





*Afterlives*

Germaine Koh & Aron Louis Cohen

Look at the moon in the sky, not in the lake.<sup>1</sup>  
– Rumi

Today, we apprehend the world through a mix of direct experience, reflections and mediation: intermeshed networks where the thresholds between selves, and our windows to knowledge of the world, feel accessible and permeable – yet deeply elusive. Things have always been interconnected, yet 21<sup>st</sup> century human technologies have rapidly accelerated our awareness and pace of connection. There is the potential of both old and new ways of knowing, averting linear time and opening new spaces for consciousness. The same feeling which led Rumi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to seek knowledge beyond the mirrors of representation, beyond that which can be seen and named, still holds today.

Technologies and old and new signify a human desire to understand, interface and possess the world. Tracing its etymology, *techne* refers to an understanding through making and doing. Material intermediaries, often supports to human activity, tend to be hidden, made supplementary, or discarded after their intended use. The accumulation of human techniques and technologies abound in the search for greater knowledge, memory and consciousness: craft and tool; philosophy, history, encyclopedia; the internet, computation and telecommunication devices. Communication technologies – speech, sound, symbol, writing, currency, electronic frequencies, telepathy – transmit messages and provide conduits between interiors and exteriors and the thresholds in-between selves, things and worlds. Today, such technologies oscillate between material and deceptively immaterial. Digital repositories of our collective experience and memory – second worlds, second lives – have become algorithmic, aleatory streams for accelerated knowing.

*Afterlives* begins with a desire to re-access direct embodied experience, accepting while attempting to transmute mediation and the technologies of contemporary human life – to meld *techne* with *poesis*, the bringing into being which did not exist before. The exhibition explores material and information flow within longer stretches of time and space, under the sign of the hidden and ambiguous processes of global economies. What intersections of energies – time, labour, emotion, power – are embedded in the materials of our late-capitalist experience? What incidental aesthetics might be revealed in these encounters?<sup>2</sup> The intuitive processes of artists Germaine Koh and Aron Louis Cohen treat materials as *alive*; their gestures towards transforming things understood as “waste” invite us to reconsider our relationship to the discarded and forgotten, and the larger metaphor of the hidden, cast-off, and cast-away. If we conceive of a more fluid and plastic dialogue between humans and things that forms and re-forms respectively with exchange, and an awareness of how material processes and manufacture – particularly those hidden from view – cohere signal and thing,<sup>3</sup> then how might we commune with the material and human world, both beloved and forgotten, to learn and understand differently?

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In its simplest form, communication can be understood as the exchange of information between beings. Human communication networks are an extension of natural forms and systems through electricity, analog and digital signals and, increasingly, the accumulated layers of email, text, real-time notifications and social media. Germaine Koh’s *Call* (2006), which predates the smartphone by one year, takes us back to a basic – while still mediated – oral exchange. By connecting us to random strangers, Koh’s analogue telephone offers vulnerability, cuts across expected routines and social norms, and prompts one’s own capacity to extend these bounds. In its own long and ongoing life, *Call* prompts reflection on

the ways we converse today, inviting a re-visitation of care for the collective, and a desire to connect with something chance and unknown. Amidst changing notions of private and public, increased connection, anxieties of precarious citizenship and an urgent need to renew civic duty amidst conservative governments and neoliberal policies, when do we reach out – how frequently or little – and *why*?<sup>4</sup>

In a shared spirit of curiosity around communication technologies and intimate encounter, Aron Louis Cohen's *Unmaking Time: Forward and Reverse* (2012/2017) also invites haptic experience. Cohen's curiosities around electronic waste began from an image circulating online that depicted the dissection of computer objects through rudimentary craft methods, albeit with toxic consequences, in developing countries. His own amateur, clinical dissection of laptops, desktop computers and flat-screen monitors seeks to understand what we can know through the materials' properties and our hands-on, aesthetic encounters. Transparent, mirrored and mysterious, these materials impart no greater understanding than when he first began.<sup>5</sup> The documentation of layered transparencies in book-form, with no clear beginning nor end, conveys both his experience of the feedback loop of his comprehension and the consciousness of accumulated time embedded in the making, disposal and disassembly of these materials, which then recirculate in other forms.

