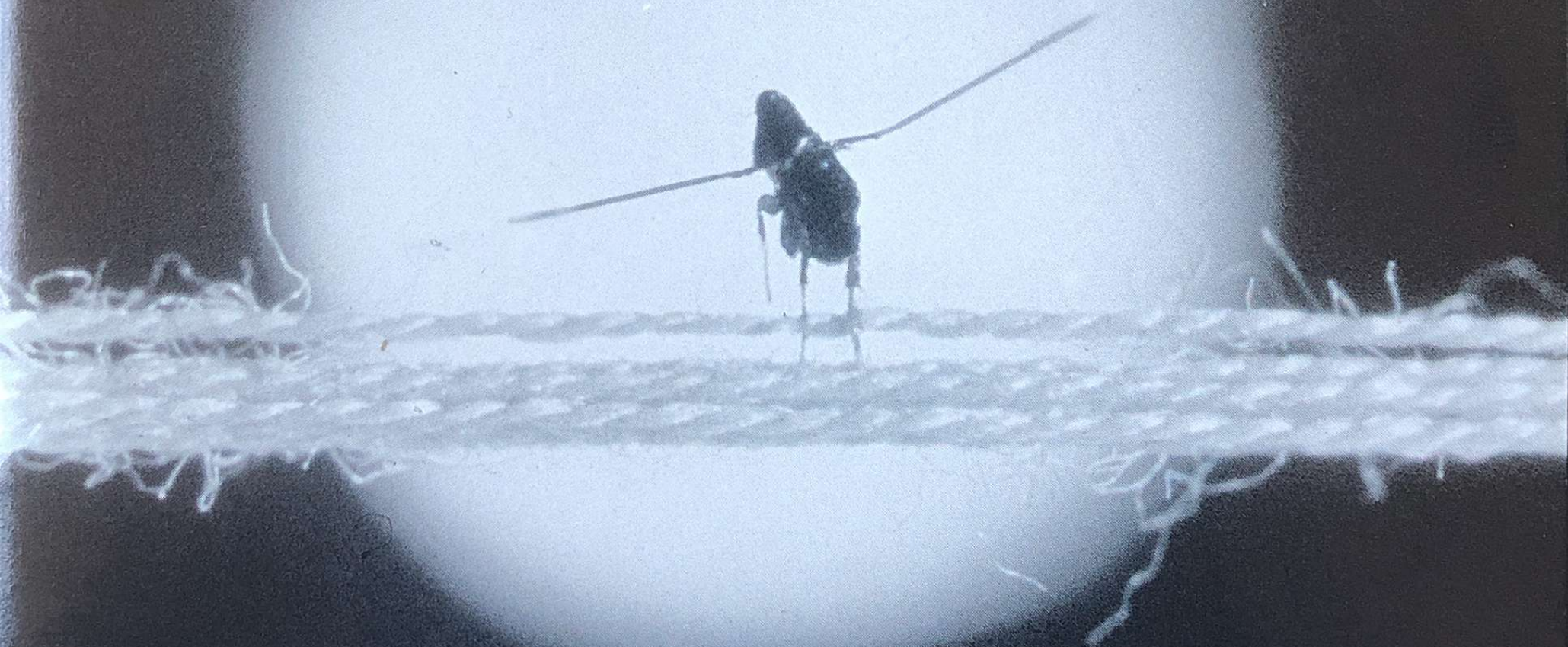
