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**HIDDEN
MECHANISMS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
HEIDI KUMAO**

**OUR AUTO-BODIES, OURSELVES:
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HIDDEN MECHANISMS: AN INTERVIEW WITH HEIDI KUMAO

LYNN LOVE

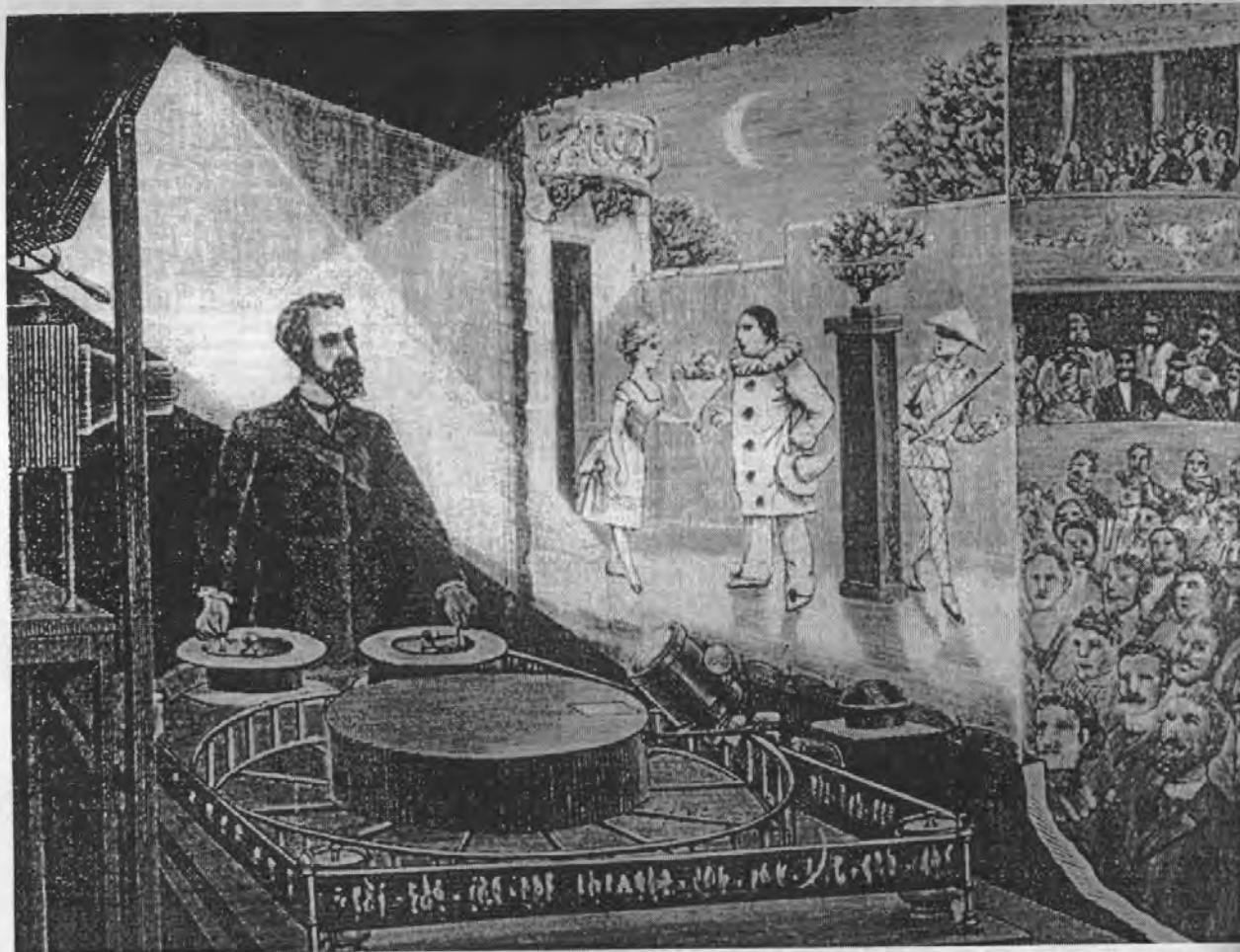
Heidi Kumao, a young photographer from California who was educated at the Art Institute of Chicago, has been building a noteworthy repertoire of installation work. I encountered one of her cinematic projection machines in Seattle, where the behemoth group show "Motion and Document—Sequence and Time: Edward Muybridge and Contemporary American Photography," was installed at the Henry Art Gallery in March 1993. There, the piece *Dusk* (1990-91), though a bit different than some of her subsequent cinematic machines, contained all the elements of what was to follow. A large, simple "dollhouse" structure with opaque walls encloses a makeshift zoetrope projector that casts an animated image on one of the walls of the house. The viewer can see the projection from outside the opaque wall of the miniature house, as well as inspect the mechanism inside through a cutaway of the roof and front wall. The projected silhouette image repeats endlessly; a woman approaches a table, sets it, walks away, returns, and clears it. Seen alone, this work arouses interest for its form and its content, and seen in the context of other machines that Kumao has worked on during the past four years, the content becomes compelling.

