Germaine Koh and Image Bank’s practices, in a way I did not expect, are concerned with the significance of an alternative artistic medium, more particularly the document as a viable vehicle for art production and reception.

While the two artists are seemingly far apart, at least in temporal terms, Koh's works are from the past twenty-five years whereas Image Bank was active in the 1960s and 1970s. They come together here under two themes: an overarching interest in the everyday life or the banal; and a strong conceptual impetus fueled by an archival impulse. The decision to present a small fraction of Image Bank’s large body of work in second is in synch with the conceptual affinities presented by the two corpuses. The linearity of chronological narrative did not suit the questioning, alternative nature of both Germaine Koh and Image Bank, as it would have reduced their dialogue to a matter of temporality.

Germaine Koh

Malaysian-born Canadian artist Germaine Koh (b. 1967) is based in Vancouver, although she consistently describes herself as having no fixed address. Her work, exhibited across Canada and abroad, demonstrates an acute consideration of the private/public dichotomy. Operating mostly in the realm of conceptual art, whose main tropes include the prevalence of idea over technique and of concept over object, Koh’s fascination with the banal experiences of ordinary life is indebted to earlier conceptual practices for which art and life converge. This trajectory
includes most significantly the American artist Allan Kaprow whose *Happenings* in the late 1950s replaced the traditional art object with collective actions and gatherings.²

Germaine Koh

*Journal*, 23 October 1996, Ottawa Citizen

1995-ongoing

Personal journal entries appearing in classified ads and other venues

Allan Kaprow

Posters for *Environments, Situations, Spaces*

1961

Allan Kaprow Papers, © Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

http://arttattler.com/archiveallankaprow.html
In interview with artist and writer Mathew Kabatoff, Koh elaborates on her affinity with the commonplace: “The minor things that mediate our everyday life inevitably bears residual meaningfulness, and much of my work has been an effort to allow these things to speak quietly back to us. I would characterize my work as a whole as an attempt to be attentive to the poetics of daily life by focusing on those phenomena that shape everyday experience, often slightly below the threshold of notice (and, yes, of value).”

3
Germaine Koh


1995-ongoing

Dimensions: Variable

Personal journal entries appearing in classified ads and other venues

Germaine Koh

Journal, 8 April 1998, Ottawa Citizen

1995-ongoing

Dimensions: Variable

Personal journal entries appearing in classified ads and other venues

http://www.germainekoh.com/ma/projects_detail.cfm?pg=projects&projectID=81
Ongoing since 1995, Koh's series *Journal* illustrates contemporary concerns towards language both as an artistic medium used to create a work and a means of communication. Her insertion of ordinary yet mysterious short texts in the classified ad section of various newspapers appears to criticize the current state of human interrelations, and their potential failure to create a sense of community. Her short posts are public yet anonymous. Some of her journal entries made public include: “Cut off my hair yesterday. It’s lopsided but lighter. Auntie L. died this week last year.” and “8 April. Ran into A and S, who solved my problem. Had dinner, beer. I like them.” By inserting the private into the public realm, the artist plays on the traditionally dichotomous nature of this relationship: The personal, subjective nature of journal entries Koh includes is not conventionally intended for divulgation. Their presence in newspapers subverts the politics of control and restrain associated with the public realm.

About this series, Koh writes: “I use the real time and repetition embedded in these spaces to relate little more than the passing of time, gently magnifying its banality and arguing for the monumentality of daily preoccupations. Executed anonymously, this work's reception is as unknowable as its potential audience is wide, though part of its poignancy lies in the assumption that many of the activities I describe might be familiar to many of the unknown people who happen to read them. Although the events are particular to me, they thus might seem to represent certain shared collective experiences.”

Veering away from the primarily commercial intent of traditional classified ads, Koh intends to direct the reader’s attention toward the similarities of experience, pointing at collective and shared sentiments of melancholy and sadness which are palpable in typical ads such as “Wanted-A hopeless romantic, who can make me laugh.”
Especially in terms of “romantic” ads, readers are inclined to project and reflect on their own emotions, while empathizing with complete strangers.

