

Art in America

OCTOBER 2000



FLAVIN'S LAST PROJECTS
CHINATI FOUNDATION
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Art in America

October 2000

The Chinati Foundation: A Museum in Process by Daphne Beal

In a remote corner of Texas, the unique museum initiated by Donald Judd is steadily taking shape.

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Cover: Interior view of Building 3, part of Dan Flavin's *untitled (Marfa project)*, 1996, 8-foot fluorescent light tubes in slant-walled passageways; at the Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Tex. Photo Todd Eberle. See stories beginning on pages 116 and 126.

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*View of Elizabeth King's installation *The Sizes of Things in the Mind's Eye* (first version), 1994-96, porcelain, glass eyes, eyelashes, wood, metal, fiber optics, stop-action film animation on laser disc, projection lenses, wood frame; head 5 by 3¼ by 4½ inches. Photo Dot Griffith.*

The Ghost in the Machine

Using highly articulated automatons modeled on herself and her female relatives, sculptor Elizabeth King invites us to consider how consciousness arises from physical being. In photographs, stop-action films and videos, she portrays her mechanical surrogates as convincingly self-aware, while we are left to ponder that age-old question: where exactly does the self reside?

BY LEAH OLLMAN

Odd that a thing is most itself when likened . . .

—Richard Wilbur, “Lying”

Sculptor Elizabeth King has been tracking something as ordinary as it is elusive: the circuit connecting eye, brain, body and thing perceived, what she calls “attention’s loop.” What happens physically, she ponders through her work, in the act of paying attention? Why, for instance, can we feel the force of attention even when our back is turned? Are perception and physical sensation unified functions, or twins with a symbiotic, shared identity? How is the looping path of attention configured when focus turns to the self, the very one doing the focusing?

One of the primary instruments of King’s inquiries into the nature of consciousness and self-consciousness has been a sculptural self-portrait called *Pupil*, which she completed in 1990. Her miniaturized double, exquisitely crafted in wood, porcelain, glass and brass, with movable arms, hands and neck, is half a body (from the waist up), half life-size. Insistently nonhuman, its joints and workings nakedly exposed, *Pupil* is nevertheless uncannily alive, equally able to hold a gaze and to cast one outward. If what distinguishes simulations like puppets, golems, dolls and robots from the living is their inability to reflect upon themselves, their own being and purpose, King’s *Pupil* confounds the categories by appearing to do only that. It (she?) is an object seemingly infused with self-reflexive awareness; it suggests consciousness marveling at its own packaging.

In King’s stop-action film and video works, *Pupil* (in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum) and related figures and figure fragments appear to move of their own volition, pulling tight a stitch made with an imaginary needle, watching the fluttery drumming of their own fingers, raising hand to lips. In a stunning series of photographs made in collaboration with Katherine Wetzel, the sculptures straddle the boundary between real and fictional worlds. They look as self-possessed as any organically animate portrait subject sheathed in skin. King has exhibited her sculptures, video animation and photographs in venues as varied as the Exploratorium in San Francisco (a museum of science, art and human perception), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Kent Gallery and Allan Stone Gallery in New York, and the American Psychiatric Association’s annual meeting. Last year she published *Attention’s Loop: A Sculptor’s Reverie on the Coexistence of Substance and Spirit*, a book that assumes a porousness between genres in the same way that *Pupil* assumes a fluidity between the artificial and the alive. An elegant chronicle of the intellectual, sensual and practical journeys she undertakes in conceiving and constructing her work, the book—which she regards as a work of “slow-motion cinema”—braids together philosophical and phenomenological musings with anecdotes, childhood memories, studio notes, fairy tales and legends. Throughout, entrancing photographs of *Pupil* and a newer sculpture punctuate, reinforce and complicate the text.

In several of the images, King has posed a sculpture watching itself form a loop by touching forefinger to thumb. It’s a simple gesture, but a developmental milestone in the life of a human, this ability to seize, to pinch, to hold. It signals the beginning of being able to pair desire with possession, and to exercise some small control over one’s environment and, by extension, one’s destiny. In King’s double, the closure of that loop suggests a completion, an alchemical tipping point at which the inert material transcends itself, breathes with life and is fixed in awe of that very breath.