Dusk is different from the other installations because it is much more physically contained. The piece projects an animation within its own physical parameters. And in the travelling group show it was installed in fairly well-lit gallery spaces. This is not the case with Kumao's most recent individual exhibition at the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA), following her one-month summer residency there in 1993. This set of cinematic machines, "Tied" includes the pieces *Tied, Kept, Treat, Every Hour on the Hour, and Swallow*. They were installed together, in several rooms of the WPA's in-Flux gallery, in atypical low light for a gallery. These machines, unlike *Dusk*, all project an image someplace outside of the physical machine construction. In most cases they project onto another installed object that relates to the content of the image projected.

The content weaving together all of the cinematic projection installations is centered in psychological patterns. Based on manifestations in domestic, school, hospital, or other socially mediated environments, Kumao's animations are usually disconcerting. For example, *Mute* (1992) projects a daring eye looking left, up, right, down, as if imploring a viewer to intervene, or searching for a way to communicate something more concrete than an imploring glance. The silent room contains the handmade zoetrope projection machine on an old,

institutional wheelchair. Another piece, *Childhood Rituals: Consumption* (1990-91), evokes a kind of self-image distortion that sometimes leads to any of a variety of eating disorders, or just the pressure to eat quickly versus not at all as it projects a hand feeding heaping spoonfuls of food to a child in a dunce cap. The zoetrope projection machine resides in this instance in a small metal birdcage. *Recital* (1992) projects a hand pointing vehemently with index finger extended on a child's drawing easel from a moveable-toy projection stand. Kumao tries to detail the importance of patterns we come to live with, and what effect they might produce, even if we don't consciously track the effect. The machines create some distance from the way performative representations referencing the same psychological patterns might engage an audience. A viewer can be fairly detached approaching Kumao's machines, then suddenly be overcome with an eerie identification with the patterned image presented. The identification can be personal, or it can be more public, in the way that the media have interrogated conditions of interfamilial and institutional mistreatment over the past half dozen years.

Kumao's work deserves attention and suggests an interesting career to come. Currently she is a visiting Assistant Professor in photography at Syracuse University. Her next exhibition of cinematic machines will be at *Hallwalls*



Machinery for operating Reynaud's *Pantomimes Lumineuses*, 1892.

Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo, New York beginning May 15. This interview took place in Rochester, New York on November 9, 1993.

LYNN LOVE: How did you arrive at the particular combination of materials, construction, presentation, and content that characterize your recent work?

HEIDI KUMAO: I'm trained primarily as a photographer; I have a history of imagemaking with a camera. I worked with sequential photos prior to the machines. I created these machines because I wanted more than a flat photograph to describe the psychological aspects of life that I've always been interested in. I wanted to provide a kinetic experience in order to describe the cyclical qualities of life, the things I felt were repeated. At the same time I was thinking about these things I moved to Chicago and began collecting record players from local thrift stores. I had just left a job at a radio station in California where I had worked for five years. Radio stations were just beginning to replace records with compact discs. Collecting record players was a way for me to preserve a dying technology (that I loved). I didn't know what I would do with the record players; I thought maybe I'd use sound in my work somehow.

