1991 / (seated) Peter, Elizabeth, Rosie / (foreground) Claire"

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