

## TOWARD A FEMINIST "CONEY ISLAND OF THE AVANT-GARDE" JANIE GEISER RECASTS THE CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS



**Y**ou hear Janie Geiser's cinematic diorama-installation before you see it. Drifting out of a darkened room are the suspenseful flourishes played on a piano when a damsel is in distress in a silent film, punctuated every so often by a thunderous clap. Produced by a motorized contraption that would be right at home on the grounds of a country fair—a large box hanging in mid-air whose side flaps are hoisted up by a rope on pulleys, then released with a violent slam—this is a sound that stops you dead in your tracks. It rings in your ears, runs down your spine, and makes you feel suddenly trapped. These sensations have a political dimension. Their hold on the body offers a lesson in history, and invites a kinesthetic insight into the freedoms and limitations experienced by women in early American films.

It is precisely this tension between female liberation and restriction that is the subject of Geiser's "The Spider's Wheels," created for the tenth anniversary exhibition of the City of Los Angeles (C.O.L.A.) Individual Artist Fellowship Program held at the Los Angeles

Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park. Geiser became interested in the rapidly fading first generation of female Hollywood stars when, in 1999, she moved to LA to become director of the Cotsen Center for Puppetry and the Arts at CalArts. Intrigued by the glimpses into the once-adventurous lives of now unknown actresses from the teens and twenties afforded by their obituaries, she began to investigate the careers of Ruth Clifford, Pauline Curley, Laura La Plante, Allene Ray, and their more famous counterparts—the "serial queens"—Helen Holmes, Ruth Rowland, and Pearl White. Athletic, strong, and self-reliant, these women often performed their own stunts and were as accomplished in real life as the heroines whose exploits they enacted on screen. The press regarded them with a curious mixture of admiration and anxiety, and the characters they portrayed in serials like *The Perils of Pauline* (1914, by Louis J. Gasnier and Donald MacKenzie) and *The Hazards of Helen* (1914, by James D. Davis and J.P. McGowan) were alternately empowered and imperiled. The heroines' ambivalent condition became the basis of Geiser's installation.<sup>1</sup>

Utilizing found imagery from serial films and 16mm black-and-white footage of a contemporary actress playing a silent film heroine dispersed across three distinct object/projection areas, "The Spider's Wheels" focuses on the forgotten star of a fictitious serial about a female detective known as "The Spider." The central element in the installation is that compelling contraption, an opaque Plexiglas box with perforated metal flaps that also serves as a silver screen. Superimposed on both sides are luminous images of a determined White and her double, Andrea LeBlanc, crawling back and forth through a tunnel that gradually gives way to an apocryphal landscape. The screen, as its sides lift, transforms temporarily into a house. When the roof descends with a violent slam, our heroine is stuck. In this situation, she appears hopelessly boxed in.



Elsewhere in the installation, the heroine has other options. In one corner of the room, she reclines in her "web," a paper and wire mesh screen on which is projected an uncanny image of her head. In another miniature projection she is engaged in detection. Adjoining the house-screen is a closet-diorama that seems to belong on the set of a Technicolor version of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920, by Robert Wiene). Constructed in the foreshortened perspective favored by German Expressionist films, a deep blue corridor leads to a mysterious red door at the top of a small staircase. A latched peephole invites us to peer in on an inexplicable scene: a man's hands crush and conceal an unidentified document before deliberately dropping an inkwell onto the floor, causing a spectral female figure to abruptly open a door. The wide-eyed Spider witnesses these events and then, unexpectedly, looks out at us—as though she is acknowledging our presence as viewers. Like her, we're left wondering how these incidents add up, and more importantly, what they might mean.

"The Spider's Wheels," a video installation exploring the representation of women in silent film whose spectacular form has

all the appeal of a fairground attraction, is a wild hybrid that fits simultaneously into so many histories, it is hard to know where to begin. On the one hand, its seamless fusion of film and video places the work squarely within the new genre of cinematic moving image installation made possible by the widespread availability of the video projector in the 1990s. Video's pedigree may be "anything but pure," as Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer noted fifteen years ago, but those who were drawn to it in the 1960s and 1970s were performance and conceptual artists, electronic musicians, sculptors, and social activists interested in community-based television or documentary—rather than filmmakers. Experimental film had its own history, and, during this same period, the "heroic," visionary avant-garde that championed radical abstraction, rejected Hollywood narrative style, and was most associated with the work of Stan Brakhage was at its peak. Crossover between the two media was rare. More recently, however, as Chrissie Iles put it, "the languages of film and video have become conflated into a single cinematic aesthetic."<sup>3</sup>