I had also worked at an arts camp for children where I first encountered a version of a zoetrope. It fascinated me to see a ring of images on a rotating wheel producing an animation. I was so taken by the zoetrope that later, when I had more time and energy I researched zoetropes and early film history. I had no previous education in cinema but I learned how images stay on the retina of your eye to create the seamless illusion we know as film. I knew I didn't want to make a zoetrope that a viewer would have to look into a drum to see. I wanted the image to come to the viewer—thus the projection. I wanted to create an isolated experience for the viewer—thus the darkness of the space. I wanted the images to make sense when repeated; this coincided with my wish to produce work that was conceptually centered around behavior patterns and psychology. My prior work had always gravitated toward the family. The machines as a project evolved pretty organically.

I had no background in sculpture or in electronics, so I used the motors from the record players. I figured out the technology needed to project a very small image about the size of the palm of your hand, like in *Dusk* (1990-91). My original idea was that I could have a room of those machines in a gallery, and you wouldn't be able to see the mechanism at all. You'd just see the projections. There would be about 12 machines in a large room all running simultaneously. The viewer would enter and see a variety of flickering gestures.

LL: So the machines were not originally conceived to be seen?
HK: When I made the first one I literally used masking tape to hold the entire structure together, leaving the mechanism exposed. I intended to eventually "hide" the mechanism by enclosing it somehow. However, I just wanted to get one done to show to people. As it turned out everyone I showed it to liked the "inside," the projection, of the piece as much as the "outside," the mechanism, even though it was so primitive. This response really surprised me since we were in a period of high postmodernism where everything was so slick, like Jeff Koons's work, just slick-o-rama. I felt very out of place as an artist at this time, making objects that were so primitive and so simple.

For me working with technology has meant keeping things relatively primitive. It is extremely important to me that I understand and can repair every element of my machines. As I've learned more about motors and electronics, the machines have become more sophisticated, but they're still simple in comparison to other technologies. Someone advising me in art school told me to learn to be as primitive as possible. In the current context of the proliferation of technology, I don't know if that advice still works, but in the days of being a poor art student the advice helped.

LL: It's interesting to me that these machines were initially supposed to be hidden from view, given how much they are a strong part of the viewing experience now.

HK: I know, I've sort of ended up being a sculptor.

LL: Not necessarily; I think it is more strongly cinematic, though there is a sculptural dimension to your work, like in the way you presented some of the pieces that I've seen like *Mute* (1992), and *Two Chairs: The Decay of Trust* (1990-91) where the machines mimic or match the projection. Overall I think of it as a form of installation.

HK: That was definitely part of my original idea. I initially envisioned a room, an atmosphere, a multitude of machines. In thinking it through I realized that every time I've seen installation work I've thought that it's not enough for the object to merely be doing something, I've always wanted the objects in installation work to be something themselves, to be conceptually related to the images. I wanted to accomplish this in my work. That is why each piece takes a long time to finalize. The relationship between the imagery and the objects has to make sense to me. I still have some of these pieces that are not finished because the image works but the object doesn't work yet.

LL: Still talking about the technology, and regarding the zoetrope: I'm interested in the zoetrope as a technology that appeared in the late nineteenth century, which was also a time when some of our existing institutional models for the family, for mental health, and for schools became solidified. Since the content of your work comes from and focuses on these sites I wonder if there is a self-conscious connection between the technology and the content as historical markers.