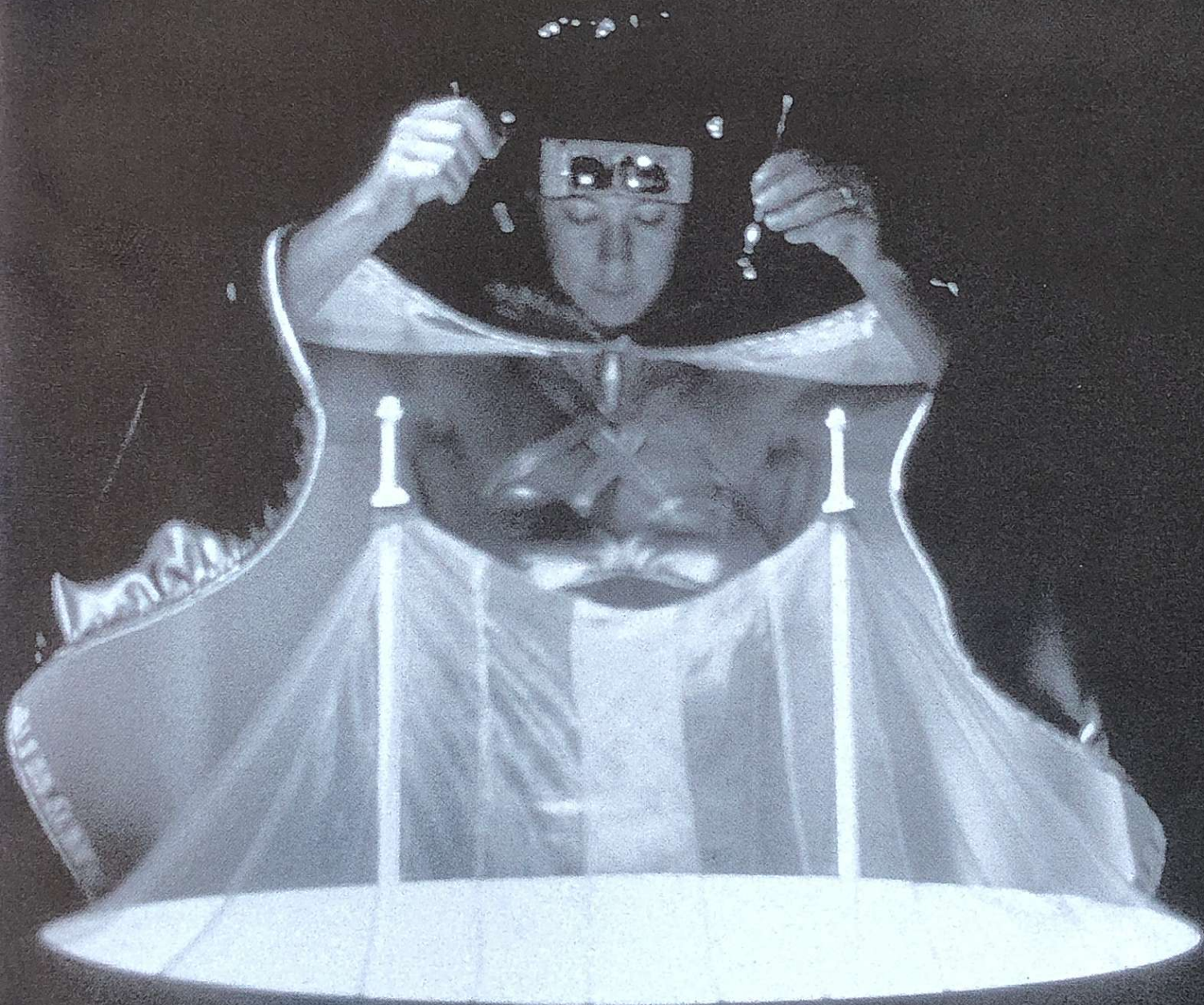


