

Transcript of forum held at the AGNSW on 19 September 1998  
 on the theme of this year's Biennale of Sydney  
 Chair: Trevor Smith Speakers: Martin Creed (UK), Germaine Koh (Can),  
 Lani Maestro (Can), Nikos Papastergiadis (Aust), Beat Streuli (Switz)

# Art + Every Day



above  
 Martin Creed  
*Work Number 200.*  
*Half the air in a given*  
*space* 1998  
 installation:  
 Analix B. Polla, Geneva  
 14,215 white x 30.5cm  
 balloons. Courtesy:  
 Pierre Huber, Geneva

**TREVOR SMITH** We drew straws this morning and Martin pulled the short one so . . . Take it away!

**MARTIN CREED** Hello. Hello. This is a work which consisted of about 15,000 white balloons. I just calculated the volume of the gallery and divided it in half and put half the air in the gallery inside balloons so that the gallery was – well, as usual the gallery was full of air. But about half of it was inside balloons. It's exactly the same air work which is out on Goat Island, except there it's in a house. I don't want to talk for too long but I might just play another piece of music off this album. Can you play track 6?

This work is just the same as the white one, except it's multi-coloured [*Work 201. Half the air in a given space* (mixed coloured balloons). Installed in January 1998 at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York]. The pieces of music that you heard, the first one was called 'Hello' and the second one was called 'Feeling Blue', played by Owada which is a collaboration between me, Adam McEwan and Keiko Owada. We played the other night, I don't know if you saw that. So thanks very much.

**BEAT STREULI** I will show you a few public space installations I have done in the last year or so, starting with the one I did here in Sydney (apart from the projection piece I am showing at Pier 2/3). It's on the corner of George and Park Streets, on two sides of a huge construction site. It's a very big print composed of photographs of people I shot here last summer in December and January. All of them were photographed around the area where the billboard is now installed. A lot of them in Pitt Street Mall. Some of the people we asked before we photographed them; they've signed release forms. And some of them are shot with a telephoto lens without them knowing that they're being photographed.

I'm feeling low.  
 I'm feeling down  
 I'm feeling blue  
 I'm feeling brown  
 I'm feeling orange  
 I'm feeling red  
 I'm feeling green  
 I'm feeling purple  
 I'm feeling pink  
 I'm feeling yellow  
 I'm feeling grey  
 I'm feeling black  
 I'm feeling white  
 I'm feeling mixed up

[boom track]  
 Hello  
 Hello  
 Hello  
 Hello  
 Hello  
 Hello  
 Hello

I'm feeling off white  
 I'm feeling pale  
 I'm feeling mixed up

This is another kind of installation I do when I work in public buildings. I install photographs printed on clear film and large size, directly into the windows of buildings. When you look through, you see perfectly clearly what's behind. From inside, you see people outside and the other way around. The image changes, depending on what the weather or the light is like. They're very visible at night from the outside when the space inside is lit, and very visible from the inside during the daytime. This was an installation I did this European Summer in Barcelona.

below  
Beat Streuli  
Billboard,  
CBD Sydney 1998

This installation I did, I think about two years ago in Vienna. In the summer, I photographed tourists in the centre of the city – very sunny pictures once more – and showed them there the next winter. Vienna can be a very grey, cold and rainy city in the winter and these pictures were mostly shown in the suburbs because there you have many more of these huge billboards.

Beat Streuli  
Visitors, billboards,  
Vienna 1996/97



There were nine different portraits. They were combined however the people who put them up felt like it. Sometimes you had all nine on one strip or very often just one next to an ad say. Without having that idea beforehand, I quite liked what it boiled down to . . . I photographed healthy looking, nice young people in the centre of the city, tourists, and brought them to the grey suburbs of Vienna where they definitely don't move normally, transposed from summer to winter as well. Very often, art or specifically photography, does exactly the opposite thing – it goes to grey suburbs, takes black and white pictures of poor people and brings them to the big museums in the centre of the city where people like these on the billboards look at them.

This is one way I think my work relates to the idea for this Biennale. Take for example the cover image of the catalogue, which is one of my photographs. It starts on a very low key 'happy shot level' – a lot of people have called it 'superficial' – and by some miracle it becomes something with some sort of political meaning. Whatever that means; but it's definitely more than just pretty pictures. My impression is that when you want to say something about a situation the direct approach almost never works. When you try to speak about political or social problems, it often results in something which is very easily consumed. As opposed to that, when you start with something which almost looks like publicity, and only after a while you start to wonder 'What is this all about?', I think that it might be a much more efficient and original approach to talking about our world here today. Thank you.

