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THRESHOLD: ON GERMAINE KOH

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It is a truism that with R. Mutt's contribution to the Society of Independent Artists Exhibition in 1917 Duchamp irreversibly transformed the basic categories of both aesthetic experience and artwork by displacing object with thought. Implied was that thought and decision are essential and that the work is largely indifferent. It is, at best, secondary. But this is only half of the story. The other half, of course, is that the artist's thoughts or decisions must be recognized and thereby legitimated by the institution. However, once the basic subjective and objective conditions governing the nature of objects as art objects are fundamentally trans-valued, conceptual art is confronted with the question, always, of what comes next. How can the recognition of the constructive, indeed, ontological role of the institution in the production of art be made further productive for art making practices?

A compelling answer to this question is provided by the work of Germaine Koh, an artist of "no fixed address." Koh's impulse is to draw attention to the ever-shifting constellation constituted by work, viewer, and environment. Being of "no fixed address" forces her to take seriously the specific relations to the various places that she nomadically traverses in such a way that enables her to be carried along by the fugitive spaces that she briefly inhabits in a kind of Debordian *dérive*. On the one hand, she pushes her work in a direction where it seeps through the walls of the museum and into public space, as in her numerous public installations, provocations, and interventions produced in a variety of Canadian cities, Mexico City, and Berlin. On the other hand, and from the opposite direction, she breathes life deeply into the gallery space, transforming both art and life in the process. It is as if her very lack of an address, her nomadic status, has the effect, at the same time, of decentring the place and role of the museum with which she is constantly and often productively engaged.

Exemplifying this dual strategy are *High Noon* (2004) and *Sleeping Rough* (2003). In the former performance piece, with collaborator Jane Rude, Koh staged a boxing match in the heart of Toronto's Bay Street. In the latter, Koh literally "slept rough" in a sleeping bag on the floor at a nightclub party for *C Magazine* and at the Toronto International Art Fair. If *High Noon* literally brings art to the life of a bustling street in Toronto's financial district, then *Sleeping Rough* (2003) brings the harsh life of the street to the art institution so as to test what kind of ethical response is possible on the basis of its dominant assumptions. In the process, Koh shows the strange dependency of "art" and "life" on one another, while at the same time keeping them separate, distinct, and almost in a state of suspended animation. While occasionally seeking to be reunified with life, art repeatedly marks its distance from precisely that with which it wishes secretly to be re-united.

But it would simply be mistaken to think that Koh's work confines itself to a Duchampian view of art, which is to say, art understood as chess by other means. Rather, in seeking to exceed the space of the institution, she makes visible or legible determinate material effects on specific bodies that are located in identifiable social spaces. Taken together, therefore, *High Noon* and *Sleeping Rough* effectively map the divisions of a society increasingly driven by growing contradictions, which are written violently, as though by the torturing device featured in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" (1914), directly onto the social body.

Since the 1980s, global capital has undergone a pronounced and perhaps irreversible process of restructuring, synonymous with increasingly ruthless competition between individual firms. Accordingly, the physical fitness of its senior management personnel—as a kind of *pars pro toto*—has been a key concern to North American capital. This has led to an inexorable trend towards the steeling

of its managers' bodies against an increasingly hostile and unforgiving global economy as a result, in part, of increasing competition from Europe and Japan due to the massive rebuilding of these economies in the post-war period (today, of course, India and China are vying to take their place). Koh reveals the increasing muscularity of the body of the corporate manager to be a thoroughly *pugilistic* body, that is, one that is battle-ready for the dawning era of Darwinian struggle as human societies revert to their origins in a kind of simian blood sport. At the same time, and from the other side, *Sleeping Rough* shows that, just as this new regime of competitiveness leads to a kind of natural selection of only the hardest, most ruthlessly impervious of bodies (both human and institutional), it unleashes, at the same time, an iron rationality that disciplines the growing numbers of those excluded from participating in the new global economy—many of them with "no fixed address," exiles, refugees, migrant labourers—weakening and disintegrating the physical integrity of those forced to live and "sleep rough" precariously on the mean streets of the city. In other words, it is possible to see written into the flesh of particular human bodies the direction of a his-toricized nature and a naturalized history. It is with these suffering bodies that Koh's work declares its solidarity. I shall return to this chiasmic relation between nature and history below.

This triangulation of work, viewer, and environment, with a particular emphasis on those excluded from participating in the "legitimate" economy of exchange, was made thematic in Koh's installation titled *Overflow* at Vancouver's International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in 2007. In this site-specific work, produced in collaboration with the Downtown Eastside's United We Can Bottle Depot, Koh participated in the economy of recycling beer bottles by accumulating several hundreds of empties from local binners and collectors. She then assembled them in Centre A in shifting

patterns, illuminating them with only the available light from the wall of windows facing Hastings Street. In so doing, Koh's gesture shifts the orientation of the museum in order to materially open up its space architecturally and economically and, in the process, transform both the subject position of the viewer and, as a result, the work's meaning. In both cases, the legibility of the work is closely tied to the short-circuiting of the closed circuit of exchange according to which objects circulate on the basis of a general or universal equivalent, namely in terms of money.

