World Art 18, pp.4-47; 1998.

CHARLES LABELLE SELECTED CRITICISM
1994 - 2005

Maria Fernandez Cardoso- World Art 1998

Maria Fernanda Cardoso

by Charles LaBelle

Clad in silver go-go boots, a silver lame mini-skirt with matching halter-top and cape, what appear to be welding goggles, and brandishing a four-inch riding crop, Maria Fernanda Cardoso looks like some unholy cross between a turn-of-the-century Parisian Dominatrix and the Id-releasing scientist from "Forbidden Planet." This appearance is not deceptive. Especially when you consider how Cardoso's main occupation these days-- the Ringmaster of her very own flea-circus-- neatly blends the scientific rigors of entomology with the more nebulous domains of desire and fantasy.

In the not-too-recent past, Cardoso's work took the form of installations whose nature-based materials-- dried flowers, preserved piranha, frogs, cow bones, gourds, corn and sugar-- smartly subverted their references to modernist forms. The pieces questioned notions of cultural hegemony without deteriorating into rhetoric and gave the age-old issue of nature vs art a much needed face-lift. In Woven Water, (1994), for example, Cardoso created a sprawling web of dried starfish which hung throughout the gallery space in hexagonal clusters. Looking like both seafood restaurant decor and DNA, the installation married two seemingly incongruous subjects: the tourist trade and Hakim Bey's theoretical "temporary autonomous zone"-- and all with a stunningly beautiful economy of means. Polymorphos in its metaphors, the installation also symbolically evoked

both heaven and earth in its elevation of the starfish. The Internet. Fishing Nets. Networks. Netherworlds. In the end, Woven Water felt more like a safety net designed to capture all the displaced wanderers cast adrift on the fin-de-siecle seas.

Yet, even as installations such as these were garnering praise in both the press and among artists, Cardoso was searching for more dynamic ways to present her ideas. It was during a residency at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada that she first began work on what, by 1998, could honestly be billed as "The World's Only Flea-Circus."[1] With no literature on the subject and no existing models, Cardoso is essentially self-taught. Working by trial and error, she spends hours patiently observing her fleas (which come a dime each from a biological supply house) and their reactions to various stimuli before attempting to teach them tricks like the tight-rope walk or high-dive. It's a tedious process, to be sure, and full of heartache as the mortality rate among her comma-sized performers is incredibly high. Many of the fleas succumb early on, while Cardoso is fitting them into their "training harnesses", a hair-thin piece

What was not evident in her earlier works but that has come into full bloom now is Cardoso's great wit and natural skills as a performer. Standing before her rapt audiences as Brutus, "The World's Strongest Flea," hauls a tiny locomotive (still 1000 times his own size) across the floor of the "big" top, Professor Cardoso proffers an accompanying monologue full of dead-pan humor and double-entendres. When asked by a 5-year-old why she decided to start a flea-circus she replies simply: "I got the flea-bite." Her show features an elaborate cast of all-but-invisible performers: tight-rope-walkers Teeny and Tiny, jugglers Pepita and Pepon, flea-cannonballs Bounce 1 and Bounce 2 (who are shot out of thimble-sized cannons), escape-artist Harry Fleadini, an ensemble of flea-clowns, and flea-tango-dancers festooned with tiny sequined tutus. While Cardoso bills many of the acts as heterosexual couples, the reality is that she works exclusively with female fleas, who are better jumpers. "The males are only good for mating," she explains with a shrug, then adds: "I'm not politically correct."

As amusing as it is, there's also something undeniably disturbing at the heart of the work. And while it's to her credit that Cardoso has managed to balance these opposing polarities so well, it is this element of the grotesque that makes her circus so fascinating. As parasites possessed of a predilection for dark spaces and hairy nooks, fleas have a naturally intimate relationship to the human body. As hosts, humans provide not only food, but warmth to nurture the thousands of eggs the females lay daily. With life spans averaging just two months, fleas must breed continually. The male flea's penis, when extended, is almost as long as his body and roughly one third his total weight. Given these facts, it should come as no surprise to realize that the flea is a highly charged sexual signifier with an entire history of erotica behind it. As early as 1633 the English poet John Donne recognized the fleas' lascivious nature and put it to use. In his poem, The Flea, the narrator attempts to convince a girl to relinquish her virginity by suggesting that they have already been joined by the single flea that has bitten them both:

"Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;"

And later:

"This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed and marriage temple is;"

Two hundred fifty years later, The Autobiography of a Flea, an anonymous Victorian "tart tale", is narrated by a flea living comfortably in the pubic patch of a beautiful, amorous, young woman named Bella. From this perfect observation post the flea is able to describe in detail Bella's numerous and increasingly bizarre sexual encounters. And while there's no actual flea in Georges Feydeau's belle-epoch farce, A Flea in Her Ear, the title refers to a young woman whose sexual indiscretions throw her

bourgeois family into turmoil, the invisible flea being cast as the culprit behind her insatiable itch.

Up until the 20th Century, the flea was a regular companion for most humans. With little hope of getting rid of them, women during the middle-ages wore bits of flea-attracting fur on strings around their necks as a kind of primitive roach-motel for their own personal flea colonies. In Victorian times, the popularity of fur collars on ladies' coats is thought to have served a similar function. Thus, the minuscule flea has been awarded an enormous amount of power. With their privileged position and accompanying knowledge of human affairs, they are like secret confidants, or inter-species spies. And as such they are viewed with justifiable suspicion. Carried without being noticed, they are themselves carriers. Between 1347 and 1351 they killed an estimated 25 million in Europe alone. Given this history, it's easy to see why the idea of a trained flea, contained, tamed and ready to obey, could become the basis for a form of popular entertainment. Cardoso's art plays upon this complex and deeply rooted historical relationship, astutely drawing parallels between human desire and the secret insight accorded the flea.

Like Annette Messager's alter ego "La Collectionneuse" who knitted wool sweaters for her menagerie of taxidermied sparrows, Cardoso's "Queen of the Fleas" is all things to her diminutive subjects-- both tyrannical despot and nurturing mother. Indeed, when feeding time arrives at the circus, Cardoso simply sticks out her arm. It's an eerie sight: hundreds of fleas dining comfortably on their master's blood. Readily admitting to having some "bizarre maternal instincts," Cardoso's relationship to her fleas is, if you will, downright codependent. Her domineering Ring-Mistress is possessed of a paradoxical masochism. In his essay on Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Coldness and Cruelty, (1967), Gilles Deleuze discusses the difference between the sadist who longs for "institutionalized possession" and the masochist who favors a "contractual alliance." Cardoso's involvement with her fleas (bordering on obsessive) exhibits the symptoms of both. As she herself has said: "I am as much their slave as they are mine."

Where so many contemporary artists today trade upon knowing references and ironic re-castings of other's work, Cardoso is a refreshing iconoclast, a genuine weirdo who just can't help it. In her desire to find a more universal language she has returned the idea of spectacle to an intimate, even magical, interaction between artist and audience. There's a touch of the 1960s to her work, but also a bit of 1860, an era before cinema, of gaslamps and zoetropes-- and era where shadows played a much more active role in people's daily lives. Her flea-circus is at once innocent and knowing, beautiful and creepy, humble yet extravagant. It both seduces and deceives us. It encourages our willing suspension of disbelief while, at the same time, remaining completely sincere. It is interesting to note that there are people who, even after seeing the circus refuse to believe that the fleas are real. Some insist that they're mechanical while others think the audience is somehow being mesmerized and that, in reality, there's nothing there at all. Cardoso doesn't seem to mind these skeptics. In fact, she carefully encourages confusion, understanding that, as a show-person, she will not be taken at face value, no matter what she says. But in the midst of all this Mystery, one thing is certain: Cardoso's own combination of old-world

charm and contemporary savvy lend her flea-circus an edge that in another's hands it would surely lack.

World Art

1998

[1] The last known flea-circus belonged to Professor Leroy Heckler. For twenty-five years Heckler performed in the back room of Hubert's Freak Museum on 42nd St and Broadway where he was often visited by the late Diane Arbus. When Heckler died in 1958, the flea-circus died with him.