

**The Way the Wind Lies:
Germaine Koh's Codes of Contingency**

Functioning within systems of transmission, translation and exchange, Germaine Koh's practice has consistently monumentalized the quotidian. This monumentalization is quietly spectacular, founded upon a lineage of conceptualism while simultaneously concerning itself with the ambiguous and evocative nature of the physical. Working largely with codes, particularly through the relationship of the individual to a codified society, Koh makes everyday precepts apparent through gestures of framing, transposing, cataloguing and disseminating information.

Often compared to Fluxus work in its shared interest in renegotiating the relationship between art and life, Koh's work uses the conceptual to amplify the ongoing dialogue of art and the everyday. Through grounding the vernacular, Koh gives greater voice to the processes of diurnal reassessment and documentation. Like practices of the 1960s, Koh's work engages and challenges existing methodologies, playing with the elusive line of art's contingency.

The codes that concern the artist slip easily between the realms of art and non-art. It might be said that the artist's *modus operandi* is to bring quotidian workings into the space of the gallery, but it is equally consistent to say that she injects art back into public life. From recontextualized found snapshots (published as postcards by the artist), to blank slogan buttons that were institutionally distributed, to an ongoing processual dustball (made from the accumulated dust gathered in the artist's studio and the spaces the work was subsequently housed), to the diaristic use of newspaper personal ads and storefront window sitting, Koh's work reframes our understanding of, and often our participation in, everyday codes. This codified subject matter is manifest in behaviors and signals that are both communicative and regulative. Koh's work disrupts these daily maxims, if only by calling attention to them. The simple act of claiming is a significant gesture in and of itself (as the N.E. Thing Co. demonstrated more than three decades ago), but the act of transmitting signals in a translated form, or exchanging one artifice for another, offers an alternative reading of these signifiers.

Koh's recent work at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery presents two operational modes in her practice: one that perpetuates the experiential transmission of information through a translatory process, and another that redefines an extant vernacular. Both *Fair-weather forces: wind speed* (2002) and *Sighns* (2001) are realized from everyday, often recycled, materials and phenomena loaded with associations.

Fair-weather engages the wind, motivated by a conceptual and physical relationship between the element and the social processes reflected in the gallery. The work consists of a chrome turnstile that moves in a translation of the wind's speed on gallery's roof, functioning as a statistical meteorological measure, as well as a suggestion of human movement. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted by a turning stile, an unseen force pushing its way through the regulatory device into the building's interior. It is a stile one might encounter at the entrance of a supermarket, the PNE or an institution of "high art." It serves to control the flow of bodies, to count and monitor their movement. There is something definitive and satisfying in the whir and click of such an entrance or exit. That click is gathered as statistical data, reflecting the number of people that have attended "x" function, or the masses that rotated their way through subway gates.

The stile turns as a result of Koh's homemade rooftop wind gage - an anemometer - which is wired into the gallery twenty-five feet below (through the skylight) and is mediated by a control box of the adapted cookie tin variety. As the anemometer captures the wind and is propelled, it prompts an electrical switch that sends a signal down to the control box. The control box transforms the signal pulses into voltage that, in turn, sends power to a motor housed in the shaft of the turnstile.¹ The movement of the stile reflects the environment outside (or what is being captured of that environment), from stillness to a lazy breeze or the frenzy of a gale.

Fair-weather functions primarily as a translatory monitor. The anemometer gages an omni-present physical, yet invisible, phenomenon. This rooftop monitoring calls attention to a similar

¹ Germaine Koh in an email, April 21, 2002.

presence in the social realm of the gallery. The work equates the apparatus of the anemometer with that of the turnstile, revealing a relationship between the patterns made by the movement of the wind and those made by man. These patterns are translated into codes (i.e. the anemometric pulses and the count of each rotation of the turnstile), to result in abstracted forms of information. This information is then transmitted, transformed and turns yet another metaphorical crank. If the wind turns the stile, then the stile's power resides in its engagement of ideas of social movement and opinion (the choice to enter a space, to be complicit with an institution, to cast a vote). These two unseen forces are equally performative, happening in real time and space, both captured by objects that make meaning of the movement and ultimately make the invisible visible.

