

*Many would like to forget time altogether,
because it conceals the 'death principle'...*
Robert Smithson, 'A Sedimentation of
the Mind: Earth Projects' (1968)

In the city, there exist certain transitory spaces – benches, bus shelters – where waiting and rest may be said to constitute the operative activity. One could say these are spaces for 'killing time' (an expression whose verbal violence has always struck me with a kind of revolutionary potential that is totally at odds with the (in)activity which manifests it) and their founding contradictions may be useful for considering the work of an artist who has attended to these spaces and their time. By carving a sort of bus shelter out of the street-front of the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Germaine Koh may be said to open up a space for thought. Unlike the business hours of the commercial gallery, the space will be open 24 hours a day. The space is not on a bus route, though a few steps away from an actual transit stop, rendering ambivalent its relation to a prescribed schedule. But if the space is not determined by the clocks that cohere buses and to a certain extent affect galleries, this is not to say that time has been forgotten here. When waiting one thinks differently about time. Plotting to kill it, to waste it a little – one remembers time and its 'death principle'. This notion of time becomes operative within Koh's architectural intervention, which itself waits for further transformation.

Shell, the title of Germaine Koh's work, echoes the name of its architectural origin – the 'bus shelter' while opening up to the natural world of snails, turtles and other mollusks and crustaceans. For these creatures a shell is the slowly formed shelter that can be taken anywhere, allowing a condition of being at home in the world. This cipher of protection is, however, a disappearing aspect of so-called "street furniture". Vancouver's newly designed bus shelters have, after all, been subjects of mild controversy precisely because they have failed to provide sufficient shelter. One commuter's posting on a local website provides this apt summary: "They leak horribly, are designed with bumps on the seat to discourage homeless napping and are therefore limited to only three bums. Many of them also have the ad panel blocking the view of the bus, so the driver cannot see someone who is seated and the passenger must stand up to check if the bus is in sight. Stupid stupid stupid."¹ One might say that what is ultimately at stake in these "stupid" civic spaces is an erosion of the mind.

Robert Smithson is one artist whose insistence on mind/matter relations may be recalled here, particularly because his poetics find an echo in the oddly 'natural' title of Koh's architectural intervention. Is there an element in *Shell* of what Smithson termed an "abstract geology"? If so, when we consider that the artist is opening up part of the private gallery space to the elements, these need not only be environmental (though Vancouver's rare snowy season may have unpredictable effects), but become conceptual as well. In *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, Smithson proposes a model of mind/matter that is not fixed: "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason." Smithson's essay concludes with a section on 'The Value of Time' (from which the opening quotation of this essay is taken). Here, it becomes obvious that geology became an effective mental model for Smithson because its extreme and uncertain temporality allows for an escape from the clock and from history.² In a different way, Koh's displaced space of a bus shelter becomes a kind of temporal surface. Here, it is not "places where remote futures meet remote pasts" but the undervalued space of waiting which comes to the fore.

There is an abstract element in much of Koh's situational work, which insists on an openness of everyday phenomena. This is as evident in *Shell* as it is in earlier works, which are also attentive to temporal surfaces. One such experiment, *Poll* (1999) involved the punning placement of a metal pole in a vacant lot in Ottawa, Ontario (and later in the middle of a path at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario). Over time, foot traffic marked two unequally worn paths around this pivotal fixture, slyly registering a public choice between Left and Right (though here the directions are literal rather than ideological, subtly critiquing the oversimplified dichotomies of opinion polls). It is interesting to consider this abstraction of a political exercise in relation to *Shell*. In the earlier work, the participation of the public was more specified. A model of civic and aesthetic engagement is not so easily deciphered from this enclosure. For one, entrance involves negotiating the low windowpane of the gallery, which makes the space not so immediately accessible as the already used path of *Poll*. What this work depends on, therefore, is the public imagination. Itself based on a space of waiting, *Shell* awaits to be filled (by

people, thoughts and their unpredictable (in)actions).

In another work presented alongside this architectural intervention, the notion of 'killing time' returns, allowing for a further consideration of the civic value of *chronocide*. Koh's *Side piece* of 1999 is a 6.5 hour video which shows the workaday activity of four men on two city benches seen from inside the artist's live-in studio in Paris. This view of their comings and goings – talking, sitting, waiting and sometimes sleeping – is accompanied by the sound of the activity inside Koh's home. This sound not only precipitates a kind of folding of domestic and street space, but also disrupts the men's synchrony with the "real time" of the video. As the artist herself submits: "Time passes beside them, less as a measure than as a simple presence." If time is present, becoming a kind of object of reflection or speculation that does not include measurement, then it is important to consider how this relates to a sense of being 'at home in the city'. What I am proposing, in other words, is chronocide as a condition of citizenship. In order to feel at home in the city, one must be able to kill time there.