**GERMAINE KOH** My work takes quite diverse forms. I'm going to run through a range of recent work and then I'll try to give an overview of how the work might relate to this curatorial theme.

This is a collection of lumber picked up over the course of several years, repainted and glazed and then moved into the art gallery. The pieces of wood all continue to show the marks of their previous use. They are all recuperated off the street and from dumpsters and so on.

This is the large piece that is installed at Artspace called *Knitwork*. It's conceived as a lifelong project that I have been working on now for six and a half years – generated by unravelling used sweaters and then knitting them back together into this sort of blanket, a kind of never ending, out-of-control kind of object.

That's the more monumental scale of my work. It ranges in size down to something like this series of postcards, which are based on snapshots that I find in public places. On the front of the postcard is the image, and on the



this page  
clockwise from above  
all works by  
Germaine Koh

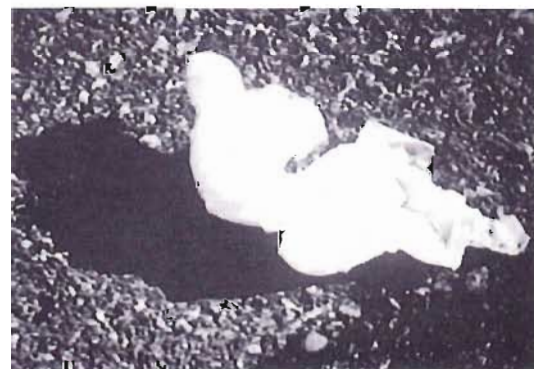
*Lumber* 1991-94  
oil, enamel and varnish on  
recuperated 4 x 2's  
dimensions variable

*Knitwork* ongoing since 1992  
unravalled used garments with  
documentation  
approximately 2 metres x  
increasing length

from *Sightings* ongoing since 1992  
offset postcard  
10 x 15 cm

One of two photographs found 2  
December 1994, Dalhousie Street  
at George Street, Ottawa  
Verso marked 'Kodak PAPER'

*Trek* 1997  
installation with 30 min. video



back is a caption that gives the date and place I found the photograph and any other kinds of identifying marks that might help to retrace the original owner, perhaps. It's also a way of recording where I was at a certain time. It records my own travels, as well as the passage of someone before me who lost or dropped or discarded the photograph that I have found.

This is a piece that is running every day for the duration of this exhibition in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It's a journal that I keep, a personal journal, that gives the details of the kinds of things I do everyday. This one says '8 April, Toronto. Ran into A and S, who solved my problem. Had dinner, beer. I like them.' The events are generally enough described that they might spark a moment of recognition in a number of people who might happen to come across them, by chance, in the course of the day, as they carry their newspapers around with them.

This is a work that is not in the exhibition. It's a series of small bronzes. They're cast from pebbles and from sticks and they're meant to be carried around with you. So, in a sense, it is a work that is not really meant to be seen but rather to be felt or to be lived with . . . used perhaps, traded, exchanged and worn.



This is a video I made – my epic video – of a paper napkin, which blows around in the wind. The camera pans, follows it, tracks it. One starts to get caught up in the minor drama of this journey. It plays on an overhead monitor, such as the kind you might see in an arrivals or a departures lounge.

This work's installed here in the art gallery, in two locations: beside the elevator outside the cafe, and beside the public telephones at the main entrance. They're business cards, to be used, with blank lines that happen to correspond to the symbols of the I Ching.

So the work has a diversity but tends to be based, as you can see, in real time processes, as well as real world, real life processes, and to use commonplace types of objects – to isolate these, pointing to the way that these kinds of objects circulate in the world. The work attempts to be attentive to the minor moments of our daily lives and the kind of ordinary exchanges and gestures that are often forgotten or that we are often oblivious to, as we go

policy where the policy document has been declared either lost or destroyed 4101572 — Robert Macnamee.

NOVEMBER 2. Worked late. A woman from one of the photos has appeared. I have to write to her.