This conflation signals the third distinct phase in the history of moving image installation. Following the phenomenologically oriented works of the 1960s and 1970s and the sculptural arrangements of the 1980s, the wall-sized projections of the last two decades recall the large-scale, "expanded cinema" events and slide installations of thirty-five years ago. Shot on 16mm film or video and digitally projected, often on enormous, contiguous screens, some of these new works utilize installation as a tool for interrogating Hollywood cinema. Douglas Gordon's installation "24 Hour Psycho" (1993), for example, meticulously deconstructs Alfred Hitchcock's famous thriller by slowing the film down to two frames per second and stripping it of sound, thus exposing nuances of movement imperceptible to the naked eye and making each gesture seem even more menacing. Isaac Julien's installation "Baltimore" (2003) does something different. Made in the wake of *Baaadasssss Cinema* (2002), his documentary about the history of Blaxploitation films, Julien's three-screen work intersperses dialogue from *The Mack* (1973) throughout 16mm color sequences featuring the genre's founder Melvin Van Peebles on an urban journey that ultimately brings him face to face with his own effigy at the Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore.

"The Spider's Wheels" uses a three-dimensional configuration of elements to interrogate an earlier period in Hollywood's history, thus transforming a number of experimental film traditions while taking Geiser's eclectic body of work in a whole new direction—one that makes her unique feminist aesthetic particularly forceful and

**OVERLEAF**

Still from the installation "The Spider's Wheels" (2006) by Janie Geiser; photo by Melinda Barlow

**ABOVE LEFT**

Still from the installation "The Spider's Wheels" (2006) by Janie Geiser; photo by Melinda Barlow

**FACING PAGE**

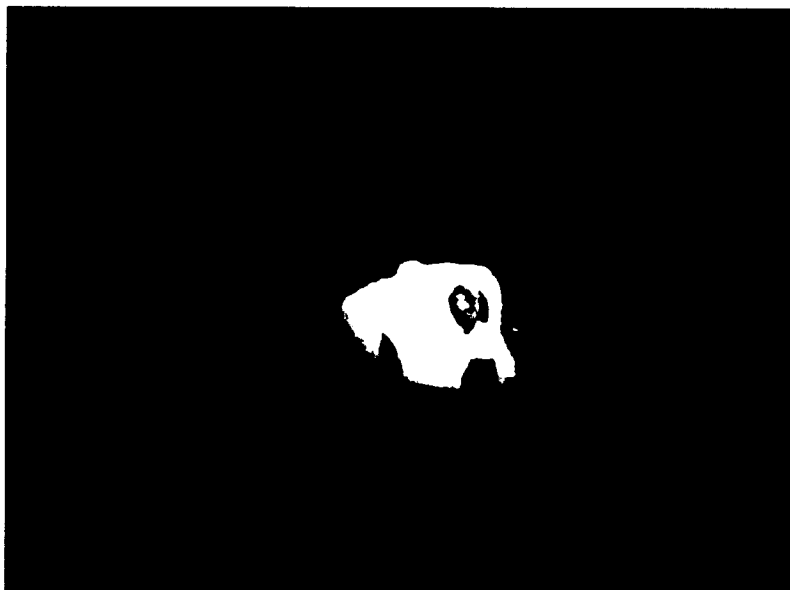
Still from the installation "The Spider's Wheels" (2006) by Janie Geiser; photo by Melinda Barlow

explicit. If her first installation resembles a stage set, this is perhaps no surprise as Geiser is a master of puppet theatre, and what drew her to puppetry twenty-five years ago—its ability to invent “an incredibly visual world apart, where image, object, movement, sound, and text are all equal players”<sup>4</sup>—sounds remarkably like a definition of moving image installation. Her comment also alludes to what she loves about experimental cinema, especially the genre of collage animation: its capacity for creating self-contained worlds.

Geiser has moved fluidly back and forth between experimental film and theatre since 1990, when she made a short, black-and-white animated film titled *The Royal Terror Theatre* and a toy theatre segment for *Half a World Away*, a diorama-performance dramatizing British naval officer Robert Scott’s fatal voyage to the South Pole in 1912, co-created with A. Leroy (a.k.a. Dick Connette). Since that time, she has made ten animated films that collage found imagery with found objects, and often includes films in her works for puppet theatre, projecting clips onto characters and elements of mise-en-scène, sometimes borrowing footage from Hollywood films. *Ether Telegrams* (1999), for example, a “theatrical collage”<sup>5</sup> inspired by the dramatic use of gesture in nineteenth-century spirit photographs and by the ghost stories of Edith Wharton, projects imagery from the dream-like opening sequence of Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) onto a masked performer flanked by a screen to construct the winding, moonlit terrain through which she walks to a haunted mansion. More recently Geiser has integrated film and theatre via Automata, a company co-founded with CalArts colleague Susan Simpson in 2004 to explore the common ancestry of puppetry, miniature theatre, and experimental film in earlier kinds of popular entertainment like the cinema of attractions, nineteenth-century toy theatre, magic lantern shows, and cabinets of curiosities.<sup>6</sup>