In the past decade, both Jeff Wall and Roy Arden have made works entitled *Citizen*, the former a still- and the latter a moving picture. But despite their formal distinctions, both share a fascination with killing time. In Jeff Wall's *Citizen* of 1996, a young man is sleeping in a Los Angeles park. Legs crossed, hand on chest, he is a mirror of Manet's *Dead Torreador* (c.1864). A 'death principle' is at work here that (while it may not squarely align with Smithsonian's aesthetics) makes a provocative equation between citizenship and killing time. This is one of Jeff Wall's first black-and-white pictures, which shifts the artist's previous focus on more painterly imagery towards the edge of documentation and its attendant truth claims. The truth of citizenship is sought in a body so relaxed that it appears at once dead and dreaming (perhaps of a better tomorrow). Roy Arden's *Citizen* of 2000 trades stillness for extreme slowness, sleep for sitting, retaining the focus on a body out of sync with urban bustle. This black and white video document of a young man slouched on a median, in the middle of bustling traffic, was shot from a car that encircles him, making central his liminal position. Upon projection, the image is slowed down considerably; and along with it, the slowed-down sound deteriorates into a heavy indiscernible drone. This alien sound – not to mention the fact that what looks to be a homeless man is surprisingly at home, relaxed and settled

in the midst of bustling traffic – sets him further apart from the space occupied by the camera. As in Koh's *Side piece*, though with a very different tone, an exogenous sound magnifies temporal shifts, distancing the scene from the clock time of the city.

Alongside any critique of the alienating state that many people find themselves in within cities, Wall's and Arden's works are marked by a refusal to lend a clear heroic action to citizenship. Koh's *Shell* and *Side piece* maintain this ambivalence. To leave the category of citizenship open, in a state of hibernation, is to produce a chance to meditate rather than measure up. The particular presence of time and the (in)activity of the subjects in Koh's *Side piece* tend towards this meditative state. *Shell* may be said to go further as it waits for an undefined subject. The wooden floor of the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, having become the floor of a space that might function as a shelter, also lends this space a sense of a stage to be filled with action. But there is no script, no further recipe beyond this opening.

Such models are crucial, if we consider that the last US presidential election turned in large part on the dichotomy of (Bush's) action and (Kerry's) thought.³ Indeed, Bush's reelection offers every indication that thinking itself is increasingly denigrated and in danger of being severed from notions of 'good citizenship'. In the field of art, it becomes increasingly important to consider (given the popularity of French curator and theorist Nicholas Bourriaud's emphasis on "interactive, user-friendly and relational concepts" posed in the 1998 collection of essays *Relational Aesthetics*) when we run the risk of restaging this action/contemplation dichotomy.⁴ This is not to dismiss Bourriaud's entire argument, but to point out that his emphasis on active relations tends to relegate contemplation to the realm of passive consumerism.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that, all too often, the still or moving picture becomes synonymous with Spectacle – a reduction that makes all the other types of reification possible. In oscillating between a space to be occupied and a video to be watched, and in her overall attention to the seemingly inactive spaces for killing time, Koh's practice abandons the dichotomies that tend to separate and denigrate the mind, while exploring the compelling notion of an open work theorized in *Relational Aesthetics*. The figment of a chronocidal citizen has been called up as a kind of ghost in Koh's *Shell*, negotiating this temporarily public space in

a way that does not fill it categorically but stresses its potential. Koh's experiment necessarily allows time to take its toll. *Shell* remains a vulnerable space, as do many spaces of waiting and thinking.

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Endnotes

- 1 Comment posted by Dez at <http://www.urbanvancouver.com/node/view/797#comment> in response to a press release issued by the City of Vancouver on May 21, 2003, announcing the planned replacement of all so called "street furniture" in Vancouver.
- 2 See Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp.863-868. The essay was first published in *Artforum*, New York, September 1968. Koh's third planned work for this exhibition, *Wave*, may also be seen to explore the entropic imperative. The artist's own writing is also attentive to the type of mind/matter relations which Smithson privileged, though with more emphasis on technological and designed rather than geological materials. See Germaine Koh, "Soft Design for Mushy Thought," *MIX independent art + culture magazine* (Toronto), no. 26.3, Winter 2001, pp. 24-28.
- 3 I am indebted to Corin Sworn for articulating this Kerry/Bush dichotomy in relation to criticisms of *Relational Aesthetics*.
- 4 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), p. 8.

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chronocidal citizens

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