Germaine Koh

*Journal*, 27 October 2003, McMaster University Campus, Hamilton

1995-ongoing

Dimensions: Variable

Personal journal entries appearing in classified ads and other venues

Germaine Koh

Journal, 10-11 July, 2007, Ingenuity Festival, Cleveland

1995-ongoing

Dimensions: Variable

Personal journal entries appearing in classified ads and other venues

http://www.germainekoh.com/ma/projects_detail.cfm?pg=projects&projectID=81
Following their insertion amongst classified ads, Koh's personal journal entries were later exposed on commercial billboards, road signs and illuminated message boards in various North American cities, such as Hamilton, Ontario and Cleveland, Ohio. The placement of her journal entries in physical, public space is once again telling of the artist's affinity for and commitment to the familiar “real world”, rendered ambiguous in her enigmatic insertions.

Germaine Koh

Postcard from the *Sightings* Series

1992-1998

Dimensions: 4 x 6 inches

Series of offset postcards

Germaine Koh

Postcard from the *Sightings* Series


Dimensions: 4 x 6 inches

Series of offset postcards

http://www.germainekoh.com/ma/projects_detail.cfm?pg=projects&projectID=88
Sightings (1992-98) is a series of postcards which integrate as their main subject discarded photographs which Koh allegedly finds in places such as city sidewalks and park trash cans. Printed in editions of 1000 to 2500, the cards were made available to audiences for a dollar each. About their distribution, Koh says: "This particular project conceptually needed to be produced in a cheap form that would eventually disappear, so it happens to be one case where the concept precludes a finished—i.e. Permanent or commercially viable product." The caption on the back of each card tells the beholder the date, site and circumstances of the find, any relevant details as well as its publication date.
Germaine Koh

Postcard from the *Sightings* Series

1992-1998

Dimensions: 4 x 6 inches

Series of offset postcards

Perhaps more important than the consumable aspect of the postcards is Koh’s recycling and exposure of anonymous, rejected personal photographs. By repurposing discarded images, Koh reactivates the potential narratives related to those photographs: Who are these people enjoying a bottle of champagne in what appears to be an outdoor celebration? What memories and emotions are associated with them? And more importantly, why were the photographs rejected? Koh re-situates them at the intersection of the private and public through a clever repurposing. This differs from recycling in that it gives new life and use to an obsolete, in this case found object, without necessarily altering it. The distinction is significant insofar as Koh does not combine random objects to create an entirely new one, but rather alters the photograph’s function.

This very repurposing also has a double reference in its relation to the ideas of documentation and archival work: the photographic format has long been associated with the capture, quite literally, of events. Photographs, banal or original, necessarily act as repositories for memories. Thus the discarded photographs collected by Koh existed, indifferent forms and settings, as an archive of sort. This characteristic is visible to some degree in all of the postcards, especially moving in one inscribed with *Christmas 1991, Peter, Elizabeth, Rosie, Claire*. Assuming that it is a family photograph, the handwritten note on its back is significant of a collective wish to retain, collect, and organize memories. Arguably, Koh’s postcards re-activate the archival potential of these abandoned photographs by including them in a (non-exhaustive) archive of lost or forgotten photographs. As curator Christina Ritchie points out, “the documentary aspects of these work impose an “administrative” character that is, for Koh, an explicit resurrection of the strategies of Conceptual art. Each work is conducted like an experiment whose findings are dutifully recorded as the work.”\(^7\)
Germaine Koh

*Call*

2006

Dimensions: Variable

Intervention using vintage telephone modified with programmable microcontroller and custom circuitry

Call

Germaine Koh

2006

Dimensions: Variable

Installation in Grande Prairie, Alberta, 2009. Intervention using vintage telephone modified with programmable microcontroller and custom circuitry

http://www.germainekoh.com/ma/projects_detail.cfm?pg=projects&projectID=10
Yet another “experiment,” Koh's more recent piece entitled *Call*, from 2006, also reflects recurring themes of the commonplace and documentation through the medium of communication. For this work, Koh repurposed a vintage telephone, augmenting its common usage with a programmed LCD screen that informs the viewer that once he or she picks up the handset, the telephone will automatically dial the phone number of a random participant who has beforehand agreed to receive unplanned calls and engage in conversations with complete strangers.8

*Call*’s multiple incarnations were all installed in gallery settings, perhaps situating the purpose of the artwork more clearly than in the two series discussed previously. While remaining true to the conceptualism of her practice, Koh plays on the notion of active, embodied participation. This piece disrupts the conventional use of the telephone, introducing an ambiguous, hazardous element to the act of exchanging information, ideas and feelings. *Call* effectively transfigures the everyday object into an art object, or experience rather, by disrupting the assumed universal everyday and pointing out to the multiplicity of experience by depending on elements of willing participation and chance.
Michael Morris

*The Problem of Nothing*

1966

137 x 152.4 cm

Acrylic on canvas.