HK: I saw the zoetrope as an object of early home entertainment along with stereographs, phenakistoscopes, etc. They were an indicator of how we began to treat children differently, as smaller adults, rather than as unformed beings. I saw the zoetrope as an early film technology, or as

an early form of spectacle. There is an incredible nineteenth century lithograph that really influenced me. It is an image of a man behind a giant sheet, or screen, and he is spinning these huge drums of images that are projected onto a sheet, and there's an audience on the other side. To me this image depicts a magician of sorts, creating an illusion for the audience. I've always had this picture in my head as I've worked. I'm the man, so to speak, creating these illusions. In the picture, the man had two different drums, one of scenery and one of human figures. There was a fascination at the time with this form of illusion. In the nineteenth century people were struggling to understand technology, and I was struggling too at the time with understanding and working with different technologies.

LL: One of your pieces is entitled *Two Chairs: The Decay of Trust*, and in your artist statement for the show at Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) you cite the decay of trust in intimate or domestic situations as part of your conceptual framework. Could you elaborate on this idea? How might it relate to other pieces?

HK: The decay of trust comes from my reading of how some relationships evolve and change. The machines and their imagery are in constant motion or flux—like relationships among people. The interactions referenced in my work relate to various institutions: school, family, marriage, for example. The decay of trust implies a slow, ongoing erosion of something that seems fixed. It's the type of thing that one doesn't notice right away. In *Two Chairs: The Decay of Trust* I was attempting to describe a specific relationship that was itself decaying. I didn't know where the truth ended and lies started. The projected words, "truth," "lies," "trust," "loss," "like," "lose," constantly overlap and shift in a similar way as "truth" or trust shifts in relationships.

The psychological part of my work was also informed by reading about the Joel Steinberg/Hedda Nussbaum trials in 1988. That's where the series name "Silenced" comes from. This story was one of the early, highly publicized domestic violence cases and it made every mass media paper. What you saw in the media was this very well-established New York City attorney who for 10 years had been beating his

wife and eventually beat his child to death. On the surface, Steinberg was an upper middle-class man in a conventional family, but the reality of the circumstances exposed in the trial totally contradicts that appearance. What struck me the most about the entire case in addition to the ongoing terrible physical abuse was the fact that he had conditioned Hedda to ask his permission to go to the bathroom. He had conditioned her to ask him if she could perform one of her personal bodily functions. That level of psychological training struck me as such a powerful, insidious thing that I



Silenced (1990-91) by Heidi Kumao.



Detail of *Kept* (1993) by Heidi Kumao.



Childhood Rituals: Consumption (1991-93) by Heidi Kumao.

know I wanted to deal with it in my work. Psychological damage or training is at the core of almost all of my pieces. In the piece called *Silenced* (1990-91) a child is beckoned, touched sort of strangely, patted on the head, and then reminded to keep silent in a single gesture. One of the reasons that domestic violence stays in the family is that the victim is rewarded for keeping silent. It never leaves the family so it keeps happening again and again. I saw that this

conceptual framework would work perfectly with the repetition in these machines.

In another work, *Recital* (1992) I thought I was making a piece about my family, but as with many of them, after they're finished I realize that they're about something else. *Recital* was made during my first year of teaching, and when I finished the piece I realized that it is about teaching, being taught, and the repetitions that both of those experiences incorporate. To

make a point you have to repeat it so many times. To understand something you have to recite it many times. *Recital* could be about being pointed out as someone who has made a mistake, or about pointing out something important, something obvious. I don't know if that one is so much about the decay of trust, but it's related to the structures of power and submission: parent/child, teacher/student.

LL: You mention the Steinberg/Nussbaum case as one of the first of many subsequent highly publicized child and spousal abuse, neglect, and child abuse cases. Has the way these examples and issues have been represented in popular or mainstream media affected your work specifically?

HK: In the late '80s the term "dysfunctional family" was used so excessively it lost a lot of meaning. But it was also alright then to "come out" about your family. No one comes from a perfect family. As I thought about my own and other families I was more and more interested in talking about the "not perfect family," and how "not perfect" is more familiar to people. The Steinberg/Nussbaum case made talking about the not perfect family legitimate. My work, though I don't link it directly to the media's attention to dysfunction and abuse, is a response to legitimating the not perfect reality of people's family situations.

LL: And the contradictions about how people and families can look on the surface?