Automata of earlier eras impressed audiences with their performances as miniature jugglers, organ grinders, gymnasts and musicians. King’s alter egos, stripped (as it were) to bare flesh and bone, perform nothing but the basic act, the basic miracle, of being. They blink and ponder, turn and tilt their heads. That these porcelain and wood



Compass (detail), 1986-99, movable arms of carved wood with hidden magnetic drive mechanism mounted in a cabinet, each hand approx. 3½ inches long. Photo Liz Deschenes.



Above, two of the 11 gelatin silver prints produced in collaboration with photographer Katherine Wetzel, *Pupil: pose 1* (left), 1997-99, 14 by 11 inches, and *Pupil: pose 2* (right), 20 by 16 inches.

King has often posed a sculpture watching itself make a loop by touching forefinger to thumb—a simple gesture but a developmental leap for humans.

objects have a soulful presence goes beyond the parlor trick of a craftily hidden internal mechanism. For all of the meticulous care King takes to render the gently raised veins on the back of the hand and the shallow creases where ear meets cheek, to re-create the true asymmetry of the lips and to build up eyebrows hair by hair using her own collected eyelashes, she doesn't aspire to create a seamless illusion of life, but rather an evocation or reflection of it, a conjuring of its most basic questions: Where does the self reside? Is there a point at which substance defers to spirit? From somewhere within the honest ambivalence of their own identities, King's forms acquire a soul. It coalesces around them and emanates from them, a potent surprise.

A professor of sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University, King has been creating puppets for over 25 years, in her own image and that of her mother and grandmother. All, like *Pupil*, are smaller than life-size, suggesting the subordinate stature of student to teacher, doll to puppeteer, child to parent—or, in her case, parent to child. When King was a girl, her mother contracted polio. "While we grew up, she grew small," she writes in *Attention's Loop*. "Before I was twelve, I could carry her."

The diminutive figures also evoke the tiny reflection one sees of oneself mirrored in the dark center of another's eye, which King mentions in the book, in her discussion of the etymologies of the word "pupil." "Memory itself changes the size of a thing," she writes, and pho-

tographs, too, "seldom deliver things in their actual sizes." The discrepancy in both scale and substance between her sculptures, the photographs of them and the human forms they are modeled after initiates a delicious friction. Illusion rubs up seductively against artifice, and artifice insinuates itself into illusion, setting in motion another perceptual loop. But that rhythm of giving in (to either artifice or reality) and being pulled back (by the other)—the internal machinations of the theater audience—doesn't form as neat a circle as that made by joining thumb to forefinger. The mind's path is fruitfully interrupted, indeed defined by interruption and the unexpected. Instead of delivering the certainty of a closed loop, King's work generates an exhilarating spiral of thought that continually closes in on and teases out the elusive truths at its core.

"Attention goes outside the body and comes back in, to make thought," King writes. Theorizing in a similar vein, James Elkins characterizes seeing as "metamorphosis, not mechanism,"¹ an active force that impacts both its destination and its source, transforming the thing that is seen as well as the seer. King's work affirms the fluidity as well as the fertility of that transaction. Every moment's attention—given and received—grows the soul. □

1. James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996, p. 12.

Attention's Loop: A Sculptor's Reverie on the Coexistence of Substance and Spirit, by Elizabeth King with photographs by Katherine Wetzel, was published by Harry N. Abrams, 1999. King's work appeared at Kent Gallery, New York [Apr. 10-May 22, 1999], and is currently on view in the group show "Forms in Motion" at the Cooper Union, New York [through Oct. 8]. Her work will also be included in the exhibition "Index" (working title) at the Photographic Resource Center, Boston, opening in January 2001.

Author: Leah Ollman is a San Diego-based critic.



Back view of Pupil (detail), 1987-90, porcelain, glass eyes, carved wood, brass; head 4 by 3 by 3½ inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Photo Katherine Wetzel.