

## Still Thoughts on Moving Images

by Susan Stewart

*Video*—the first person singular Latin verb, “I see.”

This retrospective exhibition at Colgate University of Ann Hamilton’s video installations incorporates objects and moving images from 1984 to the present, bringing earlier work into an array of new configurations. Hamilton, born in 1956, is only a few years older than this medium that she has explored on and off since the late 1980’s; in the same period she has pursued, to an even more intense degree, works of art made by hand from tangible, often raw, materials. The installations at Colgate not only survey these filmed and hand-made—we might say “cooked” and “raw”—trajectories of her work, but also reveal an intriguing dialectic between them.

The exhibit’s title *Recto/Verso* [literally “front” and “back”] refers to the traditional terms used to

designate the two halves of an open book. For left to right languages, such as English, the recto falls on a reader’s right side, the verso on the left; for right to left languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, the terms are reversed. The same page therefore can be a recto or verso, depending on the reader’s point of view, the language, and conventions of writing, printing, binding, and reading.

“Recto” and “verso” also can designate the front and backsides of a single piece of paper used for drawing. Here the distinction has to do with not only the orientation of the body, but also with interpretation and significance. A sheet with drawings on both sides invites the viewer to reverse his or her attention, to carry one image as an after-image or point of comparison over into another, or perhaps even to suppress one or the other side. In sewing and embroidery, too, we speak of a “right” or “wrong,” an “up” or “down,” side—the former polished and completed, the latter displaying seams, knots, and stray bits of string. The right side, which in a fin-

ished garment is the outside, may seem effortless, yet as Hamilton demonstrates in two videos showing very close-up views of the processes of sewing and picking, or unsewing, closures from 1996/2000 *reserve · video/picking* and *reserve · video/sewing*, the under or wrong side shows the labor of making and any stitch can be permanent or impermanent. As a red thread moves in a running stitch through a swatch of silk organza in her 2003 work, *draw*, the heavily amplified sound of the needle's puncturing motion, recorded by a miniature single-chip surveillance camera, makes the turn from one surface to another a gesture of momentous importance.

If we have a sense of front and back, right and wrong, completed or rough, and, for a sequential practice such as reading, feel that we are moving between the past, present, and future, these certainties arise from our apprehension of the phenomenal world. The face to face and the invisible, the emerging and receding, all fall into place for us as we move through space in time. These terms also indicate

the interconnectedness and mutuality of things: a single two-dimensional sheet of paper turns out to have another dimension, the labor of a work is both hiding and constitutive, and behind and before one view another view is waiting.

Immanuel Kant wrote in his 1786 essay "What is Orientation in Thinking?" that our sense of the right and left sides of our bodies comes from our experience of the horizon—we determine direction out of our knowledge of the rising and setting of the sun. "To *orientate* oneself," he writes, "in the proper sense of the word, means to use a given direction—and we divide the horizon into four of these—in order to find the others, and in particular that of *sunrise*. If I see the sun in the sky and know that it is now midday, I know how to find south, west, north, and east. For this purpose, however, I must necessarily be able to feel a difference within my own *subject*, namely that between my right and left hands. I call this a *feeling*."



Recto and verso thereby tie us to the largest patterns of nature as they also help us order, place, and project our own states of mind and emotion. Hamilton, citing Emerson—our own home-grown American transcendental idealist—on the topic of circles, has written “For me, the circle of the hand making is the first eye. It is the empty center of the tower, the clearing in the forest, where with the fundamentals of cloth and paper and line we weave and re-weave unending relations.”

The binary quality of front and back, right and left, characterizes the experience of the viewers of the Colgate exhibit as they move between two galleries in separate buildings. Within these vast halls, sound and light can be simultaneous, but the visitor must choose between works, moving and turning, approaching and receding—all within the closed geometric space of the gallery room. What the Colgate spaces share are qualities of interiority and finality—there is no “outside” to the rooms once one enters them and they do not open to one another.

To be present in one gallery is to hold the other in either anticipation or retrospection.