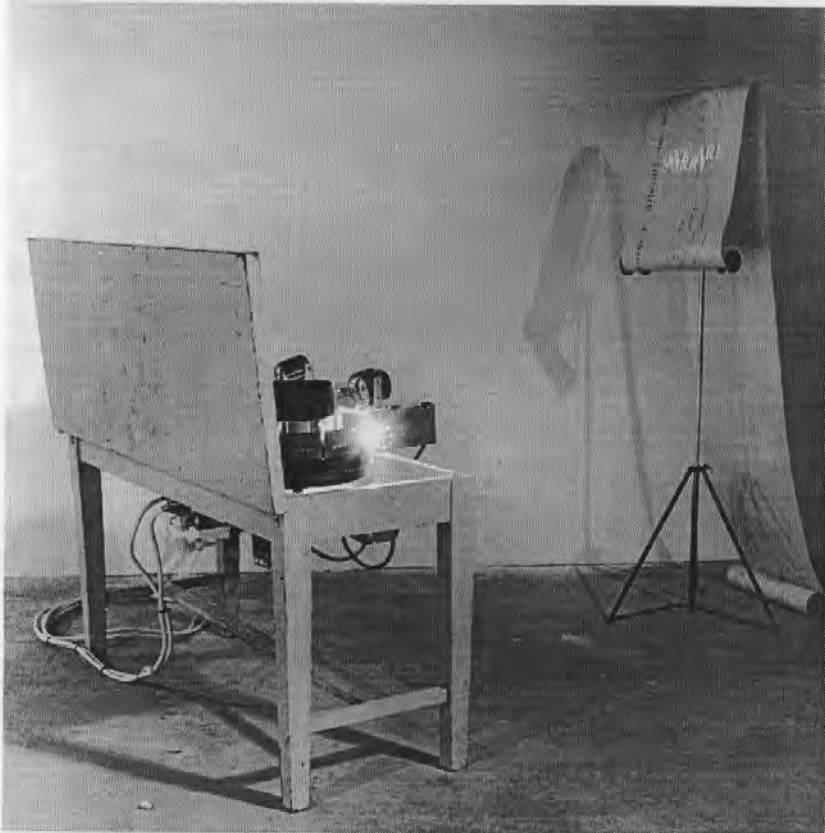
HK: Popular media is often obsessed with stories that exaggerate the difference between a person's public and private lives. My work exposes contradictions too, but in a different way than popular media. Formally, each piece uses everyday, banal, or even "cute" objects to project unsettling image messages. Their initial appearance as objects belies their content. That contradiction is what I seek. Another type of contradiction that occurs in my work is the result of watching a sequence once versus watching it repeatedly. In the first instance, the images and toy-like structure appear powerless. After repeated viewing, the images projected from the object and the object itself take on another meaning—one that is darker.

LL: I don't read your pieces as suggesting that all domestic activity is just futile repetition. There are important rituals that we follow.

HK: I'm trying to describe some very specific activities, patterns, relationships in these pieces. Through this specificity I'm hoping that people will recognize events, patterns, activities in their own experience and think about the implications.

LL: Throughout all of the work you are very sensitive to the various ways that people exploit relational authority. In *Recital* you speak from the perspective of authority. You are the teacher, the "authority." In other pieces you seem to speak from different positions, not necessarily as the authority.

HK: I'd like to think that people can view these installations from all of these perspectives. They're not just about being exploited and being unable to do anything about it. I put wheels on the projection machine in *Recital* on purpose. There's the potential for it to wheel right out of there, to leave the finger-pointing. It stays there, but it is similar to the way that people



Tied: A Duet (1993) by Heidi Kumao.

consciously stay in exploitive relationships that they theoretically could leave with varying degrees of effort.

LL: Some of the pieces are extremely unsettling because of the imagery used, whether seen once or repeatedly. For example, I found *Childhood Rituals: Consumption* (1991-93) to be disturbing. A hand feeds a child wearing a dunce cap with huge spoonfuls of food. It's almost painful to watch the child struggle to keep up with the hand that feeds it. Is there one reading that you seek or anticipate?