The large-scale movement of materials in the system of global capitalism exists far beyond individual and direct human knowledge, despite access to volumes of information. Fragments and glimpses of a larger narrative appear, offering clues for further speculation and investigation. Koh's *Roadkill* series (2017), comprised of tire treads found highway-side on various personal journeys along the West Coast, amplifies the fiction of their form – itself a generic and forgotten object. Koh was drawn by their resemblance to small animals or

pelts, as if referring to “wild things brought into systems of exchange.”<sup>6</sup> Now strung up with aircraft cable as strange sci-fi objects with curling tails, and mounted onto red cedar as if they are hunting trophies, *Roadkill* draws disturbing attention to humanity’s often dominant and violent treatment of both things and animals.

Koh and Cohen’s crate exchange expands their speculations on the circulation of goods in the domain of global capital. Recognizing their mutual interests in materials conceived as disposable and waste, Koh shipped Cohen a crate full of tourist t-shirts that primarily advertised destinations other than where they were made. Cohen, in turn, sent Koh a few months’ worth of plastics that he used in his daily life. Over a six-month period, both transformed the received material into new forms. What could they become, while retaining the paradoxes and referents of their material origins?

Cohen’s *Greetings From (21 to 1500)* (2017) documents the t-shirts’ pulping into postcards, with the help of a one-hundred year old machine and specialized craftsperson. Paper, an interlacing of fibres, is similar to cloth; yet while cloth’s strength comes from an intentional, mechanical weave, paper’s strength is formed through a chemical bond between randomized structures.<sup>7</sup> The postcards bear the letterpress marks of locations where the cotton was sourced, information traced on an inner label and cast in performative typefaces that strike further geographic spread and dissonance. A less visible, though implied narrative is the economic and labour imbalances corresponding to the t-shirts’ origins, place of manufacture and place of sale, masked by the chipper idealism of graphic and font (*I♥KL*; *I♥London*).<sup>8</sup> In postcard form, these materials are given another chance to recirculate through extended personal networks of the individual participant’s choosing, while they perhaps contemplate the postcard’s previous life and the other lives they connect to.

Koh's *Takeaways* (2017) similarly retain the original materials' properties, with letters between the artists expressing their fascination and frustrations with the deceptiveness of plastics. Plastics, considered disposable, ubiquitous and cheap, take from five years to millennia to biodegrade: they are durable beyond many human life spans, stubborn, and extremely malleable.<sup>9</sup> Taking up Cohen's observation of plastic as "shapeshifter and chameleon," Koh initially experimented with its ability to return oil, its primary substance of creation, before finding it too volatile.<sup>10</sup> Instead, as amateur cook and chemist, she followed its attractive and repulsive nature, categorizing and then melting various plastics types with edibles: coconut and canola oil, molasses, white sugar, flour, wasabi. The resulting forms are inedible delectables, inconsumable offshoots of consumption: matcha-like "pastilles" are sourced from green plastic bottles; "ice-cream sandwiches" are concocted with polypropylene and coconut oil; polystyrene "lollies" cite their origins as crinkly plastic. Koh's corresponding recipes, in saccharine chocolate-box cursive, also tantalize and repel. Images and a record of her trials and errors are included in her letter and shipping labels, all archived into the work itself. As with the t-shirts turned postcards, *Takeaways* are also for prospective re-circulation – in exchange for a modest plastic recycling fee.

Near the back of the room, a deconstructed LCD screen emits ambient sound and light. An image is still visible, but the mysteries of this seemingly miraculous apparatus are pulled apart, violating the suspension of disbelief that such mediation requests of its viewers. *Exploded View (Planet Earth)* (2017) enacts Cohen's deconstruction of technical objects in search of deeper understandings. Incongruously paired with materials that contrast in craft and time, it sits atop a generic antique table and is suspended by woven rattan, whose simple pliable nature acts almost as a support structure for a theatre set. One performance is the content – the hyperreal simulacra of nature in *Planet*



*Earth*, BBC's 2006 award-winning documentary: punchy high-definition footage shifting between distant landscapes, close-ups of animals, and glistening red mushrooms. Another performative layer is the apparatus itself: an LCD display extracted from diffuser, cathode fluorescent zig-zags that illuminate, buoyed by the reflector at the rear.

