IMMANENT DOMAIN   Laura U. Marks

Somewhere in the recesses of the gallery, a worker is doing day-to-day business on a computer. This kind of labour is usually understood in terms of its symbolic results: e-mails are sent, schedules are organized, grant applications are written. The physical process of fingers tapping a keypad several hundred times a minute tends to be subsumed in these final products. But for the duration of this exhibition by Germaine Koh, that labour will be dignified. The keystrokes will be copied by another computer, which will translate the characters into Morse code; those bulky proto-digital bits will in turn be translated into puffs of smoke, which will issue from the building in a series of longer and shorter jets. Puffing hard when the worker inside is busy, breathing easy when there's less to do. Koh calls this translation process *Prayers*.

Walking into the gallery you do not see much at all beyond the clean and accommodating space. But you do notice numerous shiny steel ball bearings, either still rolling or gathered in rivulets on the gallery floor. Stand there a little longer and you feel yourself the object of a gentle hail of these same tiny metal balls, spewing randomly from points in the ceiling. They pass or bounce off your body and join the eddies of small movement on the gallery floor, gathering along the irregularities in its concrete surface. Gradually the BBs gather in large, continent-like puddles, literal maps to a newly discovered territory. In principle, the balls would all gather at the lowest point on the floor, where they would be picked up and recirculated. In practice, gallery staff have to coax them into place, in the sort of "adjusted chance" activity favored by Marcel Duchamp.

When you spend time with one of Germaine Koh's works, you realize that she is drawing attention to patterns that already exist but of which you are not normally aware. Koh is an unfolder, an actualizer: she makes patterns manifest in modest ways, the way one shakes powder on a smooth surface and blows it off to reveal fingerprints. What are these emergent patterns, immanent in the everyday interactions of humans and our environment? I'll suggest that they are macro-level, self-organizing properties that are quite physical, for all that they are difficult to divine. These patterns are life itself, on a scale that requires us humans to be rather humble about our conscious role in the world's processes of growth and change.

All this from a few puffs of smoke, a sprinkling of ball bearings? Yes indeed.

Koh's is a work of making manifest what exists in latent form in the physical world; making manifest what is immanent. In the unfashionable distinction made by religion and philosophy, immanence is usually opposed to transcendence. In those contexts, what is immanent in the world (or conversely, what transcends it) is God, Buddha nature, some sort of abstract mind. But we do not need spiritual notions to understand Koh's work, unless we want to get into theoretical tangos such as, Does traffic have a Buddha nature? Do computers have a Buddha nature? And how can we reconcile such notions with the headlong

collision that characterizes postindustrial society? The immanence to which Koh draws our attention is a different kind of latent or virtual reality, so enfolded with the mundane as to be itself completely mundane, like the invisible map patterns on the gallery floor. Those ardent post-humanists Manuel de Landa, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari would say that what is immanent in the physical world is the capacity to self-organize, grow, transform, and die. This exists at all levels of reality, from primitive silicates (sand) to advanced ones (computer chips) and from simple organics like E.coli to advanced ones like you and me. It's life!

Koh's self-appointed task is to be an actualizer of some of these immanent life flows, an unfolder of enfolded patterns, especially in the aggregation of humans and our built and natural environments. In her performance *Watch* (2000, 2001), for example, she sits in a storefrontwindow for 8-hour days, actively regarding the passersby. This performance is a special kind of endurance piece: a sympathetic 9-to-5 in synchrony with the office workers, and the un- or otherwise employed who traipse the streets. It has an element of the feminist practice of "returning the gaze," as Koh is both on display and actively spectating.[1] But Koh's gaze is not aggressive as much as attentive. Passersby are most likely not conscious of their movements, their gait, what it takes them to get from A to B; their consciousness is focused on how to make it to the next paycheque, on a love quarrel, on dinner. They are not aware of themselves, but Germaine Koh is aware for them: watching them, she actualizes their passage in the street. Koh offers her work as a repository of perceptions while the rest of us are too busy to perceive; *Watch* is thus a kind of public service. These performances were carried out in gentrifying neighborhoods—Ontario Street East in Montreal in 2000, and Queen Street West in Toronto in 2001—so, as Koh points out, she is also acting as a (silent) oral historian of the changes unfolding there.

