

swers be found? At the very least will there be a gratification of curiosity? Langergräber lures us into a labyrinth of artifice where we discover for ourselves the impossibility of his dramatized mission. In this way we experientially *understand* the dilemma of reconstructing history instead of knowing of, or about, it.

Langergräber invites us to follow his lead but there never seems to be enough pieces to complete his puzzle. The ones we do have don't fit together very well. In *Sunken Histories*, performatively re-enacting history is a ritual doomed to fail even though it momentarily displaces the alienating presence of the unknowable. It is awkward and poetic. It happens innocuously and seems embarrassing upon reflection. I really do think Langergräber implicates the viewer in a powerful way because of this. I left Centre A wondering how many of us are shut out from the formation of history now.

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Sunken Histories
Keith Langergräber
February 14—March 15, 2003



QUESTIONS FOR KEITH

What is this?
Where did you find it?
How did it get there?
How old is it?
Whose was it?
Whose is it?
Did you take it?
Did you ask?
So is this one a copy?
You found another?
Where?
Is it different?
Can it tell you the same things?
Does it tell you different things?
What can it tell someone else?
How does it do that?
What else do you know about it?
How did you find out?
You were allowed to look?
But you couldn't find anything there?
There was nothing left?
What had the others been doing there?
It seems to have worked out for them all together?
Why did they have to leave?
When did they leave?
How did you find out?
They left a few things, fragments, a wrecked boat?
It was not easy to tell?
Non-sites with no sites?
It would have been impossible to recover?
But you made some drawings?
Scanned and collaged some of the fragments?
Arte povera plus production values?
You searched further along the shore?
And you tried to relate the fragments?
It was like trying to recover the relations between the
Musqueam and the Chinese?
You couldn't find out very much?
Nobody could remember?
But Miss. Leila Chu remembered?
And she told you?
And you put all this stuff together?
So what is this?
Sunken histories?

Charlotte Townsend-Gault

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A phoneme or grapheme is necessarily always to some extent different each time it is presented in an operation or a perception. But, it can function as a sign, and in general as language, only if a formal identity enables it to be issued again and to be recognized.

Jacques Derrida from *Speech and Phenomena*, 1973.

The physical sense of admittance connotes in a vivid manner the process of acceptance by permission, and hence the process of identification as the successful or failed acquisition of a particular kind of entry permit. And yet, being "admitted" is never simply a matter of processing the right permit, for validation and acknowledgment must also be present for admittance to be complete.

Rey Chow, from *Ethics After Idealism*, 1998.

The Recognition of Loss In *Sunken Histories*



Sunken Histories knowingly fails to reconstruct the past. The work theatrically acts out this failure through an allegorical structuring of fragments. In doing so this exhibition reveals how a lack of validation and acknowledgment of people's lives within a multicultural society prevents them from participating in the formation of its history. The representations in this exhibition are specific indexes of the loss which ensues from this lack of recognition.

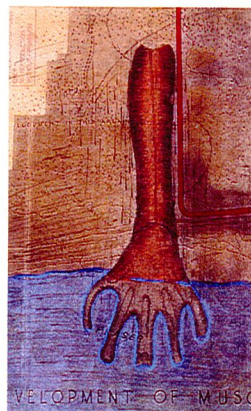
The art context provides a formal and somewhat autonomous site of authority from which Keith Langergräber can activate previously dormant representations within public discourse. In this case they involve the lives of the Chinese and First Nations communities that co-existed in the area known as Musqueam Indian Reserve No.2 during the 1930's and 40's. Langergräber is not trying to define their histories through these representations. Engagement with this exhibition reveals the permanent incompleteness of such an activity. An inability to reconstruct some kind of historical totality is acted out by Langergräber within a drama of his own devising.

