

RE-ENGENDERED

Fertilite
by Caroline Koebel
Cornershop
Buffalo, New York
April 15-May 31, 2000

Pupspindanceslow
by Caroline Koebel
Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art
Buffalo, New York
March 17-July 31, 2000

ROBERTO TEJADA

"Pupspindanceslow," a recent multi-media installation by Caroline Koebel, was on public display at the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art's (CEPA) Window on Main Street, the heart of downtown Buffalo's theater district, where it hardly went unnoticed by playgoers at night and corporate wage-earners by day, not to mention the entranced scrutiny of school children on urban field trips. The work, in part, made reference to the original use of the building as a commercial storefront, but with a timely view of commodity culture as seen through the looking glass of sexual difference. The art-historical sampling—Marchel Duchamp and the debris of 1970s pop culture—combined to create a mawkish retro look or mood-ring sensory experience. Together the installation managed to fashion a kinetic space where female adolescent psychology and cultural kitsch were entwined when underscored, in the words of the artist herself, by those "marketplace-driven conceptions of sexual desire and romantic expectation."¹

Glittering behind the curved glass of the facing window displays was a silver-a-go-go surface that lined the entire base and walls of the installation. The faux-metallic 3-D pattern pointed to the moment when pop-art began to inform the post-hippie modernity of interior design. At the far rear of the facing showcases, two video monitors randomly alternated between rhythmically manipulated frames of Duchamp's 1927 film *Anemic Cinema*—with its hypnotic spirals alluding to the swoon of vision as caught up in the lure of the medium itself—and blunt head-on shots of standard French poodles staring straight at the viewer as they undergo fastidious grooming. Below, a series of embedded turntables spun incessantly; on top of each vinyl LP stood a white plastic poodle, each identical on its axis, whirling to the elastic garbled tunes of Air Supply's "I'm All Out of Love," Johnny Mathis's "You Light Up My Life" and Captain and Tenille's "I Never Wanted."

Diego Rivera once referred to the capitalist appeal of window displays as a "perversity of reflections." What we see behind the show-

case is forever in a troubled relation to the mirror image we see reflected, no matter how faintly, in the mediating layer that separates us from the coveted object of desire; ultimately, the two reflections are collapsed altogether. Reflection, self-identity, desire and recurrence are explicit themes in this work. In her artist's statement Koebel situates this piece at a specific interval of female development: that "awkward and vulnerable time of pre- and early adolescence (roughly 11 to 13), when the awareness of the existence of codes of sexuality and romance is sharp while the self confidence (and experience) entailed in determining one's unique navigations through these codes is not."

Physically detained between the two showcases—they are alike but not identical—the viewer is inevitably caught in a time-lag mirror-play that mimics the warped acoustic suggested by the words "anemic cinema." The display teems with innuendo and visual quips: the video poodles and their mass-produced counterparts, together with the record players and Duchampian spirals, create an environment engendered by the unlikely, or not-so-unlikely encounter between a dog kennel, a toy store, a sock hop and a psychiatric ward, as imagined in a juvenile nightmare. The domestic, the hygienic, the identical, the sexual, the different and the aesthetic are all thereby conflated in references to grooming, romantic pathos, pulchritude and window-dressed delirium. The Duchampian spirals and the rotating turntable, in their mesmerizing glee or anxiety of loop and repetition, perform what the artist identifies as "the capitalist ordering of the social": a perpetuation that "hardly skips a beat in the face of any . . . attempt on the part of the individual." This is one of the unsettled and unsettling questions Koebel's installation poses: To what degree can there be self-resolution if representation itself is often feeble or ineffective in the flow of the mercantile phantasmagoria it critiques as its object of inquiry?