Seeking to transgress the boundaries of the gallery and the real world, Koh often breaks with the expectations linked to institutional surroundings to play with spatial and social boundaries. Mindful of the environment dictated by the context of the gallery, Koh's investigation of abstract forms of communication infiltrates the gallery's controlled interior with outside weather conditions, pushing a transformed natural element into the architecture.²

The complexity of sequential translation in *Fair-weather* has a strong relationship to two of Koh's earlier works. *Prayers* (1999) and *by the way* (2000) translate the language of a codified phenomenon into another set of signals. In *Prayers*, a smoke machine was networked to an office computer that translated its daily texts into Morse code. This translation manifested as smoke signals that could be viewed from the street outside the building where the office was situated. Similarly, *by the way* translated the sound of traffic on a Mexico City highway into the sound of wind (by an effects unit that corresponded to each passing car) which was then transmitted via FM radio back out into the world. Koh wrote about *by the way*: "It is a kind of alternative traffic report, one which tends to become the weather report at the same time. I was hoping that in that city [Mexico]

² It is worth pointing out that Michael Asher, from 1966-67, made pressured air works that similarly addressed the gallery environment by making an invisible, yet physical and architectural, presence.

infamous for its congestion and pollution, the project might provide a quiet opportunity to imagine a more open space and conditions [sic] for passage."³

Fair-weather, like *Prayers and by the way*, raises the viewer's consciousness of their movement through the world, especially through the heavily systematized social spaces of the city: on the commute to work, in the office and in the gallery itself. Koh claims these spaces, specifically the gallery in an institutional critique, pointing to the contingency of our daily operative modes. Koh's slippage between art and non-art suggests that the commute could flip over into an escape, the office into a studio or place of entertainment. Koh adeptly correlates word processing and emailing with antiquated Morse code and timeless smoke signals, challenging the ways in which the language of art is revealed. Koh highlights both the sophistication and baseness of contemporary art, technology and information, naturalizing it, as it were, while calling attention to the beauty and strangeness of such diurnal processes.

The notion of using information as a way to signify and categorize the everyday is a strategy pioneered by the likes of the N.E. Thing Co. and Joseph Kosuth in the 1960s. These and other artists worked to confront traditional categories of media in order to affect the viewer's perception of the world, organizing and interpreting artistic mediums in the form of information. The N.E. Thing Co., for example, constructed a framework of new types of art activity that included claiming and rejecting aesthetics and content, while Kosuth's 1969 *Information Room*, born from his work with definitions, reiterated the re-perception of art's parameters by breaking it down into the form of an informational reading room. John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha concerned themselves with the urban and textual vernacular, often through photographic documentation and textualization.

In a gesture akin to the N.E. Thing Co.'s claiming action or Ruscha's serial categorization, Koh's *Sighns* redefine the everyday vernacular by reframing urban signage to create a kind of street prose. Koh describes these works as "terse concrete poems that extract some of

³ Mathew Kabatoff, *Interview with Germaine Koh*. Rhizome.org, January 30, 2001.

the emotions latent in the vocabulary of everyday communication. I think of [them] as a way of making manifest the compulsions built into everyday activity. There is something sort of documentary about them. Perhaps assisted documentary."⁴ These multipanel colour photo pieces are another translatory act, one in which Koh identifies something in the world and redefines it. Using the camera to juxtapose, crop and resituate text, Koh replaces conventional meaning with new readings. For example, the street sign "One Way Begins" becomes, for Koh, "One Begins," demanding that the viewer ask "what" and reassess their understanding of the once-familiar. Similarly, Koh juxtaposes "If" and "Ever," opening up the conjunction for open-ended interpretations, while "Here Here" has a more definitive ambiguity. The poetic looseness of these works bears resemblance to a Ruscha-esque way of seeing the vernacular through regulation and seriality in an urban culture made strange and beautiful. *Sighns* are documentary, but even more accurately, like the work of Ruscha and others, Koh's document is one that has been carefully constructed and "assisted."

Together *Fair-weather forces: wind speed* and *Sighns* remark on the way histories of human perception are encoded in everyday objects and actions. Koh's post-conceptual practice relies on the visitor's experience, but also maintains the object as a point of reference and question; it serves as an indicator of how the wind lies. Koh reveals and complicates everyday codes through the object, using it to transmit and redefine the vernacular.

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⁴ Germaine Koh in an email, April 21, 2002.