Vancouver Art Gallery

A collective founded by Michael Morris, (b. 1942) known as Marcel Dot, in collaboration with Vincent Trasov, (b. 1947) known as Mr. Peanut, Image Bank constitutes the second part of this presentation.

Operating on the margins of the art circuit, both artists were part of a large—albeit private—network of artists that included the members of General Idea, Anna Banana, and Glenn Lewis. This vibrant community was, as American Fluxus artist and author Ken Friedman writes, “characterized by a trenchant sense of privacy [and] a specific reaction against the exclusionary façade of art history and [its] exclusive attitudes.” Image Bank’s use of a means of communication—the mail—as a viable artistic medium promoted the exchange of ideas and visual material across geographical boundaries.

After encountering Morris’ The Problem of Nothing in Artforum, Ray Johnson of the New York Correspondence School, which was an network of artists corresponding and exchanging visual material through mail, contacted Morris, noting their shared interest in “nothing.” About Johnson’s practice, Clive Phillpot, former director of the MOMA Library, writes: “Even when he is invited to participate in a group show, he is as likely as not to exhibit, or to declare that his contribution will be a Ray Johnson nothing.” Indeed, Johnson informed Morris that he had done Nothings while everyone else had done Happenings, consciously contrasting the popularity of American artist Allan Kaprow and his experimentation with the creation of social situations for the audience to engage in. Johnson’s Nothings were in fact fictional meetings that never actually took place in the physical world, but rather functioned as conceptual intentions.
Image Bank

Page from *The Image Bank Annual Report*

1972

8 x 21.5 cm

Offset print, published in a special issue of *File Megazine*

Morris/Trasov Archive. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

Image Bank

Page from *The Image Bank Annual Report*

1972

28 x 21.5 cm

Offset print, published in a special issue of *File Megazine*

Morris/Trasov Archive. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

Morris’ correspondence with Ray Johnson set in motion a Canadian network similar to the New York Correspondence School. The initiative responded to a real need for personal and direct contact among artists in Canada and abroad. The founders describe their initiative as such: “Image Bank always existed in the mind. There were never any of the charters, boards of directors or societies that came later with the parallel galleries. Image Bank was telepathic. It read the pulse and tapped into the subliminal. Image Bank motivated events, created structures, questioned and redefined roles, and was always open to new ideas.”12

The Image Bank Annual Report of 1972, listed visual material requests sent to the Image Bank by artists across Canada and the United States as a way to collect various images that could be appropriated, copied, re-used, exchanged, etc. By providing the participants’ postal addresses, the Report made artists part of a vast network that allowed them to correspond and collaborate, creating an alternative art circuit through Canada Post, a common mode of communication and exchange. Along with image requests, the annual report was comprised of progress reports and facsimiles of on-going projects.13 This collaborative effort was, as curator Luis Jacob writes, a crucial aspect of the Image Bank’s activities: “Annual Report (1972) was a kind of corporate progress that assimilated the rhetoric [and] the aesthetics of administration and bureaucracy […] conflate[ing] the aesthetics of administration and an impulse towards museology.”14
Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute) and Kate Craig (Lady Brute)

*Untitled*, from the *Banal Beauty Inc.* Series

1972

28 x 21.5 cm

Published in the *Image Bank Annual Report* in *File Megazine*

The Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute) and Kate Craig (Lady Brute)

Mailing Page

1971-3.

28 x 21.5 cm

Offset print

Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

Untitled is, amongst many of Image Bank’s collaboration on the series *Banal Beauty Inc* from the Brutopia duo, comprised of Eric Metcalfe (b. 1941) and Kate Craig (b.1947), who were known as their alter egos Dr. and Lady Brute. The piece was published in the 1972 *Image Bank Annual Report*. Indeed, this series of images of banal beauty was the result of the collaboration between Metcalfe and Craig, along with the network of artists involved in Image Bank’s Image Requests program. All the images used in the series were the product of a year of accumulation of visual material sent from across the country. This project’s documentarian impulse was propelled by the Image Bank’s networking capacities.

