

**LEANNE COUGHLIN & JASON STARNES / *map sense* and the
Urban Environment: A Conversation with GERMAINE KOH
and GILLIAN JEROME**

LEANNE COUGHLIN & JASON STARNES: *map sense* (www.map-sense.com) is an interactive field map created for the cross-disciplinary workshop and exhibition Co-Lab, co-presented by Centre A and Vancouver New Music. The area mapped is Vancouver's Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, an urban community of interest in both of your recent work. Can you give a sense of the project and how it serves as an intersection of your practices?

GERMAINE KOH: Both of us have a standing interest in oral history and urban geography (cf. Gillian's and Brad Cran's *Hope in Shadows* book, and many of Germaine's projects such as *Call*, *Watch* or *Homemaking* that intervene in urban space and are primarily disseminated through storytelling). We have both also realized projects working in the Downtown Eastside community (*Hope in Shadows* and Germaine's installation *Overflow* at Centre A). When the opportunity arose to make a sound-based work for Centre A, we hatched *map sense* as a project that would expand/extend our usual media (words for Gillian and visual arts for Germaine) into other senses.

GILLIAN JEROME: Germaine's work as a conceptual artist astonishes me and so when she approached me to talk about a community-based collaboration, I felt a mad rush at the prospect of changing my game up. I had been in a funk about my own work as a poet and the limitations of a compositional practice based entirely in language; we landed quite nicely on the concept of a community-generated mapping site. I'd worked on an oral history project in the Downtown Eastside (*Hope in Shadows*, 2008) with my partner Brad Cran in which we collected peoples' stories about their lives, a project very much inspired by Itter and Marlatt's *Opening Doors*, an oral history of Strathcona. Oral history is my preferred means of encountering a community's history because the genre allows for an encounter with the voices of ordinary people—people who can tell stories about what it was like to be alive at a

particular time; in telling their stories, they make history more intimate and democratic, more akin to the old Aristotelian notion of the polis in which the heard human voice is a measure of a healthy democracy. We're so physically disconnected from each other in city life because of the pressures that late capitalism brings to our lived experience. This is especially acute in Vancouver where most people are caught up in working non-stop to pay off mortgages or rents and struggling with the seemingly interminable development of property and wealth at great social and spiritual expense, especially to those who are poor. People are hungry for a sense of belonging, I think, *because* we actually have less physical contact with each other in day-to-day conversation; we want to hear each other's stories. And so I was really drawn to the possibilities of making a map with a bunch of people—strangers and neighbours—in a community and exploring the possibilities of mapping with sound and images.

LC & JS: The title—*map sense*—is productively ambiguous: does it refer to a mode of perception? Is it more closely related to “common sense” or “making sense”?

GK: My take on it was that it suggested the insertion of additional senses into mapping, but as you realize, it's meant to be suggestive.

GJ: The title refers to the multi-sensory capacities of the map: the visual, audio and textual. I suppose the interactive, multi-dimensional aspects of the map invite people to explore the map and make sense of the neighbourhood by means of multifarious kinds of representations of place. A traditional map doesn't allow for as many points of access.

LC & JS: Acoustic ecology investigates ways we are affected by sound in the urban environment and the social impact of the aural terrain. While conventional cartography privileges the visual, in *map sense* sound is used to represent unseen elements: a dimension normally absent from maps. What does the aural/oral engagement of sound in *map sense* add to the visual form?

GK: I think one gets a distinct sort of information from sound, especially when isolated from visuals. The isolation of a particular sense brings with it a change of attention.

GJ: We started working with people's contributions and it became immediately clear to me that sound was the most sensual element: I was in awe of people's recordings whether it was running water or a garbage truck making its way through an alley. Listening is a powerful physical experience. How often do we rush around in our city and neglect to hear what's going on because of the noise in our heads? The audio material was lyrical for me in that it suspended particular moments in space and time.

LC & JS: The online multimedia map registers space from both aerial and personal perspectives. Is the combination of prose, poetry, sound, and image able to capture something particular to the space of the Downtown Eastside? How might the project also explore the possible representation of absence, especially in the context of the Missing Women's Inquiry and the problems of political invisibility for housed and unhoused residents of the area?

GJ: I think a multi-genre/multi-sensory commingling of inputs will always be a more comprehensive way to encounter a subject, but I think it's particularly helpful in a neighbourhood like the Downtown Eastside. Language is a system of power and so barriers to its expression in a person can create a tremendous sense of powerlessness, frustration, shame, and fear. So it behooves any artist to think about modes of expression for marginalized people and how to best involve people who may not be able to write or read, for example. Part of my work in *map sense* included leading a writing workshop with women at the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre. Their poems and stories are very honest accounts of their lives, and in some cases they write about struggles with housing and poverty. We also excerpted some of the personal stories from *Hope In Shadows* in which people talk about struggles with poverty, homelessness, and mental illness.

GK: I think that one of the things a project like this does is make one realize all the gaps that exist in any representation of a place, even (or maybe especially) purportedly authoritative ones like maps. By allowing users to add detail to a generic map and depict the environment through different media, it becomes obvious that varied points of view and approach will cause an area to be depicted quite differently. The Downtown Eastside is similar to any other

place on Earth in that respect, though it is also a good example of a place that is viewed quite differently by different communities.

LC & JS: *map sense* depends on public contributions to and interactions with the database. What was your strategy in encouraging the community to represent itself to itself? What did this facilitation of community engagement add to the project?

GK: Part of our intent was to introduce people to some existing tools (blogging, image and video publishing, sharing sounds) that might seem daunting. There are more and more tools and services out there that have to potential to give a voice to people who don't have particular technical knowledge, and this project brings together a few of those. There is still a perceived technological barrier, and showing people how to contribute to the map was partly an attempt to demystify those tools. As well, on the content front, we assumed from the beginning that our generating the content for the map would not provide a good sample of voices and viewpoints on the neighbourhood.

GJ: When Germaine and I gave a talk about our project at Centre A gallery, we spoke about the practice of crowdsourcing in which you ask a bunch of people to solve a problem and/or contribute to a project. We hosted a workshop at Centre A and taught people how to use the equipment necessary to gather material: Germaine worked with the video and audio processes and I taught a street text poetry workshop based on the compositional processes of street photographers. These interactions with groups of people reminded me of the requirement to listen attentively to the discord of many voices. We needed a public space like the gallery and the streets surrounding it. We needed the public scrutiny that comes with inviting so many different kinds of people to participate in making and interacting with the map. The entire project was started and sustained by public participation. This kind of community building was the very premise of the project.