“The Spider’s Wheels” offers a new twist on these intertwined histories, recasting the cinema of attractions for the twenty-first century by plumbing film’s original penchant for spectacle, fusing it with found footage’s skillful critique, and tapping into installation’s kinesthetic aspect—its sensual effect on an ambulatory body, moving through the immediacy of a spatial here-and-now. Fueling all of this is an investigation of gender as it was constructed by Hollywood cinema in the mid-teens. As women continued to fight for suffrage, the film industry embarked on its first major campaign to solicit female patronage, through serials whose sensational action-adventure format showcased the heroic feats of the Progressive era’s New Women, while relishing the spectacle of their distress.<sup>7</sup> Probing the films’ political unconscious (bypassing scenes of lurid victimization and leaving diabolical villains behind), Geiser extracts a female archetype—an image of a woman engaged in struggle, crawling back and forth again and again—and, by recontextualizing it in space, adding riveting sound and providing a shocking but entertaining mode of presentation, creates a spectacular, feminist “Coney Island of the avant-garde,” a phrase coined by film historian Tom Gunning.<sup>8</sup>

If experimental film has often functioned as a pedagogical intervention or mode of reception capable of interrogating the codes and conventions of Hollywood cinema as thoroughly as film theory or history, as Bart Testa suggests in *Back and Forth: Early Film and the Avant-Garde* (1994), then one of the most striking examples of this tendency is the recurring interest by members of the French, Russian, and American avant-gardes in cinema’s facility at harnessing visibility or, as Fernand Leger put it in 1922, for “making images seen.”<sup>9</sup> Films produced before 1906 exhibited this quality most intensely. Shocking, spectacular, and virtually without plot or characterization, short erotic and trick films of the early 1900s were demonstrations of cinematic techniques or recreations of current events and were designed to incite viewers’ visual curiosity, and to provide pleasure through acts of display. Frequently displayed



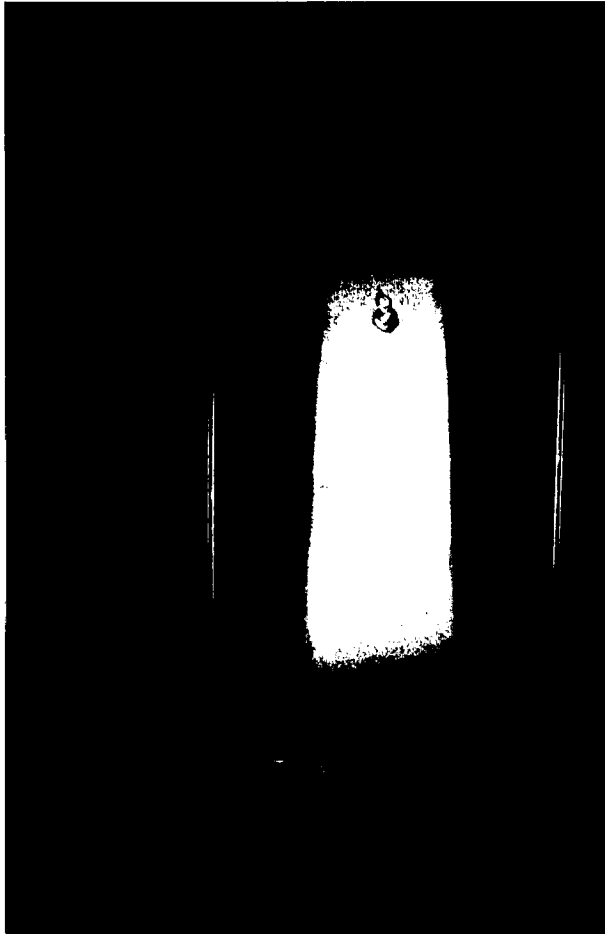
was the act of looking itself, as actors ruptured the film’s illusion of continuity and stared out at spectators, acknowledging their presence. This non-narrative, exhibitionistic cinema of attractions, as Gunning called it, directly addressed and engaged its spectator.