NOTICE under S223 Life Insurance Act, 1995. Prudential Corporation Australia Limited (A.C.N. 066 649 241), on or after 12th November 1998, intends to issue replacement policy document for the following policy where the

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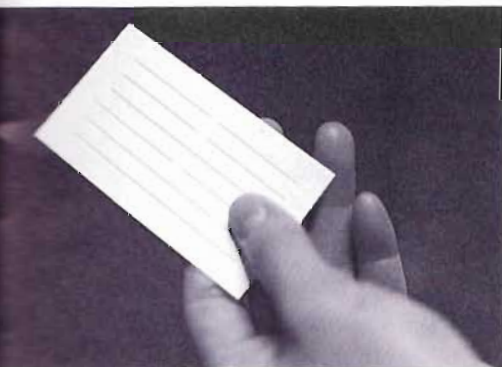


this page  
clockwise from far left  
all works by  
Germaine Koh

*Personal Messages* ongoing since 1995  
personal journal appearing in classified ads  
SMH, Wednesday, November 4, 1998

*Token series* 1996-97  
small bronzes to be carried

*Exchange* 1996  
business cards in unlimited editions



about our daily rituals. It tries to eke out a reckoning with types of commonplace forms, objects and types of practices that unbeknown to us, shape our daily lives; as well as, I guess, arguing for the monumentality of daily preoccupations, of the kinds of activities that, over the course of a life, shape it. The work is almost always ongoing. There's a certain will to maintaining a provisional stance or a commitment to mutability. There is also a reliance on commonsense and the kinds of expectations that I believe an audience is likely to bring to these objects – postcards or snapshots or common construction lumber. Related to that, is a belief in the richness of common experience and shared points of reference as a really basic form of community. I guess that's all I have to say.

**LANI MAESTRO** Several years ago now a gallery invited a group of artists in Montreal to put a show together and rented an apartment building that we inhabited for two months, and chose our spaces within it. I chose a space that was a bedroom in the apartment. A friend and I did a collaborative work where we got together, came into the room and just began working on it. What we eventually did was gather some bed sheets and bundle them up and put them around the floor and we tore the carpet up, creating this kind of painterly surface.

There is a running theme with regards to the work that I do. A lot of it is trying to deal with silence, or silence as another way of speaking – a language that hasn't really been explored. Part of the interest that I have with that, is coming from a non-western culture where the idea of silence or absence or nothingness is defined in a different way. For the last few years I have been thinking about the notion of passivity and non-action and how

that has been defined as a kind of negativity within western culture. But it's something that I wanted to reclaim as a space – a powerful space – and perhaps a space of liberation, within my own work and within my own process as a person, as a woman, as an artist, coming to terms with a history of oppression, a history of colonisation. I am interested in how this is manifested within the body – how I experience this history and internalise it, embody it. For me, the working process is a way of coming to terms with this history – a way of decolonising myself.

With this work I had invited a dancer to respond to the piece and there were people, an audience, awaiting the performance. And interestingly enough, when I asked her to respond what she did was, she came into the room and lay down and slept – took a nap. Well, that was what it looked like. I think a lot of people there felt cheated and they felt suspicious and maybe threatened. It brought up a lot of questions for me. Why does the figure claiming space and attention and yet doing nothing cause so much unease? Michel Foucault said: 'Matter contains resistance. It is passivity and inertia. Only the power of domination is given energy, movement,

formative force . . . ' So these are the kind of things that I have been thinking about in relation to my own practice where there is a kind of contemplative and quiet feeling in establishing or making a space.

[Went on to show slides of works including *A Wound in the Lung*, *Cradle*, *Quiet Pain*, *A Book Thick of Ocean*]

**NIKOS PAPASTERGIADIS** The theme of the every day has a very loose sense of boundary. How would we define the every day in reality? Normally we define something by saying what it is not. In this case, what is not every day? What is non-every day? That's one of the real paradoxes of this Biennale: the fact that the boundary between art, life and politics, the boundary between the every day and the non-every day is not really there. So in a sense we have to constitute those boundaries, we have to fight out and define which every day, what part of the every day, who's every day? The concept and the term as I tried to map out in my essay in the catalogue, has a long history. It has a long history in both art practice and in cultural and social theory. I don't want to repeat those arguments, but it's perhaps important to keep in mind the fact that these terms, although they appear quite simplistic, have very complex trajectories. It's important to see how certain definitions of the every day get mobilised at certain points in time, in order to contest other claims about what is the real, what is the aesthetic, what is the political.



