

## VANCOUVER

### LIFE AT THE NEW CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY:

GERMAINE KOH & KEN LUM

May 5–July 14, 2001

Contemporary Art Gallery,  
555 Nelson Street, Vancouver, B.C.

For the opening of the Contemporary Art Gallery's new premises two of Canada's leading conceptual artists—Germaine Koh and Ken Lum—are presenting some recent works. Lum and Koh have established vigorous practices in an international context with challenging reconfigurations of everyday experience—Lum with his photo/text diptychs and Koh with her recuperation of mundane objects and behaviour(s). To show Lum, firmly rooted in his hometown Vancouver, and Koh, based in Toronto—both of “Asian descent and Canadian identity” (to quote outgoing CAG director Keith Wallace)—together makes for a fitting finale to a decade in which the CAG has come of age as Vancouver's public gallery for contemporary art.

Lum's takes over the roadside business sign, brings a new twist to his earlier photo-portrait and logo/text paired works. The two-part panel usually displays a business name and information in permanent text above a board with tracks holding moveable type that announce changing services and offers. Lum's are actual full-size signs, designed by the artist and commercially produced in plexiglas, aluminum, enamel paint and plastic letters. Bold typefaces in flat contrasting colours advertise fictive mid-scale businesses from printing supplies to adult entertainment. A room full of them under stark lighting amplifies the visual assault of a strip mall.

What we read initially as a simple ad, shifts abruptly to a personal declaration inserted in the second, temporary message. In *Jim and Susan's Motel* we are startled by the plea “Sue, I am sorry. Please come back.” In *Parvi* the moveable text concludes with the religious invocation “Praise

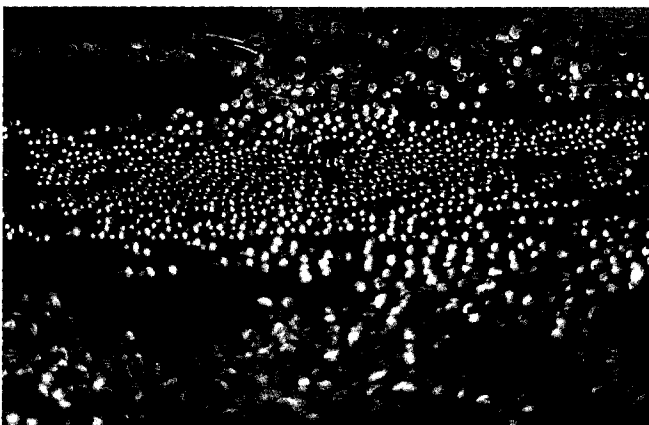
be to Allah” and in *Taj Kabab Palace* with a call to end conflict in India and Pakistan. The joke gives way to the realization that these “signs” disrupt the conventional relationship between seller and buyer with emotional outbursts on topics usually taboo in this context—sex, politics and religion. They draw the viewer into an imaginative, projective attempt to identify and locate the speaker in relation to the advertised business.

In this remarkable way, Lum introduces portrait and narrative qualities to an unlikely format as usually commercial messages negates personal voice. The unsettling effect of Lum's “signs” reveals that to violate mercantile protocol is risky, perhaps radical. Lum's dedication to finding a means to give voice where it appears most absent is courageous and fundamentally humanitarian.

Germaine Koh presents two installations with kinetic elements: *Prayers* (1999) in the gallery foyer, and ... (2000) in the second of the

viewer. ... is an all encompassing unique experience. My own impression: I pause on the threshold of an empty room, windows opening to a busy intersection—cars, road work. Then the sound: a constant rolling and clicking. I see the patterns of tiny, silvery balls on bare concrete, and realize they are falling. I am arrested in the unconscious act of entering. All senses are on the alert. First the social risk: Is it permissible to enter? What is the art work? Is it licit to be “inside” it? Second, the personal risk: Pain and possible injury. Will the balls hit my head? Will I slip?

... compels the visitor to conscious decision, to accept the risk of entering with heightened awareness of head and feet, with attention split in two vertical directions and between the public and the private. This “rain” with its busy-ness, constant sound, and silvery puddles evokes an alive, independent phenomenon that nevertheless needs human intervention. The gallery attendant wielding a magnet must



Germaine Koh  
..., 2000

Ball-bearings, electric moors and mechanical parts, vinyl tubing  
Commissioned by the Gendai Gallery, Toronto  
Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

new galleries. Both pieces invite the visitor to make decisions, to be involved. *Prayers* consists of a machine that puffs grey smoke through an aperture in a window to the outdoors. Messages passing through the office computer or typed by visitors at a nearby terminal are translated and transmitted to the city in a morse code of long and short smoke bursts. ... is a room empty but for a gentle, constant rain of ball bearings. Thousands of tiny steel balls roll through two circuits of tracking suspended from the ceiling. Punctures allow ball bearings to fall to the floor, where they bounce, then pool, into shimmering irregular patterns on the polished concrete.

This is conceptual art that relies on the actual sensing presence of the

several times daily recycle the fallen ball bearings to ceiling reservoirs. In both of Koh's installations, the human experience is accompanied by a different but parallel order or language. At first foreign and chaotic, it subsequently resolves into its own emergent logic. Smoke is ordered into linguistic communication and ball bearings reveal the latent topography of cement paving.

Both artists imply and employ the momentary. Koh's works are transient, constituted by motion and change that are perceived as they pass. Although Lum's objects are permanent, the momentary is implicit: a sudden crying out. Koh and Lum restore the unique actual moment within a larger unconscious physical and social system.

Joan Richardson