At the same time, the works within each space and across the two galleries are clearly yoked to one another by both technology and theme and the exhibition as a whole elegantly uses the dynamic between the past lives of the works and their present simultaneous incarnations to reframe them. The hidden “live” wiring of these electronic pieces, their use of images of threads and drawn lines, including lines of light projected across the walls of each gallery, all traverse and close the distance between points like lines drawn between stars on a map to create an intelligible constellation. Hamilton has used a similar metaphor of “revolving planets, overlapping, passing through and over each other,” to describe the motion of the images of her lyrical 2002 piece *across*. The work animates a photo of a 19th century sailing vessel, faces from several contemporary *cartes de visite*, and pages from penmanship exercise books. The viewer or reader is invited

to “draw” connections within and across the historical moment.

As this meeting of theme and form involves extending meaning, a deep pun on “camera” or room suggests containing and enclosing the viewer’s focus. Yet the difference between moving images framed inside monitors and images projected across walls suggests the difference between various modes of seeing beyond the focus of the still image: we track, glimpse, and catch with our peripheral vision. Works made with a moving camera translate directly into a moving projection. When Hamilton creates a roving light, we might be reminded of fireflies, search lights, and metaphors of the soul at once. Yet moving in and out of synchronization the images acquire another level of depth and we realize that moving and still images themselves are not so distinct as appearing along a non-synchronized continuum of perception.

Still reproductions of these works cannot do justice to the experience of their flickering presence.

Meanwhile, the camera obscura images of Colgate’s Brehmer Theater and Memorial Chapel and the book of photos of a crowd from Hamilton’s 1987 work, *the earth never gets flat* here link the camera, the room, and the room as a camera to the limits of a frame. This retrospective collection thus invites the viewer to both move with the moving images, draw closer, and stand back from them—the turning or transformation of habits of viewing or participating in the art work has been a preoccupation of Hamilton’s long career and is vividly evident in this ensemble.

Considering these issues of the exterior and interior, motion and framing, of the work, Hamilton also draws, as Kant did, on the subjective feeling of orientation more generally. The video installation flashes, beckoning, from within its “monitors”—from the Latin *monere*, to warn or watch. The monitors might be very small in relation to a large wall, or flush with a wall or a table, and covered with handmade woolen, silk-lined, cloth. Even when her



images extend across an entire wall, they remain on a level of intimacy.

Some of Hamilton's imagery, with its emphasis on effort and difficulty, indicates the disequilibrium and disturbances of pain. A string pulled slowly from an open mouth in *salic* violates our sense of the invisibility of the body's interior. In the 1992/93 work *aleph*, Hamilton has filmed her mouth brimming with wet pebbles—the sound track with its grinding noise of stone on stone indicates an intentional act that could be sensual or suffocating. In other early works here, we find a mouth overflowing with water, water pouring down a neck, a hand manipulating honey in a pocket—the sensuality and even eroticism of these images evokes a strange innocence—one that seems to belong to the viewer, who stands before these close-up views within conventional face to face space with the certainty of never having before looked so closely or so uncannily at such phenomena.

The essence of video art is electricity encoun-

tered in darkness. With its polished closed surface, invisible apparatus, and de-contextualized form, video's processes are more mysterious than those of film, let alone painting and drawing. Made of pixels, whose content is color alone, the video image is framed, often duplicated and "interlaced," formed by odd and even numbered lines of light. Its glassy surface bounces back the viewer; there are no particular traces of the maker—only the overall effect of a made thing mysteriously made. Video art carries with it some of the aura of magic that we associate with the "right side"; illuminated and alive, the image summons its viewers with the paradoxical power of a cool fire.

Yet in the current installation of her 2006 piece, *voce*, Hamilton exposes something of the device. The spinning video projectors, veiled by organza, are at the center of the room—in full view and concealed at once—while the images, shifting faces and shifting feet in turn, appear on both the cloth and the surrounding walls. Her 1995 piece *lumen*

uses ventriloquist's wooden dummies and a wooden prosthetic hand; and the glove-like paper hands she made for her 2010 piece *stylus* appear to be prostheses used for drawing. Like the constantly failing/falling little blue ball from a child's air pipe toy that she keeps aloft with her breath in the 2003 piece *up*, or the "clapping" hands of her 2011 *clapclap* that more often miss than hit, these awkward forms of "help" are another means of baring the device. Demonstrating the necessity and fruitfulness of error and difficulty, these pieces also show the ways that art itself can be prosthetic—giving us access to means of production and reception that we cannot exercise with our bodies alone.