This exhibition continues a way of working for Langergräber which experimentally inverts a methodological premise in the work of Robert Smithson. Langergräber, with his bizarrely subjective non-site installations, performatively demonstrates the impossibility of reversing entropic disintegration. With Smithson's famous analogy of a sandbox in mind I imagine Langergräber obsessively trying to return a stirred blend of two different shades of sand into cleanly divided halves. But *Sunken Histories* involves people's lives instead of raw inert materials. The resulting drama is a manic journey through a scrap heap of imaginary worlds and contradictory memories instead of slap-stick physical comedy (although perhaps they share many things in common). Anything Langergräber bears witness to in his attempt at reconstruction may be contested as to its origins, authenticity and who has the right to invoke it in the first place. Like Smithson, he inevitably becomes a subject within the work itself. For Langergräber it is an intentional part of his over-all strategy. He wants us to ask certain questions. Why is an educated middle-class white guy making art in the present about the lives of working poor Chinese and Musqueam peoples of the past? More specifically, why is he focusing on the 1941 court case known as *The City of Vancouver v. Chow Chee*? Who does he think he is by trying to tell us these stories? Who do you think he should have to be? Most importantly, this exhibition asks questions which go beyond the artist, his work and the specific circumstances and situations it points to: What recognizes and what is recognized in the formation of history? How can the historical and material contingencies of race and class avoid perpetuating exclusionary voids within the overlap-

ping, singular space of a multicultural society? This, in my opinion, makes *Sunken Histories* urgently relevant to everyone living in Vancouver today.

The success of Langergräber's art lies in its exposure of what is at stake in attempting to answer these questions -- the validation and acknowledgment of our co-existence. These "laying bare" points in turn to the radical discrepancy between the acquisition of privilege and the pursuit of a just society. When what is lost is acknowledged (as is the case in this exhibition) it can be remembered as lost. I would like to think that such remembrances lead us to act in ways which prove that histories, and/or the lack of them, do not have to be repeated.

In dealing with the idea of reconstructing social histories in his art, Langergräber has found ways of coming to terms with the failings of language and representation as raw material. As I mentioned earlier, an allegorical structure of fragments is used as an index of lack and absence. Court documents, photographs taken in the present of sites involved with his subjects, salvaged remnants of objects found at these sites and names and anecdotal excerpts from oral histories and interviews are utilized because they are all highly charged but ultimately mute testaments. He recontextualizes them in a theater of imaginary reconnaissance. The salon-style hanging of drawings/collages, assisted ready-mades, photographs and documents seems to act out a traumatically induced obsessive-compulsive behavior -- a whimsical parody of the orderly archives of scholarly research and museums. The drawings/collages, with their distressed, tea-stained patina and excessive mark-making, telegraph their dramatic function as continually returned to substitutions for an absent object of desire. True to the inherent qualities of the fetish they are an uncanny reminder of what cannot be replaced by them. A claw hoe, the courthouse/city art gallery, waves, the repetitive underlining of sites on maps -- these images point back and forth amongst themselves, encircling us in deferrals. This is graphically exaggerated in a palimpsestial manner by collages which have been scanned and digitally printed on to 8 ft long scrolls which hang from the ceiling. I think Langergräber would agree with Horst Hoheisel that such fragments never tell truths, pointing always to events from the past that no one understands in the present. He would also agree with Walter Benjamin's conception of the allegorical fragment as being like an undecipherable hieroglyph (a mute signifier whose referential context, or signified, has been lost). He uses fragments anyway as a means of dramatically displaying the disturbing withholding of meaning in their signification. We are left with our own projections upon them. The exhibition becomes an engine of fantasy, memory, desire and their forever mutating and associative relationships. By engaging with this work we too contribute to the expanding imaginary universe of versions and accounts that it has activated.



How does this affect us?

What is the purpose of Langergräber's stage-set like installation and the allusions it creates? A projected image of rippling water, a boat sunk into the floor, earth and detritus -- what is here now that could have been a part of what was? What does it matter? Viewers are left with their own dispositions in an environment designed to phenomenologically seduce them and stimulate their imaginations. What is one looking at that is *real*? How is the real representable? Along with a newly realized consciousness about these concerns, viewers experience the physical sensation of being in a fun house or movie theater. There is a feeling of anticipation. If you stay with the work long enough -- if you keep searching and thinking things over -- will an-