

*Surface of Depth: A Conceptual Fin De Siecle*  
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I'm trying to express my incredulity at the kind of work it's possible to produce (again) nowadays. I'm becoming quite theatrical and my hands are flailing about. <<But this is conceptualism>>, I tell the curator pseudo-hysterically. <<No>> she corrects me, <<it's only the surface of conceptualism>>. Smart answer. But does it have any depth?

Germaine Koh and Lucy Pullen are paired in the multidisciplinary room for the last of Optica's turn-of-the-millennium series, *1000 Gracias*, curated by Francois Dion and Luis Jacob (they will publish a catalogue next spring). Over the past few years, both artists have developed bodies of work that draw heavily on strategies of conceptualism. Pullen even graduated from one of the original centres of conceptual art, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax.

In **Surrender**, Koh has mounted a white flag at the entrance that stands in for, and duplicates another white flag installed on the street at 100 Sherbrooke St E. **Side Piece**, her other contribution to the show, is a 6 1/2, hour, real time, single-shot take of a park bench in Paris frequented by homeless people. Setting up surrogate links, and revealing or establishing alternate networks of relations is an old conceptualist tactic, and in this regard some of Pullen's pieces are typical.

**The Library of Rhizomatic Activity** is an idiosyncratic collection of books that come together by virtue of a bookplate sticker the artist has produced (a little boxed set can be purchased at the gallery). Not housed in any one building, or restricted to any particular subject, discipline or language, this library's structure is personal and anachronistic. According to my dictionary, <<rhizoma>> is Greek for causing to take root, and Pullen seems interested in planting the seeds for open networks of unforeseen relations. In **Chance Operations with Blue Buttons**, you are asked to take one of the small blue buttons the artist has placed on a shelf and... <<circulate>>.

These different networks and structures recall other artistic strategies that were contemporary with the first wave of conceptualism. The resolutely unproductive situationist technique of aimlessly wandering was used as an antidote to the goal-oriented, linearity of capitalist life. Here the explicitly political motive isn't quite so clear. However the recourse to absurdity and social relations roots this work firmly in the opposition's camp.

Even if we accept the neatly complete collapse of history, and agree that <<derivative>> is a word we should eject from our critical vocabularies, some of this stuff just seems to sit there. One piece with a fresh fuck-you attitude is a straight-ahead video document entitled **2500 Superballs**. Two people climb the stairs to the roof of a downtown high-rise and dump buckets of Superballs down to the street below. Even though the prank is carried out at 7 am, its still dangerous, irresponsible, wasteful, juvenile, pointless and probably destructive – but ohhhh what a feeling. From where I'm sitting, **2500 Superballs** digs past the surface and gives a glimpse, however brief and illusory, of pure freedom.