CARDOSO FLEA CIRCUIS



CARDOSO



FILEA CIRCUS

Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston

THE SMALLEST SHOW ON EARTH

LYNN M. HERBERT

A flea circus? And in a museum, no less? Curiosity laced with incredulity has followed the *Cardoso Flea Circus* wherever it has appeared since its world premier in 1995. The flea circus had its heyday in previous centuries. Even at the height of its popularity, relatively few people were actually able to witness performances, making the flea circus the stuff of legend. Since then, the flea circus' obscurity and marginal status have propelled it into the domain of myth and even caricature to the point that today most of us are skeptical that a real flea circus ever existed. Surely they were a trick, a wonderfully absurd yet contrived entertainment.

That said, Maria Fernanda Cardoso's *Cardoso Flea Circus* raises an array of questions. What really *is* the history of the flea circus? Was there ever, and is there now, really such a thing as a flea circus? Can fleas really perform? And why would a serious sculptor of international renown choose to go off on such a tangent, becoming the ringmistress of a flea circus?

A parallel can be found in the work of American sculptor Alexander Calder. In the late 1920s, Calder created a circus of his own with miniature figurines made out of wire and other humble materials. Art historians have since posited that Calder's *Circus* grew from his wire drawings, his work designing toys, his background in engineering, and his interest in incorporating movement into his sculpture. In the winter of 1927, he began to perform his *Circus* for gatherings of friends in his small studio on the rue Daguerre in Paris.¹ While his wife provided the music by changing phonograph records for different acts, Calder animated his small figurines, providing sound effects when appropriate, from blowing a whistle to introduce each act to roaring for his lion. Playful and humorous, Calder's whimsical *Circus* was a notable break from the earlier tradition of sculpture as serious and monumental. Writing about Calder's *Circus*, Alain Jouffroy notes: "Revolutionaries and artists of genius bring such disorder into the formulas of history that new theories and new, reassuring interpretations have to be found."² He adds: "[T]hese are moments recognized as political or artistic revolutions, or an irruption of genius. . . . It is precisely these antihistoric, ahistoric moments that the historians are forced to examine beneath a magnifying glass."³ With her *Cardoso Flea Circus*, Cardoso asks us to take out that magnifying glass again, this time literally as well as figuratively.

Cardoso was born in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1963. Before creating her flea circus, she was known primarily for her sculpture and installations that utilized animals, capitalizing on both their formal and their metaphorical potential. Animals appeared as a signature element in her work as early as in her graduate thesis exhibition at Yale University in 1990, which included arrangements of lizards, frogs, and grasshoppers. These and subsequent works combine the purity of form found in minimalism with the social commentary found in *arte povera*.

Cardoso adopts animal and plant forms that relate to her Colombian childhood

and heritage: starfish, piranhas, cattle bones, sea urchins, snakes, gourds, corncobs, fish scales, guava candy. For each, Cardoso has assigned a corollary geometric form such as a ring, sphere, polyhedron, or grid. While steeped in the rigors of twentieth-century minimalism, Cardoso's works also allude to the equally "minimalist" stylized zoomorphic animals one finds in Pre-Columbian art.⁴ By combining all of these elements, Cardoso has created a very personal language that explores issues of form as well as humankind's complicated relationship to the natural world. Working with animal life "enables her to explore the emotions that people project onto living things and how humans have used other creatures for decoration and ritual display."⁵

Cardoso capitalizes on our inherent link to and fascination with animal and plant life. Animals and plants enrich our lives, nourish us, and sustain us, yet we view them as expendable. Cardoso addresses this paradox by creating elegant works that first seduce with their beauty, drawing us in, and then take us through a darker realm to end ultimately with death. En route from beauty to death, she touches upon such subjects as the balance of power, neglect, and the quirks of popular culture (stuffed piranhas in curio shops).

In 1992, Cardoso began to research fleas, yet another focus in her ongoing exploration of animals from her childhood. Her investigations led her to the flea circus, something she had heard of but never seen. The history of the flea circus remains sketchy, but they appear to have originated in England in the sixteenth century, then entering a "golden age" in the 1860s, thanks to an Italian entrepreneur named L. Bertolotto who raised the standard of flea circuses to a new height while performing for royalty in Europe. Cardoso was inspired by written reports of Bertolotto's circus and others that included everything from a flea orchestra playing audible music, flea dancers, fleas drawing coaches and warships, fleas portraying Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, and a flea-driven siege of Antwerp to Bertolotto's grand finale, allowing the fleas to dine on his arm. Flea circuses eventually appeared all over the world; Professor Heckler's circus on 42nd Street in New York could be seen as recently as the 1950s. Intrigued, Cardoso wanted to see a flea circus, and when she couldn't find one, she decided to create her own.