Attraction is a fairground and circus term for a surprising or illogical novelty act, and Gunning borrowed it from Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who argued in “Montage of Attractions” (1923) for a politically agitational form of theatre that would replace the melodramatic illusionism of the bourgeois stage with a method that subjected audience members to sensual and psychological impact, rather than encouraging them to identify with characters. Along with acrobatic clowns, a short film, and a tightrope act that disrupted the proscenium and extended over the heads of spectators, Eisenstein envisioned a salvo exploding beneath the seats, catapulting audience members into revolutionary consciousness. The spectator was the theatre’s most important material, and attractions, he argued, worked by establishing interrelationships with other attractions, and with viewers whose intellectual process was a dialectical synthesis of the

CONTINUED ON P. 26

relationships between those attractions and their own perceptions. These ideas became the basis of his “dialectical approach to film form,” which emphasized the collision of antithetical elements. As he wrote in his notes in the late 1920s for an unrealized film of Karl Marx’s *Capital* (whose “formal side” was inspired by *Ulysses* [1922] and therefore dedicated to modernist James Joyce), Eisenstein’s goal was instruction in Marx’s method. He wanted to teach workers to “think dialectically” by drawing upon cinema’s spectacular properties, and by creating novel attractions, like those found at the circus or fair.<sup>10</sup> If films could generate physical sensations with genuine political significance, then a truly critical cinema should seek to astonish.

No wonder Gunning turned to Eisenstein for terminology: the word “attraction” perfectly embodies both the confrontational spirit and



pleasurable appeal of early twentieth-century forms of popular entertainment, from circus to cinema, and highlights the direct mode of address they shared with Eisenstein’s later avant-garde. Convinced of spectacle’s radical potential for stimulating insight, and committed to the political efficacy of an aesthetics of shock, Eisenstein was “tapping into a source of energy”<sup>11</sup> that had always been part of film history, but that had been absorbed by narrative

features since their rise to prominence in the mid-teens. A diverse group of filmmakers with different styles and agendas have joined Eisenstein in this discovery over the years: Buster Keaton, Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel, Jack Smith, and most recently Geiser, have each realized that the cinema of attractions is still an “unexhausted resource”<sup>12</sup> capable of fueling spectacular forms of critique.

By embracing theatricality, harnessing visibility, and especially by utilizing strategies of direct address (from the startling moment when the Spider breaks the frame and meets our gaze, to that dangling house-screen’s unforgettable slam), “The Spider’s Wheels” refashions the cinema of attractions into a three-dimensional installation that cultivates an attitude of critical distance by employing techniques that leave us in awe. But instead of catapulting us into revolutionary consciousness through a salvo that literally hurls us out of our seats, Geiser creates a form of kinesthetic consciousness raising. She raises our consciousness as female spectators by reworking a number of strangely familiar images, and by subjecting us to a series of physical jolts that lead to surprising historical insights. And this, writes Caroline Walker Bynum, is the very stuff of wonder. “A historical phenomenon differently valenced and valued (and experienced) in different times and different places,”<sup>13</sup> wonder nonetheless has a deep structure. Unpredictable and jarring, if not overwhelming, wonder may be difficult to recognize or understand. At once personally illuminating and culturally significant, the experience of wonder, as Bynum suggests, operates by “jolting us into an encounter with the past that is unexpected and strange.”<sup>14</sup>

What better way to describe the effect of “The Spider’s Wheels” could there possibly be than this, given the work’s impact on the body and examination of film history? To answer this question one must first ask two more, both concerned with the issue of spectatorship. If, as Gunning points out, “every change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way,”<sup>15</sup> then how are we addressed and constructed as spectators, or, more aptly, as visitors, in and through the genre of moving image installation, at the dawn of the twenty-first century? And what is the nature of the female visitor’s experience as she moves from station to station in a cinematic diorama-installation that explores the representation of women in the American silent serials that once thrilled so many female fans?

Fifteen years ago, just as video installation was becoming less sculpturally oriented and more inclined to utilize large-scale projections, Margaret Morse outlined a preliminary poetics of the medium, noting that only by experiencing installations when they are installed do we get a sense of their atmosphere—that elusive mood or feeling generated by and palpable within the charged “space-in-between” each work’s unique sculptural or projected components.<sup>16</sup> And yet, like other experiential arts only temporarily anchored in the present, video installation is a remarkably fugitive medium, and therefore its “potentialities are discovered at a very

slow rate.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, and even after what at the time of Morse’s writing was a twenty-year history of widely varying works, we still lacked a critical vocabulary for “kinesthetic ‘insights’ at the level of the body ego and its orientation in space.”<sup>18</sup> To flesh out the specificity of video installation, she concluded, “requires each experience and its interpretation.”<sup>19</sup>

