Dumbing Up
A Downtown exhibit has its roots in a Japanese artists' collective

By Alice Winn

Lovers at Wood Street Galleries emerges from the Japanese artists' collective "dumb type" — a name which refers to a society saturated with information but devoid of understanding. Social Activism mixed with nightclub events and seminar discussions for the group's performance works, videos and installations. The late artist Teiji Funabashi founded "dumb type" in 1984 at Tokyo University, recruiting students from multiple disciplines including electronic music, dance, computer science and visual arts. In the mid-80s he was part of New York's Lower East Side avant-garde scene, where he performed at the Pyramid Club along with other underground artists such as John Lely, Lynda and the late Ethyl Eichelberger.

Lovers was Funabashi's first major solo work. It

explores perceptions of human rights and AIDS. The piece was conceived as a New York Gay Pride parade where police forced marchers to walk in a single line. It champions sexual diversity and responsibility and extols the bonds of friendship, standing as a counterpoint to the stigmatization of the gay population and other groups that are marginalized by society.

The late writer, photographer and painter, David Wojnarowicz once said that "People have found it necessary to define their sexuality in images, in photographs and movies in order not to disappear... We can all affect each other by being open enough to make each other feel less alienated. We are all able to have a profound effect on each other, a positive effect that sustains us... I'm beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gestures is the imagination."

The imaginative flight of Lovers, equal representation of images about homosexual and heterosexual relationships have the vivid immediacy of dreams. The installations reflect the flawed beauty of our shared vulnerability in a subtle, understated style.

Lovers appeared in the Museum of Modern Art's Video Space exhibition and traveled to Toronto before coming to Pittsburgh. Funabashi created the installation with technical assistance from architect/designer Shiro Takasugi, computer programmer Tomohiro Ueshiba and Cosmo ARTLAB.

In the gallery, a central stack of seven automated laser-activated projectors surround viewers with an interactive cinematic narrative played out by the space, raw images of nude "dumb type" members. The pictures are fluid and transitory, creating a constellation of figures that materialize and vanish, like stones skipping across an abandoned lake. They enter the drama with the slow motion approach of long distance runners, running through a landscape of solitude. Some are searching, restlessly passing each other by, caught between longing and despair — road movies, abruptly jumping, leaving trails of love and its aftermath, sexuality and its fall-out. They become personal histories that can suddenly turn and rush away into disintegration or else turn and speed towards another, seeking connection. As witnesses, we trigger the flow of storylines by activating motion sensors that cause the images caught in the projects' rays that cross the gallery like housewife beacons sweeping a river. We drift into a language of gestures that mirror our own, provide for us the contact between our own innermost, private experiences in a public space. We've led to make formal and emotional connections across the panorama of imagery. We experience the whole with the kaleidoscopic view that history and time exist as an aggregate of individual lives.

There are moments of self-presentation, spaces of interaction, retreat and contemplation — glimmers of interior worlds where boundaries are stretched or erased, lands without borders or fear. Couples superimposed in embrace press into the walls — vacant frescoes which come to life as brightly as lightning at the window of a darkened room.

Transparencies of a lover flicker on a bone manskin — a ghost he huge that shakes and leaves him, passing silently into the revolving screen of memory. The sounds and lyrics of faraway voices, wind and machine music mingle the primitive with the industrial, giving images a beat and shaping their themes.

Victor Masatsawa felt that "photography reveals that life and death can be so indistinguishably one. Photography is an affiliation of opposites: the negative contains the positive." Funabashi uses the photographic image to construct a space, freeing himself in a final self-portrait for the installation which was visualized in the shadow of his HIV-positive status. He opens his arm to us, then falls backwards out of sight with the weightless grace of light fading in the face of the darkness, leaving us with the quiet presence of his absence. He becomes a metaphor for compassion, empathy and understanding against a backdrop of isolation and alienation in which we all struggle.