Through research and much trial and error—or, as the artist's circus banner proclaims, "Patience and Science"—Cardoso learned a great deal about a flea's inherent abilities and how to train them. She discovered that although the flea holds a lowly position on the evolutionary ladder, it has extraordinary abilities. For example, fleas can jump one hundred times their own height and pull 160,000 times their own weight. She tried working with different species of fleas before settling on a hybrid cat/kangaroo flea. (The much larger human flea, historically used in circuses, is difficult to find in this day and age.) She only trains females, having discovered that male fleas are smaller and have less stamina. Fleas live on average two to three months, and Cardoso trains approximately twelve at a time, keeping hundreds in the wings as understudies.

Based on the flea's particular strengths and abilities and drawing from historical records, Cardoso has created her own acts, props, and costumes as well as an arena in which her fleas can perform. Like most circuses, her show is ever evolving, but there are a number of signature acts. Brutus demonstrates the flea's incredible strength by singlehandedly pulling a toy locomotive. Sir Fleamund Hillary conquers Mount Everest, climbing all the way to the top. Fearless Alfredo does his "Triple Salto Mortal," diving from the high dive into a thimble of water below. And Teeny and Tiny care-

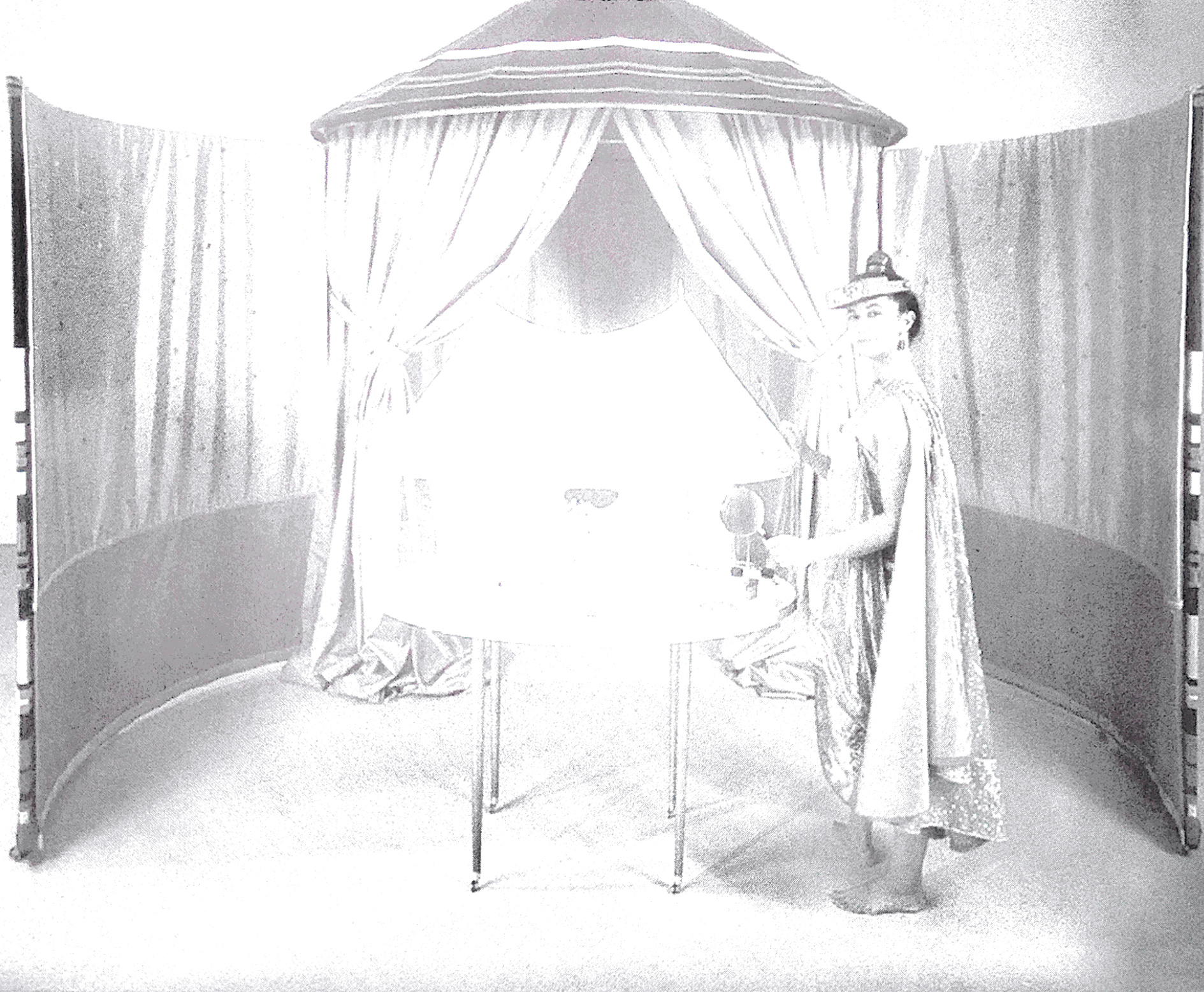


Maria Fernanda Cardoso, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Cardoso Flea Circus* (exterior view of tent), 1996

fully walk the tightrope, a magnificent feat in that Cardoso first had to teach them how to walk (fleas instinctively jump). How does Cardoso get her fleas to perform such feats? She harnesses them with wires thinner than human hair, and then capitalizes on their instincts. Fleas avoid light, migrate toward heat, and follow carbon dioxide. So, Cardoso utilizes a combination of flashlights, warmth, and her own breath to motivate her fleas. In reality, Brutus is avoiding the spotlight, and Fearless Alfredo is diving for the dark pool below.

Cardoso's investigations, training, and preparation took four years. At the end of 1995, the *Cardoso Flea Circus* had its world premier appropriately enough at The Exploratorium, San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception. Since then, the *Cardoso Flea Circus* has grown, appearing at venues as diverse as the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and the Sydney Opera House in Australia. Cardoso's "smallest show on earth" now incorporates so many different elements that it has become almost a state of mind. Its presentation at the Contemporary Arts Museum includes a selection from the rich and varied body of materials that now comprise the *Cardoso Flea Circus*.

