

# Work and words go up in smoke

BY ROBIN LAURENCE, VANCOUVER

As you walk east along Vancouver's Nelson Street, toward the new premises of the Contemporary Art Gallery, it appears that smoke signals are coming from a spot near the CAG's sleek and glassy front entrance. Puffs of smoke are being emitted from a window beside the gallery's front door. Like pleas or prayers or little gusts of hope, they lift, drift, and scatter in the wet air.

*Prayers*, one of two ingenious installations at the CAG created by Toronto-based Germaine Koh employs a smoke machine and computer interface to comment on communications technologies and reconfigure the language and labour of the everyday.

In this instance, that language is all the words typed into the computers in the CAG's unseen upstairs offices — memos, letters, e-mail messages — during the course of a day's work. Each letter of each word generated is captured by Koh's computer program, translated into Morse code, then translated again into short or long puffs

of smoke, vented to the street.

Just inside the CAG's entrance, not far from the smoke machine, is a computer at which you can sit and add your own words to the process — and, yes, there's something bleakly thrilling about watching your darling prose being knocked down to dots and dashes and then sent off into the ether as tinted vapour. You might think of the smoke as a kind of exhaust given off from the labour that takes place within the institution — or as an exhalation of language. Either way, it works as a kind of spectral utterance of the everyday.

A decade into an impressive career, Koh has employed a diversity of means and media at the service of what initially appears to be a minimalist-conceptualist agenda. Her artworks have included an installation of discarded and altered pieces of lumber, ranged along a wall; a rack of postcards printed from found snapshots; a 136-kilogram, 80-metre-long blanket knit from wool unraveled from cast-off garments (begun in 1992, *Knitwork* will be a life-long undertaking for Koh); a series of diary en-

tries placed in the classified advertising section of a daily newspaper; blank publicity buttons proffered to visitors at an international art exhibition; and a pole planted in the middle of a footpath.

"The work does tend to be really diverse," Koh agreed in an interview at the CAG before her exhibition opened. "But it is linked by certain conceptual principles, which have to do with trying to pay attention to the mundane, trying to be attentive to everyday activity and the weight of the commonplace."

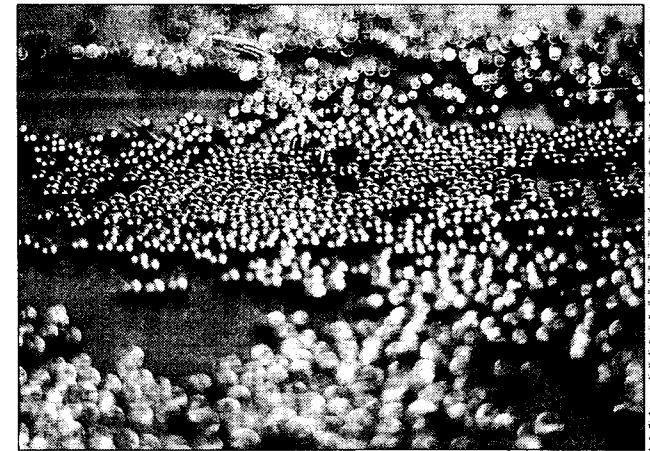
Koh's assertion that a kind of "residual meaning" abides in overlooked aspects of the everyday lands her in a philosophical position somewhere between Fluxus and Zen. She places creative faith in the power of small, overlooked, apparently inconsequential objects and actions to tell us something about ourselves.

Koh also has made it her project to work with what already exists in the world rather than manufacturing new objects to add to the planetary clutter, so you might consider her work as having an environ-

mental-Duchampian component, too. Still, her art is not about readymades; Koh doesn't simply gather up and present to us the slight or banal objects or activities we've overlooked. She subtly alters them, slightly reconfigures or repositions them, providing viewers with a new physical or conceptual space for contemplation.

Koh's second installation at the CAG is a gentle, continuous, susurrant shower of tiny ball bearings. Falling from tracks installed on the gallery ceiling (in form and colour, these temporary tracks mimic the room's lighting tracks), the BBs bounce and roll across the floor, often coming to rest in gleaming aggregations, metallic puddles in the floor's subtle declivities.

The title of this piece is "..."—that is, three dots in a row, or an ellipsis. Unpronounceable, punctuation-mark titles work better in print than in the broadcast media (think of the former name of the artist formerly known as Prince); there's something pictographic in "..."—something suggestive not only of the little ball bearings that are the essential medium of this



The random cascade of ball bearings in Germaine Koh's installation '...' at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery reflects migration, displacement, realignment and the piece's name itself.

work, but of the repetitive nature of their falling, bouncing, rolling, clustering then being gathered up to fall, bounce, roll, and cluster again.

Koh originally created "..." for the Gendai Gallery of Toronto's Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre. She was inspired there by a set of *pachinko* balls, 11-millimetre steel balls used in Japanese pinball-like game of chance, but the theme of her installation is not so much chance as movement, migration, displacement, realignment. The clusters and sprinkles of metal BBs across the floor resemble demographic maps, with attendant analogies to human settlement patterns.

Koh's "..." is installed in the smaller of the CAG's two new exhibition spaces. Each gallery is named after a luminary in the history of Vancouver's visual culture. This 73-square-metre room on the east side of the building honours the late curator, gallerist, and writer Alvin Balkind. The floor-to-ceiling windows in the corner of the Balkind gallery wonderfully engage the city beyond this room: there's a

great interpenetration of indoor and outdoor space, light and activity. While standing within "...", you can see and hear traffic swishing by on the rainy streets and watch workers planting anxious-looking saplings beside the sidewalk. The silvery-grey shower of BBs falling from the grey concrete ceiling to the polished grey concrete floor is reiterative of the grey, day outside, where rain splashes onto concrete and asphalt and gathers in glimmering puddles.

Some of Koh's earlier video and performance works have involved just this kind of quiet observance of passing traffic. It's a tribute to her versatility that her art can communicate Zen-Fluxus themes while also establishing a dialogue with the particularities — form, function, location — of the building in which it is sited.

*Germaine Koh continues at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver until July 14; 604-681-2700.*

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