Lani Maestro  
*Cradle* 1996  
installation view  
Art in General, New York  
mosquito netting,  
woven palm mats, sisal,  
dimensions variable

I thought it was quite appropriate that Jonathan would pick up the idea of 'the every day' in this particular culture and climate and time, because it certainly seems to me that it's the implicit term in many of the artistic practices and debates, both here and abroad. When I was living in Britain, it was certainly at the core of debates about 'Young British Art' – this very much touted phenomenon. My catalogue essay actually came out of a discussion I had with a group of people in Manchester three or four years ago, on the eve of the Turner Prize. We were talking about the various contenders. John Roberts, a British art critic, made a very passionate and proud speech about how glad he was that at last people were showing their 'Englishness' off. We ended up getting locked into some heated discussion and he went on to write up his views, which were published in *Third Text*. My catalogue essay here is my reply.

I noted at that time the way in which the idea of the every day was seen as being oppositional. It was seen to oppose theory. The view was that through the 80s theory had become this academicist, boring, sterile, decadent form, clouding over, shrouding, and making art impenetrable and suffocating. It was considered refreshing and rejuvenating that a new form of art practice had come along which had shed these overt theoretical pretensions and these unnecessary shackles. Here was a group of artists who were saying 'Fuck theory. Let's make art'. I think that both the 'oppositional approach' of theory and art and the YBA phenomenon, which were both celebrated within certain institutional contexts, shows incredible ignorance of both the history of art as well as the complex history of concepts like the every day.

We should always bear in mind what sort of every day we're talking about, and how its used. In social and cultural theory, the concept of 'every day' is usually used as a way of opposing the so called dominant institutionalised forms of social practice. It's used as a term to describe those ways in which humans exercise their own emotions and agency in resistance to the dominant forms of social organisation. This concept has taken on lots of different complexions throughout this century, whether coming from the perspective of psychoanalysis or Marxist theory or more recent critical theory. Many of the insights into popular culture and the current ways of representing every day experiences are in fact influenced by these theoretical investigations and earlier artistic practices like Dadaism and Surrealism. The point is that this tradition has in fact influenced the attitudes and practices of those artists who now use the concept of the every day in order to oppose theory. I am not suggesting that every artist pay a tax for their debt to previous artists or previous theorists, but simply reminding us that there are unacknowledged historical interconnections.

Of course, art has to be understood in terms of its own materiality. And that materiality can't always be translated through language. Language often doesn't measure up with the experience of it, because language, of course, is a non-artistic category – in some forms. While we need to be aware of and acknowledge these sorts of complexities – the incommensurability between different forms – it doesn't mean that one totally escapes the other, because both language and the materiality of art are bound up within a broader social history.

The concept of the every day has always been used as a way of breaking out of certain confines – structuralist and determinist ways of seeing both art and society. But while it can be used as a critical lever, it also has the potential to lead us towards rather uncritical and fetishistic ways of thinking: making the every day into an almost quasi-utopian representation, mysticising the very practice and experience of life itself. I think we need to always be conscious of the interconnections between things and I guess all I am trying to say here today is that art and the every day, and theory and the every day, and politics and the every day, are not far apart but are always woven together. Thank you.

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## DISCUSSION

**TS** Thinking about the title of the exhibition – 'Every Day' – it suggests a temporal dimension that I think is shared certainly by all of the artists at this table; whether it's in Martin's three minute pop song, or the Herculean ongoing effort of Germaine's *Knitwork*. Would anybody like to comment on that aspect of the temporality in the work? Or would somebody like to raise a question from the floor?

**GK** It seems to me there's a lot of work in this exhibition that's not only temporal, but also performative and participatory. That's not surprising given the theme of the exhibition. Part of paying attention to the every day is, at the same time, to make an argument for paying attention to the very ways that meaning is constructed. To break down the way that an art work is delivered by stressing the participatory aspect of it or by stressing the way that it is

received is perfectly in keeping with that attention to the construction of meaning.

**NP** Do you mind if I continue the conversation we were having in the morning? It's just that we were trying to warm up in the cafe and, of course we had our best conversations. But maybe we'll try it again now. Having seen some of your slides, I am still not clear Beat about the distinction you were making this morning between marketing and art.

