

Koh Invites Us to Explore Electronics

VISUAL ARTS

Germaine Koh

Field Work

At the Western Front to June 28

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

A local exhibition by Toronto-based artist Germaine Koh is always an excursion into delight and discovery. Koh, whose concept-based projects have included diary entries placed as classified ads in a daily newspaper, an indoor turnstile moved by the wind outside, ball bearings falling like rain from the ceiling, and smoke signals cued to word-processing activities, attunes her practice to everyday objects, events, and locations.

Koh enjoins us to reconsider the quotidian conditions of our existence. I've written before that the philosophy behind her work seems to reside somewhere between Fluxus and Zen Buddhism, and here it is again: the attentiveness to the everyday, the awareness of the remarkable in our relationship with the commonplace.

The new electronic works Koh created during her May residency at the Western Front, and earlier works she has restaged or revised for her exhibition at the Front, focus on the notion of agency. Koh poses questions about how we mark our individual presences in an otherwise indifferent world. The off-site aspects of the exhibition include Survey Field, an interactive Web site (www.surveyfield.net/).

Coproduced with the Ottawa-based digital-media group Art-engine, Survey Field asks viewers a question (subject to change) and then posts each answer as a

coloured pixel on a growing abstract image on the face of the monitor. At this point in the project, the relationship between pattern and response is somewhat oblique, but there seem to be direct references to mapping here, and indirect allusions to abstract painting.

On-site, look for *White Noise*, a three-channel video installation in which the viewer can fiddle with a control in the gallery, shifting and changing the video's DVD tracks. Quite apart from its interactive aspect (which is a tad subtle for habitual channel surfers), the work is a study in overlapping and montaged visual and aural textures, the former attuned again to the digital spectrum: red, green, and blue. As the camera scans close to the coloured surfaces of commonplace objects—stucco walls, car doors, mullioned windows, signage—the soundtrack catches an array of urban noise, including car horns, roaring traffic, chiming church bells, SkyTrain announcements, and passing conversations.

In contrast to the visual, aural, and electronic complexities of *White Noise*, look for *Counter*, tucked into a broom closet-sized room behind the main gallery. This work consists of two tiny black electrical components embedded in the wall: a numerical counter and a push button that advances it. Oddly enough, the village-idiot simplicity of *Counter*—click, 2744; click, 2745—is more gratifyingly interactive than *White Noise's* video control. A more peaceful sense of agency adheres to the simple acts of clicking and counting, whose statistical meaninglessness leads us to meditate on what, after all, is meaning-full. ■