

Artist's Book Beat

by Nancy Princenthal

Katherine Wetzel,
from *Attention's
Loop*. Courtesy
Harry N. Abrams,
Inc., New York.



modern computer), King also reviews a choice assortment of literature on attention, memory, vision, and miniaturization. The insights she delivers, in a series of gracefully elliptical texts, include her own, some speculative, some autobiographical. From brief references to a wheelchair-bound mother and a physicist father, we can infer early reverence for mechanisms, both abstract and material, that model the basic processes of life. An intellectual self-portrait as tightly controlled as a puppet on a string, *Attention's Loop* is an accomplished, erudite, and surprisingly satisfying performance.

As artists' books go, Elizabeth King's *Attention's Loop* (New York, Abrams, 1999, \$29.95) is disconcertingly slick. Its 40 lush photographs by Katherine Wetzel are reproduced in tritone and combined, in a handsome hardcover volume, with several ancillary illustrations and an assortment of texts, most written by King; the visual language seems caught between thoughtful exhibition catalogue and corporate annual report. But as is true of the sculpture called *Pupil* that is the book's main visual subject, the hard, brittle, unnaturally perfect surfaces are carefully considered, chosen for clarity and, more provocatively, for the light they throw on the relationship between representation and deception. *Pupil* is a half-life-size, waist-up mannequin made of wood, porcelain, glass, and assorted metal fittings; in a recent exhibition at the Kent Gallery in New York it was housed (like the few other sculptures shown) in a customized vitrine with dramatically controlled lighting that heightened its profound ambiguity, a confusion

of identity that only began with whether it was real or holographic.

This uncertainty is sustained, and even augmented, in the book, where some tight-cropped detail shots of the sculpture's head could easily be mistaken for photos of flesh. To say that *Pupil* is meticulously detailed barely hints at the level of illusionism King achieves (a result, evidently, of prodigious skill and fairly mind-blowing tenacity). Named for both the aperture of the eye and the small student that is, King tells us, its etymological root, *Pupil* reveals her interest in automata and other forms of artificial intelligence. But unlike the legions of artists now looking at how advanced technology intersects with constructions of the self (Mariano Mori is presently this field's star), King casts her gaze backward. Besides examining historical automata, from Jacques de Vaucanson's 18th-century duck (which walked, quacked, ruffled its feathers, ate, and excreted) to Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine of 1834 (generally considered the first prototype of the