Most of human activity is not conscious but has emergent properties that might be called intelligent. Manuel de Landa writes,

> …human culture and society (considered as dynamical systems) are no different from the self-organized processes that inhabit the atmosphere and hydrosphere (wind circuits, hurricanes), or, for that matter, no different from lavas and magmas, which as self-assembled conveyor belts drive plate tectonics and over millennia have created all the geological features that have influenced human history. From the point of view of energetic and catalytic flows, human societies are very much like lava flows; and human-made structures (mineralized cities and institutions) are very much like mountains and rocks: accumulations of materials hardened and shaped by historical processes.[2]

De Landa levels the hierarchy between human and mineral life, asking us to learn from rocks in order to assist human society. Rivers, for example, are "veritable hydraulic computers (or, at least, sorting machines)": they transport and sort rocks, pebbles and particles, forming them into sedimentary rock, "cementing the sorted components together into

a new entity with emergent properties of its own" and consolidating the thus-formed structure.[3] Most human engineering projects are anthropocentric and privilege conscious human activity; a key example is the project to create artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence researchers claim (disputably) that a brain is like a computer, ignoring the brain's reliance on the pre-conscious and sensuous wisdom of the body. De Landa points out that a computer is like a riverbed. Or, as Douglas Hofstadter suggested, a computer is like an anthill.[4]

These views call for a certain modesty on the part of social engineers, a moderation of the role of human agency in light of other organic and nonorganic actors. Like for example, today I found a peanut shell on the windowsill of my third-floor apartment. I do not eat peanuts, so the existence of the shell must be explained by a large-scale recycling machine

fueled by my downstairs neighbor's trash and powered by squirrel hydraulics.

Koh's pattern-actualization carries out a similar levelling between human and non-human life. Her projects limit the importance of conscious behavior to point out the ways that we unconsciously, in aggregate with nonorganic life, form great self-organizing systems, or what de Landa calls meshworks. *En busca del nivel del lago* (*Looking for lake level*) (1999) was an installation in a former 17th-century church in Mexico City, which, like many buildings in the city, is unevenly settling as the aquifer below the city is depleted. Meanwhile, city residents rely on bottled water, and the "empties" litter the city streets. Koh filled the sunken end of the church with refilled water bottles so as to create a level expanse, metaphorically finding the lake level. The installation, in Koh's words, "united current conditions of Mexico City with the physical characteristics of the space itself and, through these, the city's history." This project, one of Koh's most explicitly environmentalist works, points out the destructive

character of some of our emergent patterns. De Landa's diagnosis is that for 300 years the world has privileged hierarchies over meshworks, ignoring the nonlinear patterns that characterize the latter. *En busca del nivel del lago* demonstrates that the hierarchical structure—the human city dominates the aquasphere—ignores the meshwork—the city and the aquifer exist in a feedback loop, which includes pollution and the depletion of the water supply. In the meshwork of Mexico City, humans are part of a machine that transfers water from the aquifer to aboveground. Koh's neat array of water bottles made the disappearing lake, and the machinic process that produced it, visible.

As an actualizer, Koh seems to prefer the medium of the signal: radio and other electronic signals, Morse code, smoke signals, other media for transmitting information in compressed form that may be unfolded when it arrives at its destination—or may not. Information is compressed in the signal, and has the potential to be decompressed or to persist in latent form. Making-visible is sometimes a barely perceptible process. A visitor to the gallery will not find very much to see. But this is work that must be experienced physically and in the here and now. It's not the kind of conceptual art, in which a description of it (such as mine here) would offer an equivalent experience to being in the presence of the artwork itself.