HK: Like most of my pieces, it references a certain autobiographical experience, but can be read a number of different ways. It references being force-fed or spoon-fed food or information most specifically. It also documents a form of insatiable desire. The birdcage/projection machine is like an isolated world in which a subject consumes and consumes, seemingly without thinking. It can't get enough. It is never satisfied or full. I think of the character in the animation who wears a dunce cap/party hat as a child or the pet who is caged and extremely vulnerable. In many of the earlier pieces, I focus on the underdog, the victim who is reacting to authority. The work isn't cheerful. It articulates and describes something about the "victim" or those who are less powerful, and most importantly gets out there for people to see and experience. There is no one way to "get" the work. I hope people can compare the filmic loop with their own personal lives, connect the object to the image, connect these images to each other, and think about repetition and patterns of behavior. All the pieces, including this one, involve a certain viewing pleasure and "horror." Pleasure comes from watching the objects operate, and the horror comes from realizing the implications of the repeated gesture or action. The repetition itself is both a success and a failure; all of the work contains dualities. They express some qualities of victimization, but the victims maintain movement.

LL: Many of your machines rest on worn household objects—end tables, wooden potty chairs, a music stand, a shelf. In your artist statement for WPA you cite these objects as "revealing secret messages." Could you elaborate on your use of the word secret? Could you also talk about the projections of words as opposed to the images? Is one more secret than the other?

HK: The words in the projections are much more literal. I think the words ultimately give away the secrets. But the way they are projected in combination starts to create a larger image. I don't like to use words too much because I think they can end up naming the image. You unconsciously take the words that you see in one piece to the five other pieces without words.

LL: I think the words are less covert, especially because the installations are so quiet and the lights are dim. The arena seems secretive. I didn't presume, however, that your use of secret had to do with language versus visual representation.

HK: When I first started making this work I was drawn to domestic scenes because they are a common experience. Everyone comes from some type of domestic environment. I always draw from everyday life for my work. In addition, while I was making some of this work I was reading a book by Sei Shonagon called *The Pillow Book* (1967). She kept a diary of her life as a lady-in-waiting in the emperor's court in tenth century Japan, in which she outlines how men and women remained separate from one another and rarely communicated face to face. Communication often took place through screens, or "curtains of state" as they were called. Men and women either passed notes underneath the screen or spoke to one another through the screen, recognizing someone by their silk robe, which was visible underneath the curtain of state. I started thinking about the screen as a barrier. The screen can be seen as a replacement for a window, or a way to separate space, inside and outside, private and public, domestic and public. The screen then became the surface onto which the secret was exposed. I wanted to initially make the screen stand for a door or a window. If you're on one side of the screen you observe a silhouette from an outsider's point of view. You are witness to a secret. Also, each screen contains something very different, something very specific. *Childhood Rituals* is a secret because it could reflect an eating disorder or a pattern of eating too quickly or of eating too much. I think of personal rituals as being very secret or private. **LL:** It also brings up the idea of disclosure. These issues that you bring up in the work are not what people easily talk about or reveal even though we all might engage in these patterns everyday or regularly. There are triggers that might draw out connections that would make someone want to talk about or remind themselves how their own rituals evolved.

HK: I do think the pieces act as a catalyst for people to talk about their own experiences. I've been approached numerous times at openings of my work or by people who've seen it and want to tell me stories about their experiences. The effect has more to do with the repetition of a gesture than the gesture itself. It would be one thing for me to animate a gesture, but it works because the repetition gives it meaning. It implies another set of complex problems.