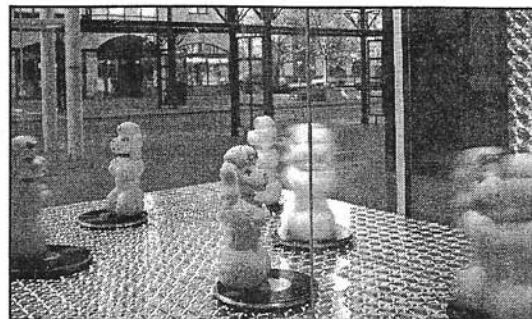
One of the spirals in Duchamp's original film featured the following pseudo-advertisement: "Among our idle hardware items we recommend a faucet that stops running when no one's listening."² In keeping with the anemic aestheticism underlined by Duchamp and as remixed by Koebel, toward the end of the CEPA run many of the turntables had gone awry—with a poodle casualty or two—a fact I would like to read, despite evidence to the contrary, as an optimistic assertion concerning the degree to which self-means may be incidental, or at least as impossible to represent as the title-slippage in-between "pup spin" and "pups pin" or "dance slow" and "dances low." Koebel, in keeping with the performative coyness of the piece itself, remarked, "Working on this installation made the artist

first happy then sad."

Parallel to the CEPA window, another installation by Koebel could be viewed at Cornershop, the bygone independent space for visual arts and writerly performance curated by Anya Lewin. Koebel's "Fertilite," direct in its delivery, made an effective use of Cornershop's intimate enclosure, with three large-format wall texts made to resemble museum signage—except for the unavoidable fact that the white vinyl lettering shouted from springtime backdrops of carnation pink, forest green and Easter bonnet yellow. A work of archeology, the texts were culled from the medical history libraries at the State University of New York at Buffalo and the University of Rochester. They included a quack alchemical formula for conceiving male infants as recorded in the thirteenth century by Pseudo-Albertus Magnus in his *De Secretis Mulierum* (On the Secrets of Women, 1490): "Then let her place a goat's hair in the milk of a female donkey and let her tie this around her at the navel while she has sexual intercourse with her husband, and she will conceive."; and a nineteenth-century reference to Phoebe Ann Baker, a 10-month-old girl who began to show secondary sexual characteristics and was put on public display as part of P. T. Barnum's first baby show. Reproduction of the species, of history and knowledge, and of the material world by way of image-making, was the unmistakable argument of "Fertilite."

Most disturbing was the excerpt from British physician William Harvey's *De Generatione Animalum* (Disputations Touching the Generation of Animals, 1651): "Whosoever shall weigh how the artist by virtue of his brain accurately portrays things which he does not now see but which he did see in the past . . . will not deem it absurd and monstrous that a woman should become the artificer of generation, being impregnated by the conception of a general and immaterial idea." What Koebel makes visible in this piece, by pitting citations against the viewer, are the embedded historic ways in which feminine sexuality can be so erased from the metaphors of imagemaking that art should be used instead to explicate the terms of human reproduction.

In revenge, Koebel's installation further enticed the viewer to enter "The Rutting Burrow," a tiny closet behind a curtain to one side of the space, where a camera transmitted to a closed-circuit television monitor at the



Installation view of "Pupspindanceslow" (2000) by Caroline Koebel.

entrance of the gallery, literally outside on the street. Cramped inside the closet, the viewer was commanded to "Position blank card over taped-down card." The "original" card depicted a black felt-tip marker rendering of a floppy-eared bunny. Participants were instructed to "Draw a bunny," and then "Hang on gallery wall." The television monitor thus recorded a close-up frame of viewers' hands as they proceeded to render a "copy" of the original cartoon figure. Hung on a wall in the gallery space these renderings literally multiplied like rabbits. In its own productive restructuring of mimesis, animal reproduction and masculinist accounts thereof, "Fertilite" compelled the viewer to render fertile at least the following questions: How does sexualized subjectivity overcome what often seems like a closed circuit to enter into relation with the real force of the social? And in what ways are others (staged here by the viewers) included in an incessant re-drafting of contingent difference? With an acute sense of visual banter and discursive counterpoint, Koebel marshalled two playful but no less challenging ventures into what a refusal to comply—as made possible by a female being-in-the-world—might look like.

ROBERTO TEJADA is an independent curator and art writer. His essays on contemporary photography and media culture have appeared in *Aperture*, *SF Camera* and *Third Text*. He served as co-curator of this year's trans-American photo-based exhibition "América Foto Latina" at the Museo de las Artes in Guadalajara, Mexico.

NOTES

1. From an artist's statement for the exhibition.
2. "Parmi nos articles de quincaillerie paresseuse, nous recommandons le robinet qui s'arrête de couler quand on ne l'écoute pas." Annette Michelson, "Anemic Cinema: Reflections on an Emblematic Work" in *Artforum* Volume XII, no. 2 (October 1973), p. 66.