… (2000) was first set in motion when the curators at Toronto's Gendai Gallery invited artists to choose an object from the collection of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre as inspiration for a new artwork. It is typical of her practice that Koh chose not an auratic object (a significant photograph, an objet d'art) but a common mass-produced object, which seemed to have found its way by chance into the Cultural Centre's archives: a humble set of pachinko balls. Transported to the Western context, these 11mm steel balls used in the game of pachinko take on a dash of intercultural mystery, so Koh decided to "translat[e] them into something more commonplace," namely, the still humbler ball bearing.[5]

For those unfamiliar with pachinko machines, think of them as a cross between an upright pinball game and a slot machine. A player inserts a coin to buy some number of balls, then pulls back a spring-loaded knob that shoots one ball at a time into an array of pins, where it bounces around randomly and, if the player is lucky, lands in a pocket that activates a slot machine, generating more balls to play with. The only control players have is of the speed of the ball's entry; the rest is up to chance. Winners cash in their pachinko balls for prizes, or sell them on the street. In the pachinko parlor, players sit at row upon row of these machines, concentrating with the trancelike intensity of workers on an assembly line. Ironically, they are there to get some relief from the stress of work. Pachinko, like the cinema, is a 20th century leisure activity developed along the principles of industrial labour. As with much repetitive labour, and also sport, the main part of the activity takes place in a pre-conscious mode.

… extracts the essence of pachinko, its substitution of machinic chance for human agency.

Pachinko is one of those human inventions that, as Marx noted, comes to stand over its inventors; though since it is a game, this subjection is a quality players accept and perhaps enjoy. The translation to ball bearings allows Koh to make more explicit the machinic quality of pachinko, as does the elaborate mechanical contraption (a bricolage of spare parts from Toronto's Active Surplus) that ejects the BBs. She amplifies pachinko's chance element by causing the steel balls to rain not in the confines of a machine but from the heavens themselves (or at least, the ceiling…), perhaps in an evocation of the prayers that players mutter as they watch the pachinko balls spill through the pins. In subjecting contemporary art goers to the hail of BBs, Koh rematerializes the willing subjection of pachinko players. We become aware of ourselves as parts of a machinic ecosystem, and aware of the system's emergent intelligence, as the fallen BBs gather in patterns on the floor.

Koh makes sense of objects that are defined by their lack of specificity. By "making sense" I mean returning particularity to things that are considered abstract.[6] Koh chooses objects that are interchangeable: computer keystrokes, ball bearings, and bottled water are defined by their sameness. It's no accident that the actions and objects that are easiest to abstract are those associated with postindustrial capitalist society. This is a society that requires that things be interchangeable, from dollars to workers to countries where labour is cheap. Koh builds many of her projects around work that is wholly instrumental, a means not an end, be it word processing or pachinko play-

Lumber, 1991-4

ing. Her work makes sense of these objects and actions by rescuing them from the general purposes they serve: it is this specific keystroke, this tossed water bottle, this hurtling ball bearing that is meaningful in its materiality. Regardless of the content of the computer work done, the smoke trail of *Prayers* makes every effort manifest.
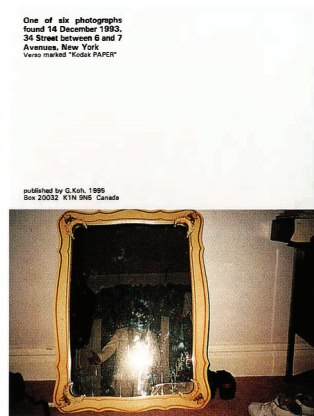
A similar act of making sense is Koh's early installation *Lumber* (1992), a collection of scrap 2x4s, painted gray and leaned against the gallery wall. *Lumber* made sense of the labour of building by making visible its discards. Similarly, for the long-term found-photo project *Sightings* (1992-98), the artist collected photographs that had been lost or discarded on city streets and reissued them as postcard multiples. One which I love features a man in white tuxedo and turquoise bow tie, reflected in a mirror leaning against the wall among scattered footwear.[7] He gestures proudly as he shoots his own portrait in the mirror, but the flash obliterates much of his image and highlights the smears on the mirror surface. Of course the photographer threw the picture away: it did not represent his ideal image of himself. But Koh, in keeping the photograph, valued it for its materiality, for the evidence of the effort
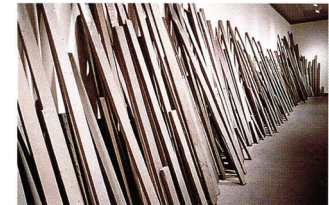
involved in self-idealization, which the tuxedoed fellow, understandably, wanted to erase.