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What metaphors and patterns exist within the technologies that humans create? The notion of the visible and invisible underlie our present communication communications technologies and their embedded forms of representation. The screen and circulating digital imagery have become ubiquitous thresholds for mediated, expedient knowledge – revealing, yet also obscuring. Excesses of industrial manufacture generated by such technologies – from upstream to post-consumer waste, the chemicals and radiation from rare-earth mineral extraction that have harmed many – are similarly obscured from view, frequently outsourced to suburban peripheries and developing countries, sometimes buried deep within the earth and our waters.<sup>11</sup> The mysterious, metaphoric “back-end” hides the political, geographic and economic imbalances in human systems of creation and disposal, not to mention the acres of desert servers that maintain our data and digital access to knowledge. Paradoxically, our present access to this information often requires the very processes that are wounding others and our world. Is waste our contemporary and unsuspectingly insidious form of imperialism? Yet with this waste, are there other potentials? How might we address these world imbalances at an individual human scale, if at all? With a surfeit of information and imagery, and no consensus on truths, how do we find our way? Out of sight perhaps, but not out of mind.

Screens are also the ideological and interpretive filters which stand in between selves and experience. In a fraught, still-human but post-humanist desiring sense, many are endeavoring to create space for more sustainable and balanced relations with the earth: a different, non-anthropocentric world view. Catherine Malabou writes of neuronal plasticity as the ability of the human brain to adapt, evolve and improvise.<sup>12</sup> Drawing analogies between forms of socio-economic organization and cerebral organization – how we have perceived ourselves and the world, and how this has shifted from a centralized, hierarchical form to one delocalized, networked and polymorphic, she asks: “what should we do so that consciousness of the brain does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?... To what extent are we plastic?”<sup>13</sup>

The wider proposition of plasticity – a more fluid and transformative dialogue between things, humans and the earth – places humanity as but one element of a larger natural system, one in dire need of care. If plasticity is indeed the capacity to give and receive form, then how might we create new systems that are more sustainable? And where do we begin? Cohen’s *Geode IV: Geoformations, The New Epoch* (2011) seems to sit within this uncertain space, somewhere between now and the distant imagined future. An unassuming black rock transformed from stewed plastic, broken to reveal the jewels within, it presents us with waste – the legacy of our age – and a strange alchemy that moves beyond it. As a form that has been mined from the oil of our earth, used, unmined and re-mined, it suggests traces of a cycle we’ve not yet experienced. And that we, too, might become something else, if we let go of our forms as we currently are.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rumi, "The Name," *The Rumi Collection* (Shambala: Boston & London, 2005), ed. Kabir Helminski.

<sup>2</sup> I feel this corresponds to both artists' practices. For use of this term, see Jim Drobnick, "Germaine Koh: Post-Performativity and Incidental Aesthetics," in Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars, eds., *Caught in the Act: Performance by Canadian Women* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2016), 270-281.

<sup>3</sup> For a deeper discussion, see Jennifer Gabrys, "Ephemeral Screens: Exchange at the Interface," in *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 45-71.

<sup>4</sup> Email exchange with Germaine Koh, November 10, 2017. See also Germaine Koh, "Talking to strangers, asking directions, acting out and other civic duties," for the exhibition *Territory* (Vancouver: Artspeak and Presentation House Gallery, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Aron Louis Cohen, November 11, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Email exchange with Koh, November 10, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the craftsperson's partner had hosted a project, "Combat Paper," which transformed veterans' uniforms into dolls and other forms, as a way of processing individual grief. Conversation with Cohen, November 15, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Recent news of unpaid workers stitching pleas into clothing for Zara illustrate human communication of injustices through the garments themselves: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/zara-workers-turkey-1.4403698>. Accessed November 15, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Plastics, depending on their type, take from 5 years to 1,000 to biodegrade. For more information: <http://www.brighthub.com/environment/green-living/articles/107380.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> See letters written by Cohen (May 16, 2017) and Koh (November 8, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> For the history of rare earth mines in Malaysia and North America, see Kiera Butler, "Your Smartphone's Dirty, Radioactive Secret," in *Mother Jones*, November 23, 2012. <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2012/11/rare-earth-elements-iphone-malaysia>. For coverage on Baotou, Inner Mongolia, see BBC's Tim Maughn, "The dystopian lake filled by the world's tech lust," <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150402-the-worst-place-on-earth>. Accessed February 2015. See also the talk by geographer Josh Lepawsky on his forthcoming book, *Reassembling Rubbish and Worlding Electronic Waste*, courtesy of VIVO Media Arts Centre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr0MwogZdkA>. More information on the Lepawsky's book is located here: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/authors/josh-lepawsky>.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

## Related Reading

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010).