The images requests placed by the duo, notably of leopard prints, was “a way to locate and document Brutopian imagery in the world of image circulation.” Craig had started using the leopard motif in 1970, and it quickly became the recurrent theme of their collaboration. This piece reflects their obsession with the leopard, combining the kitsch motif with a voluptuous, scantily dressed, pinup-like woman. The image speaks to the title of the series: the *Banal Beauty Inc*. Its aesthetics, while pushed to the limit of absurdity, are related simultaneously to the ideas of popular culture and common stereotypes. As art historian and curator Scott Watson argues, “the project played with the culture/nature and higher nature/animal polarities of classical aesthetic in an effort to undermine them.”
Image Bank

Documents from the Morris/Trasov Archive

1968-1990

Installation view from the exhibition *Documentary Protocols* at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, 2007

Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC

Image Bank

Documents from the Morris/Trasov Archive

1968-1990

Installation view from the exhibition *Documentary Protocols* at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, 2007

Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC

The original collective, renamed in 1992 the Morris/Trasov Archive, is now housed at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. The archive is predominantly comprised of Morris and Trasov’s collaboration from 1969 to 1974, but also includes various items from artists who participated in the Image Bank network. The collected and catalogued objects include postcards, books, magazines, sound recordings and a wide variety of found objects. Image Bank's incentive to collect and document is embodied by the Morris/Trasov Archive. The archives preserves these objects and demonstrates, through them, the collective’s distinctive conflation of art and everyday life through an art practice dedicated to making works that distort the conventional boundaries of creative consciousness. Indeed, the ironic and paradoxical alter egos of many of the Image Bank participants are telling of this fusion of art and life.

The transformation from active collaboration to archive is always significant, but especially so when thinking of Image Bank and its various undertakings. The collective’s initial incarnation and subversive intent is, in a way, co-opted when conceived and exhibited as archival records. The Image Bank as “a repertoire of recycled, readymade, or elaborated imagery, and raw material for further reworking” is arguably extinct by the very nature of the archive: a completed, static body of work.17
Postcard from the *Sightings* Series

Germaine Koh

1992-1998

Dimensions: 4 x 6 inches

Series of offset postcards

Page from *The Image Bank Annual Report*

Image Bank

1972

Dimensions: 28 x 21.5 cm

Offset print, published in a special issue of *File Megazine*

Morris/Trasov Archive. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC

While decades apart, Germaine Koh and Image Bank share important traits: their concern for the banality of everyday life and reflection on modes of production and communication. As such, the most poignant characteristic of their work is their attention to subjective experience and the impulse to archive it. As author and critic Hal Foster writes: “Archival art is as much a preproduction as it is postproduction: concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces [...] –in art and history alike—that might offer points of departure again.” Indeed, Koh and Image Bank’s respective projects, in their repurposing of visual and material objects, are permeated with multiple meanings about the archival source and reuse of ephemeral documents as works of art and modes of communication.
NOTES

12 Morris.
14 Jacob, 2.
16 Watson, 19.
17 Jacob, 2.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VIRTUAL EXHIBITION DESIGN

Inspiration


To stay true to the nature of the artworks presented, and because they are quite busy with text, I would like to keep the exhibition visually uncluttered and the overall design very simple. A white background would host an image carrousel at the top of the page, so that artworks from every series included would be in constant rotation, in no specific order. An introductory paragraph just below would welcome the viewer and introduce him to the exhibition. The viewer would be able to click on any one of them, which would open another window in which the selected work would be shown in a bigger, static format with a short description. Through a click on a small “plus” sign (+), curatorial text would be made available on the same page. Below the image shown, smaller photographs of the rest of the series it is part of would allow the viewer to see the series’ other manifestations. The name of the exhibition would always be visible, so that the viewer could go back to the home page. Just below an expandable menu would allow the viewer to go directly to Germaine Koh or Image Bank’s sections, which would present all the works in smaller icons.

Because of the series format of all the works presented, I would like to include more photographs of the series in their multiple incarnations, but also of other artworks I think are valuable to understand these artists’ respective practices. Especially for Image Bank, I would like to show the founders and collaborators in performance as their alter egos, as it is an important part of the collective’s impetus.