There's a piece, *Treat* (1993), in the WPA show in which a woman is shown pulling out a tooth. Because the gesture is repeated it looks like she is pulling out all of her teeth; it takes on a different meaning. Much of my work operates on the viewers' psyche. As they watch the activity they begin to see that a mundane object is engaged in a very disturbing gesture. *Tied: A Duel* (1993) operates along these lines. Like an oversized music box, a pink piano bench equipped with two motorized "zoetropes" projects two sets of words on a music stand. It implies a number of things at first glance; a recital, a music lesson, a duet. What's projected is a never-ending argument, one that is both accusatory and forgiving, "I am, you are, we are, lying, denying, guilty, blind, innocent." The blame is constantly shifting, there's no one place that it rests. **LL:** There seem to be two periods of production of these



Treat (1993) by Heidi Kumao.

machines. How have they evolved? Has the first set informed the second set of works? Have the pieces changed conceptually or physically?

HK: I think the most significant development I've made recently with the work is that it "grew up." I'm no longer primarily interested in describing the seemingly powerless experience of child. I am currently much more interested in the interactions among adults and adolescents or relationships between "equals." This has meant leaving behind the toy-like aspect of the work. The recent work still uses household objects and domestic "dramas" and is somewhat reflective of adolescent experience. Each machine has a certain personality. They are simultaneously "stuck" and moving.

The newer work has gestures that are both futile and productive. In *Every Hour on the Hour* (1993) a hand frantically knocks on a door and turns the doorknob. As the gesture is repeated, it produces the cumulative effect of frustration. This gesture, like some of the others, embodies hopelessness or desperation and optimism or hopefulness. While the door is clearly locked and the entry denied, the hand continues to knock and demand recognition.

In *Kept* (1993) a cabinet containing a zoetrope mechanism projects images of a woman sweeping into a stationary box on the coffee table below. In this box her silhouette sweeps around the remains of torn letters. She is contained in the box, as if sentenced to a lifetime of labor. She is also successful in cleaning the space she is sweeping. If she were to stop sweeping, however, the whole mess in the box would seem to cave in and surround her. Again, this is another situation that depicts both the tenacity of surviving and a bleak future of frenetic repetition.

I have tried to incorporate a third element to the work besides the images and objects, and that is the use of another object to project into or onto. The images in *Kept* are projected onto a box that contains and cages the images of the woman. *Treat* projects onto an intravenous stand, and *Swallow* (1993) projects into an empty picture frame on the wall. In every instance, the objects frame the images both formally and conceptually. I think that in some ways, the "machine" itself has become less important.

LL: *Duel* (1991) is one piece that seems playful and childlike at first glance, but it seems to span the two possible sets of

relations—among equals or between subjects in disproportionate positions of power—in a game of rock, scissors, paper repeating itself. The implications are of learning competitiveness; no matter what context you find yourself in there are a constant struggles for dominance.

HK: That piece started out being about how play becomes learning about power. I intentionally photographed one hand with a different lens than the other so one is much bigger than the other. The hand that's bigger actually plays the game with a pair of scissors, a piece of paper, and a rock whereas the other hand is just forming the symbols for those things. Here you have a game in which the players are supposed to have an equal chance to win, but they actually do not. And like *Duel* it's never-ending. In a way *Duel* was supposed to be autobiographical, or a self-portrait. I saw it as symbolically bringing two things together to create a third—a sort of synthesis.

LL: And the auto-biographical aspect has to do with your background in science?

HK: Yes, I have a background in chemistry. In many ways my work is always about a certain synthesis or chemistry; the product is different from its two parents. I have always been interested in creating art work from two different elements or media. Artmaking to me is a lot like scientific experimentation or chemistry in that you hypothesize a certain reaction, but you can't always predict the results. Much of the process of making this work involves "chance"—how will the image and object work together? Will they?

I compare viewing my pieces to using a stereo viewer. In a stereo viewer, two pictures are fused by your eyes to "see" a 3-D product. The "art" of this is both the illusion and the process of creating the illusion. The most fascinating part of pairing opposing elements is that they produce an interaction that never gets settled or resolved: adult with child; moving with still images; illusion with reality; mechanical with human. They are neither and both photography and film.

LL: And as for future work?

HK: As far as future work goes I am working on "pairs" of machines. I also want to do work that can be used in performance. I want to exhibit in venues other than visual arts spaces such as storefronts, abandoned buildings, and as a part of nighttime outdoor spectacles.