This is precisely the line of continuity that ran through her most recent exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in 2008. All of the works included demonstrate a marked continuity with her previous works that aim to explore the liminal edge—the boundary between inside and outside—of the institution. However, such an exploration is far from merely academic or conceptual; it is exuberantly concrete and site-specific. *Broken Arrow* (2008), a work produced in collaboration with Ian Verchere, explores and makes visible a form of technology designed to identify, reveal, and display the identities of all of the blue-tooth devices that come within a certain radius of its location. Significantly, as is suggested by its title, the installation suggests the hidden origin of this particular communications technology in the detection of unaccounted missiles and "broken arrows." This pushes into the foreground the way in which the often indiscernible, hidden flows of information that swirl everywhere around us manifest a Will to Power in dominating human beings and nature through "rational" planning, calculation, manipulation, and control. Such a drive reaches its culmination in technologies of surveillance and war. *Volume (Traffic)* (2008), reminiscent of Dan Flavin's use of light as a formal device, is comprised of a household fixture that has been modified with an LED device placed inside the gallery's washroom. The work

actually tracks the volume of traffic in the gallery and makes explicit the flows of visitors and workers within it.

Such a gesture of complication is continued in *Call* (2006), which is comprised of a rotary phone that has been modified with a programmable micro-controller. When the receiver is picked up, the phone automatically dials the next number on a list that has been solicited from participants in the project. This work literally takes the form of making a call beyond the gallery to a highly individualized and "privatized" public and perhaps inadvertently draws attention to the deeply precarious condition of the artwork in the present. In a certain sense, the work seeks to transcend the limits of the gallery space in order to be present in its pure randomness—if only briefly, fleetingly, even if under false pretenses—within the "white noise" of an endlessly distracting, media-saturated, public sphere. Whether the *call* of the artwork in the early twenty-first century is heard is, of course, an open question.

Taken together, these works respond to the aesthetic and conceptual problems of Minimalism, which approaches them by way of emphasizing the often hidden flows of information that permeate the walls of the art institution. While Minimalism has been correctly criticized in the past for relying on the very institution it seeks to make visible and problematic, Koh's work not only probes, but also extends the threshold between the institution and what lies beyond it. She pushes far beyond the institution by drawing attention to the subtle ways in which spatial relations have a specific temporality of their own that it is, in fact, historical. This itself has to do, paradoxically, with that which, while deeply historical, wishes to erase this history itself and become naturalized as technology. Hence, the space of art has undergone a series of subsequent displacements. Technological flows of information—analogue, digital, and otherwise—have dramatically

enhanced and diminished the institution's role in making, un-making, and remaking art. Indeed, in making explicit such a complication of the institution's role, Koh's practice opens up a consideration (or perhaps re-consideration) of the relation between subjects that oscillates continually between communication and coercion, often being one and the same simultaneously. This is made no clearer than in the exhibition's centrepiece: *Fair-weather forces (water level)* (2008).

Upon entering the white, open space of the gallery, one is confronted with five cold metallic stanchions connected by four black velvet ropes running in a diagonal from the building's northwest to southeast corners. While extremely conspicuous, it would be easy for the viewer not already familiar with Koh's work to walk past the installation, thinking that the work wasn't a work at all, but simply a random object left over from another exhibition. Then the strange realization dawns that what initially appears to be part of the mechanism that typically mediates between the individual and institution—not just the museum or gallery, but also the public library, the cinema, indeed, the "media event," per se—is, in fact, part of the exhibition itself. Here, it is being offered up as an object rather than dissolving and disappearing into the background. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that this installation—the third in the *Fair-weather forces* series of works—plays subtly, yet concretely, with the institutional space of the gallery. It shows that the inextricable relation of the communicative nexus between the work, viewer, and environment is itself framed by an irreducibly coercive, if not directly violent, edge. This can be called a frontier of exclusion, which, again, is referenced in other works such as *Sleeping Rough*. These works enable Koh, in a way, to circle back to what seems to be a key concern for her: the inextricable relation between nature and history.