**BS** From our little warm up discussion I gather that publicity or advertising is something you don't really like. That's not exactly my idea. I may be blue eyed or something but, when you look at the public images around in the last 10 or 20 years, has contemporary art delivered those images which talk about our times and our icons and our ideals and in which a lot of people can recognise themselves? I think art is, in the first place, some sort of a mirror – it may be a distorting mirror – of your own life or it shows you other possibilities. I think that publicity and also fashion photography, admittedly only maybe 5% of what is around, has found a language which works with pictures and text, to talk about our times. And it works not only for the people talking but for the people listening and looking because it's something they can understand. They are not afraid of it. When they see a picture of a pretty Asian girl on the cover of a catalogue they have no problem commenting on it. They can criticise it, they can think about it, whatever. If they see an image on the cover of a magazine or an art catalogue which looks like art, they respect it and they say 'Oh wow, it's art and I am not a professional I cannot say a thing about it'. Or they say 'Well it's art, we're not interested'. This is really one of the first times you get a catalogue cover, of a big international art show, which is not afraid to use some of the ideas everybody else who designs some publication has – a picture which attracts many people, which is kind of intelligent, which has many dimensions, which is also just beautiful. Unheard of in the art world you know! And it might even be a bit ironical at the same time.

That's I think what I wanted to say this morning. I think one of the problems of contemporary art is that it feels so totally different from the rest of the world. Just the idea that a picture has to be beautiful and attract people when it's on the cover of a magazine or catalogue, that idea seems so far away from the idea of most artists and curators, almost a taboo or something. Ironically, I heard that the PR agency who worked with the Biennale – even these guys who are into pretty pictures – they didn't like it very much,

they wanted something that looked more like art.

**TS** It's like when you have news cameras covering an art show and they choose this opportunity to make the film arty instead of treating it like news. But I think what you're saying brings up an interesting question in relation to the 80s again and this notion of the anti-aesthetic. A lot of the work, well your work in particular, but a number of the other artists in this exhibition are clearly taking a position in distinction to that.

**NP** I must admit, I have a problem with the idea of just simple beauty. Although I am not in general against publicity, I am however against publicity that takes a contemptible view of the public, and as you said 95% of publicity does do that. But also the idea of what a beautiful image is plays right into the hands of global commodification. I heard an interview with a director of a company called Global Image, who said they were interested in only two figures: super models and soccer players. Super models and soccer players are great images to sell around the world because you don't need language. The implication is that we all recognise female beauty and we all recognise a goal in soccer. Now that idea of global homogenisation has a lot of problems associated with it in my view. I think one of the things that we have to do if we are going to take on that language is to take it in on critically.

**BS** Many artists have dealt with publicity in critical ways. And, to me it just does not work any more. When you are critical about something it's just like black and white, and that's not really being critical. I work with images which almost look like publicity, and I really think it's the only thing that works, in a subversive kind of way. I agree there's a lot of stupid publicity. But I am still convinced that when people in maybe 300 years look back at our century . . . I'm not so sure that Picasso and Beuys will be the icons of our time, the ones who told something about our times just as did the painters of 400 years ago. I think it will definitely be pop music and advertising and film, and maybe literature. But

not contemporary art. And having decided for some reason to be an artist, I just can't accept that. Why give up on something just because it has been abused by a lot of people? I want to have installations that are big and beautiful just as the movies are, or great billboards, and without selling stupid products. After all this culture was created in interaction with what was happening in art.

**LM** I just wanted to comment on some of the things you're saying. Perhaps it's because we have been reduced to the spectator. And what happens when the spectator is denied? I was talking about the piece earlier with the dancer that I had asked to respond to the work. People were so dissatisfied because they had an expectation of how this body should move and that a non-moving body is 'not moving'. But there is so much sensuality in that breath and all this . . . What happens in that non-movement is that she denies spectatorship, and so we have to reside once more in our body and I think there is so much fear in coming back to our own experience. I think this is something that happens in western culture when we split the mind and the body instead of looking at the flesh. So we experience the world in a disembodied way and, when I say 'the every day escapes', I should acknowledge Maurice Blanchot. It seems that the every day is now so much about consumer culture and the administrative reality within that consumer culture. The importance of art for me is that it creates a disturbance and that disturbance shakes what happens within these relationships.

**TS** We're talking about notions of beauty and seduction and I think we're perhaps totalising – when Beat for instance, says that he wants to make work that is beautiful. I mean there is a kind of seduction in that work that has a parallel in Lani's work, but they're completely different physical and emotional experiences. And I think if we're going to be critiquing some notion of beauty then equally we should be critiquing the notion of 'criticality' itself. We're constantly negotiating situations which have mutually contradictory knowledges and experiences and

so perhaps criticality has to do with the clarity of your expression or intervention into a particular situation. That is to say, it's relative as opposed to the notion of something pure and concrete that we can somehow stand outside of and look at.