Recently Koh made sense of a public artwork, *La Torre de los Vientos*, a monumental concrete sculpture by the Uruguayan sculptor Gonzalo Fonseca, built on the peripheral highway in Mexico City for the 1968 Olympiad. Her work *by the way* (2000), housed in the sculpture, involved capturing the live sounds of passing traffic, transforming them electronically into wind-like sounds, and transmitting these sounds back over low-power radio. Commuters on the jammed highway could listen to their own passage in a gentler manifestation. Many people resent monumental sculpture for its seeming lack of connection to their everyday lives: witness the furor over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981), which was removed from its site on Federal Plaza in Manhattan in 1989 when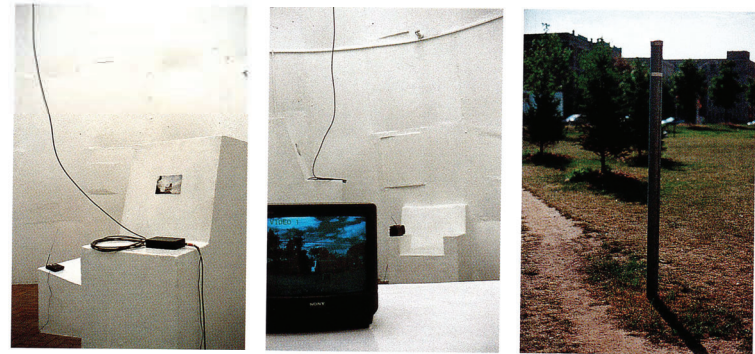 too many lunchtimers complained; or witness the general-mischief assignment in the movie *Fight Club* to destroy public monuments. While I cannot make the same claim about *La Torre de los Vientos*, it is evident that Koh reinscribed the sculpture's function as art by making it the site of something quite transient and ephemeral. She makes the sculpture sensible, meaning she both makes sense of it and makes it apparent to the senses.

Koh works with objects devoid of individuality so that she can demonstrate that they too encode histories of human activity as much as more unique and precious objects, if not more. A painting or photograph is more likely to be the record of conscious human activity; a BB, keystroke, or plastic water bottle is the record of an absence of consciousness, and is thus, for Koh, more interesting. Consider that the majority of human activity occurs prior to consciousness, and certainly well below the threshold of rationality.[8] Yet Koh's works point out that humans, in interaction with other organic and non-organic life forms, generate emergent self-organizing patterns. An earlier project, *Teams* (1997, 1998), invited visitors to exhibitions to choose one of two colors of blank publicity buttons to take away (red and yellow, at YYZ Gallery in Toronto; blue and green at the Sydney Biennale). Visitors implicitly organized themselves into teams on the basis of this modest preference. Similarly, *Poll* (1999), one of my favorite of Koh's works, consisted of a standard 6-foot galvanized steel fence post planted in the middle of a heavily trafficked footpath. Over the months, pedestrians organized themselves into groups who detoured around the pole to the left or to the right. Koh punningly "polled" people who did not know they were participating in a work of art to contribute to an emergent self-organization.

Koh's works operate much in the way rivers do, valuing the way humans behave like pebbles in rivers. Koh draws on human activity in its pre-conscious, thoughtless, or we might say mimetic state as a source of communicable meaning. She organizes what seems random in order to identify its emergent patterns. In groups, we humans behave like riverbeds. We take part in, though we are not wholly responsible for, many more patterns than we are consciously aware.

One of six photographs found 14 December 1993, 34 Street between 6 and 7 Avenues, New York
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Notes

Leah McLaren, "What's up with that woman in the window?," *The Globe and Mail*, March 3, 2001, p. R3.

2   Manuel de Landa, *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* (New York: Zone, 1997), p. 55.

3   de Landa, p. 60.

4   Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braib* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

5   Germaine Koh, e-mail to the author, March 9, 2001.

6   Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia, 1990).

7   *One of six photographs found 14 December 1993, 34 Street between 6 and 7 Avenues, New York* (1995).

8   Tor Nørretranders, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*, trans. Jonathan Sydenham (New York: Penguin, 1998).