We are the plants that need to go to the gym: Germaine Koh's *Fallow*

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"Fallow"
Curated by Cate Rimmer
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Arriving at the last minute for a reading by Lisa Robertson from her book "*Magenta Soul Whip*", I found an empty chair in the front row. As I listened I was entertained by the meanderings of a very large spider, over and around stacks of the author's books displayed just behind her. This was at *Read*, the Charles H. Scott Gallery's bookstore. The spider delicately pawed the air with its tiny arachnid leg as it felt for the next solid ground on which to proceed. The creature's searching gesture echoed something in Robertson's reading; probably the way in which meaning is found or felt in poetic language, rather than stated. I didn't realize at the time that the spider was a wayfarer from the ecosystem that was *Fallow*, Germaine Koh's installation in the adjacent gallery.

To create *Fallow,* Koh transplanted enough topsoil from a vacant lot in East Vancouver to completely carpet the gallery. Because it was winter when this operation occurred the plants were dormant when they arrived, mostly brown, withered and dead. Once transplanted, warmth, careful watering, and gro-lights induced an artificial spring. The flora and fauna of the empty lot came alive. I could recognize blackberry bushes, sow thistle, quack grass, green foxtail, pearly everlasting, douglas aster, yarrow, spiders, wood bugs, flies, moths, and crane flies. *Fallow* brought the outdoors indoors and by virtue of this inversion the qualities of the outside were magnified—a strong smell of growth and rot saturated the air, and the ground was remarkably soft, even spongy, underfoot. Amplified by the frame of architecture, the creatures and plants that spontaneously filled the lacuna of urban sprawl could be seen for the fascinating beings that they are; growing, living, reproducing, and dying. Without wind or rain to clear them away, the remnants of the spiders' predatory practices accumulated in sticky tangles of spider webs on spider webs on spider webs. The corpses of hundreds of crane bugs piled up in a corner by the window.

Intervention is a well developed aspect of Koh's artistic lexicon. Since 1995 her project *Journal* has seen the presentation of personal diaristic notes in public sites such as the newspaper classifieds and mobile street signs (the small back lit ones with the moveable type often found on the side of the road where the city devolves to box stores). The newspaper and the signs are sites of display and address that are typically circumscribed by a type of content or material that Koh problematizes through her incongruous insertions. Her intimate commentary operates like the theatrical aside, footnoting the existence of individual realities that flow beneath a public field dominated by headlines and commerce. With *Fallow* the incongruity is the introduction of top soil into the gallery, a move that accentuates various positions within the configuration of sites and materials she has orchestrated. It queries the potential of both the gallery and the vacant lot, the history of construction materials, the nature of plant life, the habits of humans, and the full lives of bugs. The simple choice to move some earth unfolds into a complex and continuously transforming terrain; producing a kind of baroque minimalism through the aesthetic reduction of the singular decision and the intricacy of its manifestation in the gallery.

If the history of public sculpture is in part a history of placing culture in the landscape, *Fallow* reverses this by bringing the landscape into the frame of the social and the constructed. There is a grandeur to the gesture of transposing the outside to the inside that operates like a monumental anti-monument, the nothingness of the empty lot becomes something extraordinary and the gallery is commandeered for insects and weeds, a situation that collapses the contemplative distance of pictorial landscape with the real. A parallel shadow of the intervention sits at the site of removal, the stripped bare section of the empty lot where all this earth used to

be. What remains is a void within the void of the development, productivity and function of urban space.

However, while the beauty of the plants was striking, the way that they had grown was disconcerting. There was both a lushness and fragility not typical of your average urban weed; they were exceptionally high-chroma and of a strangely uniform green. Protected from the elements these plants were soft and often excessively elongated and leggy. Some were lacking the ability to stand upright, an effect of insufficient direct sunlight and the absence of the strengthening structural challenges of the wind and rain. Life in the gallery, the shelter and pseudo-sun that had enabled the plants to grow out of season and so profusely, had compromised their physical development.

This aspect of *Fallow* evokes the bio-political; the notion that our bodies—their functioning, their health, their living and dying—are the contemporary frontier in the negotiation of individual sovereignty.

While often considered in terms of biotechnology, such as the patenting of the human genome, or the harnessing of human life for labour, the bio-political sphere also encompasses how the human organism is subject to the products and demands of culture. It is this last issue that *Fallow* raises. How might our bodies, thanks to the luxury of modern convenience, be like those of these slightly deformed plants. I am extrapolating from the vegetable kingdom to the homo sapiens in a typical exhibit of what is perhaps among the most pervasive traits of western culture, the tendency to focus primarily or exclusively on the needs and concerns of the human. This is an issue that is implicitly addressed by *Fallow* which places the human directly in relation to the non-human. There were paths beaten through the installation by the feet of curious visitors where nothing grew at all.

Germaine Koh, Fallow, image of installation.
Photo courtesy of Site photography.

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