**LM** Looking at the performative aspect of Surasi's work or even Rirkrit's presentation last night there is something quite inspiring about it – a generous kind of sharing as opposed to a competitive kind of relationship where everything is suspected. [Surasi Kusolwong and Rirkrit Tiravanija, both artists from Thailand.] I think this is where this whole problematic or conflict resides, in the intentionality of making work. What for me is interesting or inspiring about watching Surasi's work – he's put all of these goods in a pond which you fish – is to see the way it disrupts how art normally or conventionally resides within the object, where production is valorised and the reception of the work is not given a lot of credit or a lot of value. This is something that relates to what I was saying before; the meaning resides in all of us and we take it with us. It's wonderful to see everybody carrying these gifts away from Surasi's work; so the work continues outside of that space, it conjures up all these other sets of relationships, and there's all these nice feelings about it, warm feelings, that you keep seeing as people walk around with the pieces they've got from his work. I think it's an interesting kind of disruption, an interesting kind of subversion – very friendly, very disarming.

**Audience** (Guillermo Santamarina, Mex) I have many ideas crisscrossing in my mind now. I hope I can be clear. Thank you Lani, for your very wonderful perspective on life. And thank you for this Biennale it has a very positive vibration. It's evasive, there's a lot of evasion. I feel evasion in everyone's work. But it's good. I am wondering where's the perversity of life, the corruption of life, where is hypocrisy – what happens with all that. It's certainly in our reality and it's not in the show.

**TS** Well I would actually beg to differ – when you talk about the evasiveness of a lot of the work.

We were talking this morning about how when you're having a conversation with a loved one for instance and you're finding it difficult to say something often you find other ways of saying it – it could be humour, it could be a small gesture, it can often be silence. And the silence then begs the question. I think that these are the kinds of strategies which are at the core of a lot of the work in this show. It's one thing to say there's hypocrisy, there's corruption, etc. but the problem becomes how do you negotiate that and, to use Lani's comment of a few minutes earlier – this kind of mind-body problem – it's like yes, yes, we know, but how is our flesh to deal with it?

**NP** If I can also add something here about what our expectations are of art and of critical thinking. I just wanted to make it clear that the role critical thinking should play isn't simply to illustrate or to oppose, it's to create as well. When we are confronted with good critical thinking, whether that comes in the form of writing or any other genre, one of the immediate experiences that we have is a sense of expansion but of not quite knowing yet what it is that's actually transpiring in us in the process of that encounter. If it may seem evasive at first, if the work may feel elusive, and mercurial and obscure, that doesn't mean that with the second or third or even a belated reading that some other point might not come. When we deal with hypocrisy and when we deal with oppression perhaps one of the failures, one of the limited ways in which we respond to it is to respond to it in its kind which is, as Beat said, the limitation of the black and white approach. What I want to stress is that if there's anything we can take from this Biennale it is to break once and for all from that oppositional relationship between critical thinking and art, and work towards a more expansive and really dialogical relationship between different forms of practice.

**BS** A few months ago someone I was talking with was saying that in the western world, this century and last century, political always means critical, as in negative. You criticize things which are not the way they are supposed to be. Political is not at all any more saying how things could be

or should be or will be – political meant all this until maybe 200 years ago. There has to be a few people who think about how things maybe should look 100 years into the future – or else we'll get there and not know what to do. Political, if you want to define it in a very broad sense, it's just like anybody who does something as good as they can. This is a political act.

**LM** I just wanted to share this one quote in relation to what you're saying. It's from the Chilean writer Pablo Neruda 'One can only write political poetry when one begins to learn to write love poetry'.

**TS** And what about writing the three minute pop song, Martin? Do you want to say a few words.

**MC** Not really. Yeah, I don't know... What I know is that I want to make things and apart from that I don't feel like I know anything and the only reason I can think that I want to make things is that I want to communicate with people and I want to try and express myself and I want to be loved. I think what we're talking about is communication.

**GK** In terms of evasiveness or elusiveness there is a really nice phrase Nikos uses at the end of his essay where he talks about 'strategies of resistance in the practices of living'. It seems to me that maybe this is what a lot of the works are getting at; trying to identify a core of experience. What I was going to say – in relation to your work Beat, and Lani your comments – it seems to me that you're both talking about finding a way to return to some kind of authentic experience. Maybe Beat believes that this can still happen through publicity, and Lani I think you're talking definitely about a different kind of authenticity of experience. It seems to me this elusiveness has to do with that, with pulling back to try to find a position that you can inhabit without qualms, without having to feel yourself in conflict.

**E N D**