



Kenneth Goldsmith at BRAVIN POST LEE, 8 February–7 March
Susanna Coffey at TIBOR DE NAGY, 13 February–15 March
Kerri Sharlin at WOOSTER GARDENS, 22 February–22 March

In the span of one week last spring, Kenneth Goldsmith, if we trust his accuracy, uttered 183,685 words. Wearing a tape recorder and later transcribing every single word into the seven "acts" of *Soliloquy* (1997), Goldsmith produced a 281-page document that, once enlarged, he made into wallpaper for Bravin Post Lee. With the transcription having taken much longer than the actual speaking of these words (not to mention the editing-out of everything his interlocutors had to say), *Soliloquy* presents itself as a mindlessly precise rendering of part of the artist's life. The artless ease of speaking rubs against the tedium of secretarial labor. The simplicity of the concept contrasts dramatically with the unruly complexity and idiosyncrasies of the transcription. The work's purity masks the messy content, as Goldsmith's refined and focused art-gesture gives way to a tide of ungrammatical and inefficient daily spew: from utterances recalling routine life maintenance to full dish gossiping and domestic intimacies.

Goldsmith is a connoisseur of the unedited, part of a tradition that spans Cage, Warhol, Fluxus, and Minimalism. He writes/speaks "I'm always talking about the volume of language that's around . . . What would your language look like . . . if you collected every piece-of-shit word . . . that you said for an entire week." *Soliloquy*'s wallpaper enacts an incarnation of speech while it solicits an audience for private experience. Goldsmith converts the back and forth of social intercourse into a one-way address. Isolated from the world, the artist's words are now redirected at us. We are free to wonder how *Soliloquy*'s monologue differs from literature, and how this indiscreet material might get him into trouble: Although its reserve is playfully promiscuous, *Soliloquy* is about as literary as a wire tap. The work quietly mocks notions of writing as the careful arrangement of words or as the agonized construction of an authentic voice, but it rewards our casual, prying glance with unexpected interest. *Soliloquy* asks us to pay special attention to spoken words while suggesting that they are,

on one level, meaningless, mere snowflakes in a blizzard. The space between language and the world is made concrete, as both a measurable art object and as the stuff within which Goldsmith has embedded himself, sinking into the turbulent waters of his social milieu.

Artists have for some time aspired to make art out of their lives. They regularly aim to produce something enduring from the ephemeral flow of experience, to both redeem and transform it. Adam Phillips writes that we need art in order to recognize ourselves, that the individual can only know his most private preoccupations in terms of the public language of culture. The question is not "Who am I?" but "How do I appear to myself?"

A painted self-portrait is a familiar and deceptively simple way of staging this question. Susanna Coffey has been painting before the mirror, almost exclusively, for several years. Her smaller-than-life-sized heads, cropped at the chin, consistently depict herself staring out of the picture in locked frontal address. A range of headgear, such as glasses and hats, as well as her make-up and the theatrical lighting, introduce semiotic variations to her undeviating regard of self. For all the evident time and effort spent looking at herself, each painting continues to feel hard won, as if her own appearance was barely recognizable and required a labored cobbling together. The coherent solidity of the Coffey-head is at con-



stant risk of coming apart. Her facture is an accumulation of small and distinct marks applied with searching awkwardness, like the touches of a blind person attempting to recognize a barely familiar face. These embodied perceptions testify to an abiding mystery of consistency; they seem to ask "Is this the same person I have been facing in the mirror all these years?" A room of these heads gives the sense that the dividing mirror has disappeared, leaving only the intense stares of an odd family of faces.

Kerri Sharlin has dramatized the self in a theatrical mode as well, by asking again and again, "How do I appear to others?" She has exhibited drawings of herself done by students of life-drawing classes, police sketch artists who based their work on descriptions given by friends, and photographers, writers, and designers who collaborated in the production of mock magazine profiles. Sharlin's newest project processes the same material through the institutional machinery of television. She engaged various writers and producers of hit TV series to write episodes based on incidents in her life: Gardner Stern from *Law and Order*, Lisa Conner from *One Life to Live*, Ken Keeler from *The Simpsons*, and others who turned in scripts. The character Kerri presents herself to a magazine editor in a "Beavis and Butt-Head" episode, saying "Uhh. I'm like, trying to, uhh, see what the difference is . . . between the . . . private and public, uhh, and profeshunnal image, uhh, about how media and stuff shapes the self . . . and, like, how people inter-pret uhh . . ."

One room of the exhibition shows storyboards for some of the sequences (the full scripts are available for audience perusal). In the large darkened inner room, six video projectors screen *Thirty-six Actresses Auditioning to Play Kerri in "Diary," a Made-for-Television Special* (1997). A wall of Kerri possibilities do their trained best to project themselves into a role defined by the script and conventions of the genre. Their words, spoken by these attractive types, blend in looping cacophonies as they seek to capture the Kerri role. Bright monochromatic backgrounds lend this oversized ensemble of talking heads a graphic impact that argues for a meta-Kerri; one that has not and never will exist. Sharlin attempts to realize what the media assumes we all want—the flattery of having our lives portrayed in fiction—and her newest work burlesques that desire. Her neediness and the absorbing hollowness of these self-enlargements are rendered with hilarious gusto, but only by others, engaged by the artist.

Goldsmith, Coffey, and Sharlin propel their private lives into public life. In some ways, they reveal nothing, remaining masked like squids in their own ink. Their gestures attempt to blur the boundaries between the self and the world, functioning as exaggerations or caricatures of narcissism. Here, the sense of self depends on the consumption of *images* of the self. Much of today's art strives to attain the status of a symptom. Understood in this way, art is caused by the world as much as by the artist—like a runny nose.

Kerri Sharlin
Thirty-six Actresses Auditioning to Play Kerri in "Diary," a Made-for-Television Special, 1997
6 video projections
Dimensions variable

Susanna Coffey
Self Portrait (St. Marks Glasses), 1996-97
Oil on linen
12" x 11"

Kenneth Goldsmith
Soliloquy, 1996
344 pages
30" x 23" each