The nature of the motion in Hamilton's work is lyric rather than narrative, a path perhaps most clearly exemplified by *ghost... a border act* from 2000, a video that marked a breakthrough formally and conceptually for her. Here Hamilton used, for the first time, a camera no larger than a telephone that fit into her left hand, learning to "draw" with it. She

recorded the progress of a line that she set down with a pencil in her right hand as she ran around a large table covered in paper. The motions and rhythms of the hand and the camera come in an out of focus and synchronization. As she was making the piece, and as we view it, the work of the pencil seems to alternate between leading and pulling or following and pushing—agency, cause, and consequence become an allegory of artistic will: the person drawing is drawn, what is drawn is drawing the person on. With this shift to a drawing practice, the video camera moves with the moving image and becomes more than a framing device. When the footage is run backwards, the work seems to be consuming, erasing, its own production. These innovative uses of the video camera have allowed it to become not merely a recording device, but also a prosthesis for Hamilton's "thinking hand." The technique is one of the many ways that art technology appears in Hamilton's oeuvre as a means to augment the five human senses.



The Colgate retrospective provides a glimpse of how Hamilton has continually and restlessly grown as an artist in her nearly three-decades-long practice. Continually putting more of the work and more of the experience of the work into motion, she also, with her concern with reading and writing as passive and active experiences alike, has given her viewers an opportunity to learn and change. The solitary figures characteristic of her early installations are both analyzed at the level of singular senses and built into the congregations and choruses that appear in her recent communal projects. Literacy is a paradigm for committing one's attention and time to meaning and her art has a function on a continuum with other means of sensual extension.

In closing, we might recall that Kant's discourse on orientation is responding to a much older Western text on viewing and knowledge: Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*. Plato's prisoners, chained with their backs to a fire that projects fantastic and deluding images on the cave wall before them, have

no knowledge of the sun until one of them escapes and comes back to reveal the false reality within which his comrades are imprisoned. But no one believes this witness to the world beyond the cave. He learns he must construct his ideas of the good through the abstract powers of his reason, for Plato's idealism precludes the knowledge derived from objects of the senses.

The shadows cast on the walls of the Colgate galleries are also made by fire and the ordinary viewer understands very little about how they have been made. But what we view within their monitors and frames is no deception. Instead we find there a deeply familiar content—the exercise of touch, taste, seeing, hearing; the practice of learning, one letter at a time, to read and write; the experience of trial, error, mistiming, and misappropriation. The form is restored to the scale of apprehension and its magic is shifted from hidden cause to lived embodiment—what everyone, as a one and as one, universally knows and feels.

ANN HAMILTON is a visual artist internationally recognized for her large-scale installations and related video, objects, and prints. Hamilton recently premiered a major new work titled *the event of a thread* at the Park Avenue Armory in New York. She has been awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, NEA Visual Arts Fellowship, United States Artists Fellowship, the Heinz Award, and represented the United States at the 1991 Sao Paulo Bienal and the 1999 Venice Biennale.

Her major museum installations include the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts; Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto; La Maison Rouge Fondation de Antoine Galbert; MASS MoCA; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; The Wanås Foundation; The Musée d'art Contemporain; The Museum of Modern Art; The Tate Gallery; and the Dia Center for the Arts. She is a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Art at The Ohio State University.

SUSAN STEWART is the Avalon Foundation University Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University. A poet, critic and translator, she is the author of *The Poet's Freedom: A Notebook on Making; Poetry and the Fate of the Senses; The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics; On Longing, and other prose studies*. Her most recent books of poetry are *Red Rover, Columbarium*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *The Forest*. Her many translations and co-translations include *Milo De Angelis: Theme of Farewell and After-Poems; Love Lessons: Selected Poems of Alda Merini*, and Euripides's *Andromache*. Her song cycle, "Songs for Adam," premiered in 2009 with the Chicago Symphony with music by composer James Primosch. A former MacArthur Fellow, Stewart has served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In

2009 she received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in 2013–2014 she will hold a Berlin Prize at the American Academy in Berlin.

Susan Stewart wrote for Ann Hamilton's first museum exhibition catalog in 1991. In their twenty years of conversation and friendship, Susan has continued to write on Ann's practice, while Ann has made images for the covers of Susan's books, and integrated her poetry into her own work.

RECTO/VERSO

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