Victor Burgin, “Coda: Possessive, Pensive and Possessed” in *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

Céline Condorelli, Gavin Wade and James Langdon, *Support Structures* (Berlin & New York: Sternberg Press, 2014).

Jim Drobnick, “Germaine Koh: Post-Performativity and Incidental Aesthetics,” in Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars, eds., *Caught in the Act: Performance by Canadian Women* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2016), 270-281.

Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013).

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016).

Germaine Koh, “Talking to strangers, asking directions, acting out and other civic duties,” from the exhibition *Territory* (Vancouver: Artspeak and Presentation House Gallery, 2007).

Geert Lovink, “After the Social Media Hype: Dealing with Information Overload,” *e-flux* 45 (May 2013). <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/45/60109/after-the-social-media-hype-dealing-with-information-overload/>

Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015).

Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988).

Valclav Smil, *Making the Modern World: Materials and Dematerialization* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2014).

## Biographies

**Germaine Koh** is an internationally active Canadian visual artist based in Vancouver BC. Her practice is concerned with the significance of everyday exchanges, familiar objects and common places. Koh has been a recipient of the Shadbolt Foundation VIVA Award and a finalist for the Sobey Art Award. She is also an independent curator and a partner in the independent record label weewerk. Her current ongoing projects include *League* (2012 -), which gathers people to play invented sports and games as a practice of creative problem- solving, and *Home Made Home* (2014 -), a creative enterprise for building innovative small dwellings to imagine other possible ways of living.

**Aron Louis Cohen** is an artist working in San Francisco. His work explores technology and craft production, and is informed by his role as an art conservationist. Cohen has participated in artist residencies at KALA Art Institute (Berkeley, CA), Wave Hill (Bronx, NY), and The Center for Book Arts (New York, NY). Recent exhibitions include *Mage* at radiator gallery (2017: Queens, NY), *Not Curated* (2017: Bushwick Open Studios, NY), and *Landslide/Possible Futures* (2013-14: Markham, ON and Shenzhen, China), for which he grew and transformed a field of flax into books. Cohen received a BFA in Photography from Rhode Island School of Design and a MFA from Parsons, The New School for Design.

**Joni Low** is a writer and curator based in Vancouver. As the 2017 curator-in-residence at Or Gallery, her projects include Charles Campbell's *Actor Boy: Travels in Birdsong* (2017: Flotilla); *Underground in the Aether*, a symposium on existence within changing communication circuits (2017: with VIVO, Burnaby Art Gallery); and Chloë Lum & Yannick Desranleau's *5 Tableaux (It Bounces Back)* (2016). Her essays appear in exhibition catalogues and periodicals including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Fillip*, *Momus*, *The Capilano Review* and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. She is a member of the Doryphore Independent Curators Society.

## Afterlives

Germaine Koh & Aron Louis Cohen

This text accompanies the exhibition of the same name curated by Joni Low, presented from November 25, 2017 to February 3, 2018.

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Published by Or Gallery

ISBN 978-1-895005-55-4

Original design template:  
Information Office

Cover image: Germaine Koh,  
Roadkill: Crowsnest (2015),  
2015 / 2017. Rubber, steel,  
aluminum, 14.626" x 27.5" x 3.5"

Back image: Aron Louis Cohen,  
Unmaking Time, Forward and  
Reverse, 2012 / 2017. Duraclear  
prints, wire binding stainless  
steel, LED lights, 5" x 24" x 12"

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The Or Gallery is grateful for the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, the British Columbia Arts Council, our members, donors, and volunteers. For this exhibition, we thank the Canada Council for the Arts Grants to Culturally Diverse Curators for Residencies in the Visual Arts. The Or Gallery is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist-Run Centres (PAARC).

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