To borrow Morse’s phrase, atmosphere is something “you had to be there” to perceive.<sup>20</sup> But evocative description is enriched by



context, and corporeal sensations offer lessons in history. Which brings us back to the shocking slam that boxes in our heroine and echoes throughout the space-in-between the sculptural components comprising “The Spider’s Wheels.” Here, in Geiser’s deconstructed chamber of cinema, the mood is one of serious exhilaration, but the longer you linger the more your initial sensation of delight is punctuated by pangs of dread. Every time that roof goes up you anticipate its crash back down. Other visitors to the installation seemed to feel the same: they gasped, or winced, or stopped in their tracks, reacting each time the Spider was trapped. And while such reactions are not gender-exclusive—I saw both men and women respond in similar ways—they may be especially gender-poignant. The image of a woman engaged in struggle is nothing less than archetypal, and seeing this struggle repeatedly thwarted can be especially painful for female visitors, if not traumatic. It is something that has happened consistently throughout history (in the United States it took feminists seventy years of activism to achieve the right to vote) and is an experience women know all too well in the world.

To have created a form of political commentary that possesses what might be called somatic authority—that registers kinesthetically, in our bodies—is one of the greatest achievements of “The Spider’s Wheels.” An installation that is alternately riveting and discomfiting, that encourages us to be analytic while filling us with awe—these things make the work extraordinary. Finally, a feminist Coney Island of the avant-garde whose spectacular attractions both astonish and critique.

**MELINDA BARLOW** is associate professor of Film Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is the editor of *Mary Lucier: Art & Performance* (Johns Hopkins, 2000) and the author of *Lost Objects of Desire: Video Installation, Mary Lucier, and the Romance of History* (forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press). She is currently working on a collection of essays on Janie Geiser titled *Curiosa in Motion*.

*NOTES* 1. See Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Chapter 8, “Power and Peril in the Serial-Queen Melodrama,” was an important resource for Geiser in thinking through her ideas for “The Spider’s Wheels.” Interview with the author, Los Angeles, May 2006. 2. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1991), 14. 3. Chrissie Iles, “Video and Film Space,” in *Space Site Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, Erika Suderburg, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 257. 4. Janie Geiser in Melinda Barlow, “Interview with Janie Geiser,” *Animac*, No. 3 (2004) (Spain), 3. 5. This is Geiser’s phrase from her program notes for the work, 1999. 6. For more on Automata and Geiser’s role in the international revival of miniature theatre, see Melinda Barlow, “Size Matters: In the Micro-Universe of Toy Theatre, Startling Shifts in Perspective Require Audiences to Look Closely” *American Theatre*, Vol. 22, No. 22 (February 2005), 60–64. 7. See Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), for a detailed discussion of female fans and the serial film craze. 8. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-garde,” in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 61. 9. Fernand Léger, “A critical essay on the plastic qualities of Abel Gance’s film *The Wheel*,” in Edward Fry, ed., *Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 21, cited in Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions,” 56. 10. See Sergei Eisenstein; Marjey Sliwowski; Jay Leyda, Annette Michelson, “Notes for a Film of *Capital*,” *October*, Vol. 2 (Summer, 1976), 3–26. 11. Gunning, 61. 12. *Ibid.*, 61. 13. Carolyn Walker Bynum, “Wonder,” *American Historical Review* (February 1997), 1. 14. *Ibid.*, 1. 15. Gunning, 61. 16. Margaret Morse, “Video Installation Art: The Image, The Body, and the Space-in-Between,” in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video*, 153–167. In the last fifteen years there have been other books and essays that have also explored the phenomenology of installation—but not moving image installation—and these do not discuss what Morse isolated in 1991 and what most concerns me here: that elusive thing called atmosphere. Significant, however, for their examination of the “nomadic” aspect of installations are James Meyer’s “The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,” and Miwon Kwon’s “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” both in Suderburg, 23–37 and 38–63, respectively. Two other useful sources on kinesthetic insights in a variety of media are Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Caroline A. Jones, ed., *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). 17. Morse, 167. 18. *Ibid.*, 153. 19. *Ibid.*, 166. 20. *Ibid.*, 165.

**FACING PAGE**

Still from the installation “The Spider’s Wheels” (2006) by Janie Geiser; photo by Melinda Barlow

**ABOVE LEFT**

Still from *Ether Telegrams* (1999) by Janie Geiser; photo by Steve Gunther/CalArts