The two primary elements are a videotape of the fleas performing and an elaborate circus tent and arena filled with the fleas' props. "What, no real fleas performing?" you ask. Even before the circus' premier at The Exploratorium, Cardoso realized that the scale of her circus would make it difficult for more than a few viewers to actually see her performances. Together with Ross Rudesch Harley, she devised a way to



Maria Fernanda Cardoso, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, *Cardoso Flea Circus* (interior view with arena, artist at right), 1996

create a magnified real-time video that allowed people to see any given performance. But, because these live performances involve such an elaborate set-up to accommodate the taping and simulcast, Cardoso only performs about once a year. She and Harley, however, have put together a videotape of the various circus performances so that other viewers can “see” the *Cardoso Flea Circus*. A special lens system blows Cardoso’s fleas up to proportions only seen in science fiction, giving us a fleas’-eye view of the circus and proving once and for all that live fleas are actually performing.⁶

This videotape, co-produced by The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, has a soundtrack by New York sound artists Christian Marclay and Beo Morales whose musical contribution sets the tone for this unique video. According to Harley, “Their resulting flea soundtrack is a very apt mix of humorous, expressive and strangely eerie sounds, underscoring and giving counterpoint to the madcap and tragicomic elements of the video.”⁷ In the videotape, Professor Cardoso, Queen of the Fleas, appears as ringmistress in her silver lamé and cape, wielding her flashlights and wearing jeweler’s magnifying goggles. She domesticates the exotic in acts that include Los Dos Mosqueteros engaged in a swordfight, flea ballerinas dancing to Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker,” flea cannonballs shooting out of cannons into nets, and sadly, Fearless Alfredo diving to his death. Taking her cue from Bertolotto, Cardoso presents as her grand finale her ballerina fleas in sequin tutus lurching on her outstretched arm, an unsettling underscoring of Cardoso’s, as well as our own, interdependency with the animal world.

Cardoso's elaborate circus tent, also produced in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, further illustrates how wholeheartedly she has embraced the circus aesthetic. It is bright, colorful, seductive, and full of painted portrayals of her fleas performing unimaginable feats. Two sides of the tents open up like arms, inviting viewers inside to the arena, which brings the heroic scale of the video back down to reality once where viewers see just how tiny the actual props are. Mount Everest is only slightly bigger than a thimble.