The cold austerity of the stanchions is strongly reminiscent of Judd's Minimalist box sculptures from the 1960s. Yet, where Minimalism constituted a kind of echo effect through which the work comprised a reflection on physical presence of the museum, of its articulation, and its organization of space, lighting, etc., Koh transcends the museum. Connected to the stanchions is a sensor that causes them to be raised or lowered in proportion to the ebbing and flowing of the tides in Vancouver's False Creek via an electronically sent signal. Here, as in *Broken Arrow,* a new dimension enters into the way that the gallery space is resituated in terms of the work and world: the space is now shown to be subjected to, and thoroughly saturated by, an imperceptible fluxus of information. The wall separating what lies within and without is transgressed by such flows. It is here that Koh's hidden affiliation with *Fluxus* comes to light. Perhaps more so than any post-avant garde movement, Fluxus sought to be a kind of *solvent* that would carry out to completion Dada's *dissolution* of the Institution. However, rather than the chaotic and anarchic gestures of the Zurich Dada of Cabaret Voltaire, the explicitly political abrasiveness of George Grosz's caricatures and John Heartfield's revolutionary photomontages, or the nihilistic jokes of Duchamp in New York, Fluxus effectively unleashed the flows that would move effortlessly through the threshold separating the institution from the life beyond it.

What is especially interesting in the case of *Fair-weather forces* is the way in which technology constitutes the medium of communication even though the signal actually comes from nature itself in the form of tide patterns. This can be understood with the help of the concept of "natural-history," developed in the early 1930s by Theodor Adorno, which shows the mutual implication of history and nature. These reflections ultimately culminate in the notion of a

"dialectic of enlightenment," in that the enlightenment aspiration to totally dominate nature itself turns into the very mythology from that it seeks to break.

Since the elaboration of Christian theology in the wake of the disintegration of Rome, we are accustomed to thinking about history in linear terms as the time of the new and unprecedented: think of Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, the Fall of Rome, the Storming of the Bastille, or Lenin at the Finland Station. Of course, such a conception of time culminates in what Harold Rosenberg calls modernism's "tradition of the new." While nature is fluid and constantly in flux, its regularities are predictable and unalterable, as in, for example, the basic physical laws that govern the motion of falling bodies. So, if history constitutes the realm of the "new," nature, understood in non-evolutionary terms, is the space of the always-the-same. It is the space of repetition.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly evident that the relationship is inverted in that human affairs often seem frozen in time, unchanging, and calcified, while nature seems to be precisely the space in which the new appears. Think for, example, of the splitting of the atom and the event's ambivalent legacy. The Human Genome Project and the future prospects of genetic engineering are two further examples of this. More recently, under the sign of global climate change, we are becoming increasingly aware of the quickening of nature's own temporality as changes within the climate system are increasingly traceable to anthropogenesis. At the same time, human social relations, which are historical and therefore contingent, are becoming increasingly naturalized and, as a result, manifest the always-the-same. Indeed, the unending repetition of society in its current form, paradoxically, produces unprecedented and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, massive soil erosion,

flooding, and other environmental crises. The resulting acceleration and change in direction of human and non-human migration patterns takes the appearance of a kind of natural catastrophe.

Such an insight is already intimated in an installation Koh produced while in residency in Berlin in 2005 and exhibited at the Charles H. Scott Gallery four years later. One might be tempted to read *Fallow* as an homage to Joseph Beuys, well-known author of the revised *Fluxus Manifesto* (1963), whose impact on the West German art scene, in general, and Berlin's Free University, in particular, was profound. Koh installed soil and flora onto the floor of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien. Over the course of several months, nature was permitted from within the heart of culture, which is to say from within *history*, to take its course. At the same time, the nearby site from which the materials were gathered was developed as part of the larger post-*Wende* recon-struction of the city; here, history takes the form of nature. As the German sociologist Georg Simmel indicated, the ruin is where nature and history converge. Berlin is a ruin in reverse.

Fair-weather forces dramatically brings home the connec-tion between the historicity of nature and the spatiality of history in terms of how it highlights the relationship between various forms of social control and unprecedented changes in the natural environment. As the pace of natural climactic change quickens, massive effects will be brought about in the organization of historical societies as populations are forced to fight over increasingly scarce resources. For several years now, the CIA has modeled scenarios based on the assumption of massive social dislocation, famine, and civil war caused by climate change, particularly in especially vulnerable Asian and African states. The point where nature and history touch is a dangerous flashpoint. It also hints at the manner in which it is precisely the rendering of social arrangements as a kind of natural fact—that is, an inevitability, which is how globalization is viewed (irrespective of the collapse and abjection of its international financial infrastructure) —while, at the same time, science and technology create ever newer and more effective means of controlling the natural world. Yet, this raises difficult questions for the situation of an artist such as Koh. That is, it raises questions about whether the "call" of artwork can succeed in a world that is so saturated by the flows of information and the distraction to which it inevitably leads to a flattening out of experience. The reason for this is that the work, despite its Zen-like simplicity of inflection and gesture, makes considerable demands on us. It demands care and atten-tiveness to its framing of the Threshold and to the relation between the inside and outside. How is the artwork, in other words, able to open up a space beyond the eternal return of same: a history that has become "second nature"? This was the question posed in the early part of the twentieth century. It has returned again very much as the question of our own century.