This exhibition includes as well other materials that have become a part of the *Cardoso Flea Circus*. They range from drawings by Cardoso of different flea performances, a sampling of sketches she made for the tent, an enormous painted banner, printed panels of flea and flea circus facts and history, and woodblock posters printed for live performances, to an array of ephemera including handbills, permits for importing fleas, fan mail, the ringmistress' goggles, and photographs of the artist working with kangaroos to find fleas.⁸ Seen altogether, the materials convey the sense that the *Cardoso Flea Circus* is really a performance within a performance. One critic likened the *Cardoso Flea Circus* to a series of Chinese boxes: "The parasitic nature of the reality proposed by the circus, the parasitic nature of the flea circus, and the turning of the screw resulting from the creation of a kind of video-installation recording the event, come together like a series of Chinese boxes."⁹

There is a certain majesty to the form of a starfish and even to the lines of a lizard. But with her flea circus, Cardoso challenges our hubris to a new degree by focusing on a diminutive pest most often associated with disease and discomfort. She draws our attention to the extraordinary physical abilities honed through the centuries by the necessities of their parasitic nature, in this way exploring issues of innocence, dominance, and cynicism. There is a dark side to most circuses, and Cardoso's is no exception. Animals are prodded into doing tricks, our entertainment at their expense, and the inherent dangers prove all too real as we witness Fearless Alfredo's death. The circus is a place where we wear masks, where we seek escape, an entertaining spectacle that is also ironically replete with carnivalesque morbidity and the poignancy of the human condition. Calder also understood this and said of his own *Circus*, "Most people see the surface that's funny, but there's a lot that goes on."¹⁰

Like Calder, Cardoso has used the humblest of materials and the circus arena to ask us questions about our very nature. With her characteristic humor, Cardoso remarks: "Perhaps I didn't find the fleas, perhaps they found me."¹¹

NOTES

1. Joan M. Marter, *Alexander Calder* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 60.
2. Alain Jouffroy, "Calder's Circus or the demystification," in *Homage to Calder*, edited by G. di San Lazzaro (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1972), p. 15.
3. Ibid.
4. For more on this subject, see Ron Platt, *Maria Fernanda Cardoso* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1994), p. 6.
5. David Weintraub, "Natural Selections," *ARTnews* (May 2000), p. 176.
6. Harley found it very difficult to tape fleas performing using standard microscopy. He eventually discovered a special lens system developed by a California company called Innovision that uses three interchangeable long-barreled lenses for shooting 90 degree, 45 degree, or 180 degree angles. This allows for close-ups

- of the fleas without losing depth of field, so viewers can also see the props and lighting. For more information on the filming, see Ross Rudesch Harley, "Cardoso Flea Circus Video with real live performing fleas!" *Cantrill's Filmnotes*, nos. 87/88 (December 1997), p. 6.
7. Ross Rudesch Harley, p. 7.
8. Cardoso's performance posters are made in Bogotá at a shop that continues to print with the antiquated woodblock technique. Calder, too, always produced invitations to performances of his circus, printing them himself with a linoleum cut.
9. Nicolas Guagnini, "Maria Fernanda Cardoso: New Museum," *Art Nexus: The Nexus Between Latin America and the Rest of the World*, no. 29, (August-October 1998), p. 136.
10. Joan M. Marter, p. 64.
11. Carolina Ponce de Leon, "Maria Fernanda Cardoso," *Poliester* (Spring 1997), p. 29.

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

All works are courtesy the artist unless otherwise indicated. Measurements are listed in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Our Little Friends (information panel), 1995
Inkjet print on foam board
61½ x 22

Fabulous Flea Facts (information panel), 1995
Inkjet print on foam board
61½ x 22

Flea Circuses (information panel), 1995
Inkjet print on foam board
61½ x 22

Cardoso Flea Circus at The Exploratorium (poster), 1995
Woodblock print on paper
40 x 27

Maria Fernanda Cardoso, in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia

Cardoso Flea Circus, 1996
Tent: acrylic and oil on canvas, pigment on nylon taffeta, silk, rayon, cotton, and polyester with armature of steel and brass
Arena: Plexiglas, painted wood, silk/metallic thread organza, and brass
Props: various materials and fleas
Overall size varies
Collection The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia

Cardoso Flea Circus at The Fabric Workshop and Museum (poster), 1996
Woodblock print on paper
40 x 27

Cardoso Flea Circus, 1997
Directed by Ross Rudesch Harley and Maria Fernanda Cardoso
Music by Christian Marclay and Beo Morales
Produced by The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia
Videotape
8 minutes
Collection The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia

Cardoso Flea Circus (Banner), (1998–2000)
Recreated and hand-painted at the Contemporary Arts Museum by Mike Reed
Latex house paint
108 x 204

DRAWINGS

Flea Circus Arenas (silver outside), 1995
Colored pencil on paper
8³/₁₆ x 6½

Flea Circus Arenas (carmine red), 1995
Colored pencil on paper
8³/₁₆ x 6½

Flea Circus Arenas (with props inside), 1995
Colored pencil on paper
8³/₁₆ x 6½

Tent (closed), 1996
Tempera on paper
9½ x 7³/₈

Tent (open), 1996
Tempera on paper
7³/₈ x 9½

Tent (frontal view), 1996

Tempera on paper

7³/₈ x 9¹/₂

Tent (closed), 1996

Colored pencil on paper

7 x 7³/₄

Tent (open), 1996

Colored pencil on paper

7 x 7¹³/₁₆

The following drawings are all 2000,
graphite on paper, and 6³/₄ x 6³/₄ inches:

A flea on a leash

A flea on a leash

A flea race!

A flea race! Nose to Nose between

Pepita & Pepón

A flea swordfight

A flea swordfight between

Pierre and Pedro!

A duel between Pierre and Pedro

*Cardoso Flea Circus sign activated by
fleas*

El triple salto mortal!

[The deadly triple somersault]

El triple salto mortal

[The deadly triple somersault]

En el trapecio, Dimitri y Sarindar

En el trapecio, Dimitri y Sarindar

En la recta final! [On the home stretch!]

Flea Acrobats

Flea Ballerinas!

Flea Ballerinas! wearing tutus

Flea High Dive o El triple salto mortal

*[Flea High Dive and the deadly triple
somersault]*

Flea Prisoners

La aplanadora [the steamroller]

Las pulgas equilibristas

[Flea tightrope walkers]

Las pulgas equilibristas

[Flea tightrope walkers]

Las pulgas bala [Flea cannonballs]

Las pulgas bala [Flea cannonballs]

The Mambo Fleas!

Merry-go-rounds

Scape artist

Sir Fleamund Hillary conquista la cum-

bre del Monte Everest [Sir Fleamund

Hillary conquers Mt. Everest]

Sir Fleamund Hillary conquista la cima

del Monte Everest [Sir Fleamund

Hillary conquers Mt. Everest]

EPHEMERA

jeweler's magnifying goggles

photographs of Cardoso inspecting

kangaroos for fleas

photographs of Cardoso with circus arena

and props

assorted fan mail from 1995–96

1994 Canadian import permit for "insects:

ctenocephalides felis"

letter to Cardoso from R. H. Gooding,

Professor, Department of Entomology,

University of Alberta, Edmonton,

January 24, 1994

Sydney Opera House announcement card

and ticket stub for *Cardoso Flea Circus*

Cardoso Flea Circus video cassette packaging

and color pamphlet

handbill for *Cardoso Flea Circus*, The

Exploratorium

lottery tickets for a ringside seat to see the

Cardoso Flea Circus at The Exploratorium

poster explaining lottery procedure for

Cardoso Flea Circus performances at

The Exploratorium

aged copies of historic flea circus handbills

for Professor A. Brown's Flea Circus;

Herr Lidusdroph's Flea Circus at 5,

Leicester Square, London; and Cirque

des Puces

aged copy of an engraved portrait of

Signor Bertolotto, nineteenth century

flea impresario

aged copy of engraving illustrating a

centuries old flea trap worn as jewelry

newspaper article about debut of *Cardoso*

Flea Circus, *San Francisco Chronicle*,

October 7, 1995