

ANN HAMILTON

LA MAISON ROUGE, PARIS

LYNNE COOKE

Phora, Ann Hamilton's current installation at La Maison Rouge in Paris, occupies all three of the foundation's galleries plus the connecting corridor and basement. By inhabiting the space acoustically as well as plastically, Hamilton integrates this heterogeneous amalgam of rooms without masking the building's structure, orchestrating the visitor's trajectory into a sequence of interrelated experiences via the movement and motif of sound.

In recent years Hamilton's longstanding interest in ways that bodily and linguistic experience form and shape our understanding of the world has moved away from a highly visceral, physical embodiment in favor of a disembodied counterpart, one focused increasingly on sound in the guise of the voice. For example, *tropos* (commissioned for Dia Center for the Arts in 1993), an intensely sensory experience generated primarily by a vast pelt of horsehair, eclipsed the conceptual, represented in the form of texts that were erased—literally burned—by an attendant moving an electric burin across the pages of books; barely audible and teasingly incomprehensible, the voice, in the form of an intermittent recording, was relegated to the perimeter, its source concealed behind the translucent but not transparent windows veiling the world beyond. When pursuing in subsequent works the potential of voice to animate space more overtly, Hamilton has retained her focus on its grain, its texture and timbre, rather than on the words spoken. Nowhere, to date, has it provided so



Above and below: Ann Hamilton, *phora*, 2005. Installation views, La Maison Rouge, Paris. Photos: Marc Damage.

eloquent a trope and so fundamental a structuring device as in *phora*.

The visitor begins by entering a corridor on one side of which looms a grid of highly charged photographs of enlarged mouths. The glass wall opposite, over which a reflective film has been applied, mirrors the viewer, now enmeshed within the grid of monumental facial features. With a tiny single-chip surveillance camera, Hamilton sought to capture in close-up the mouths of a group of painted wooden statues from a medieval altarpiece. Amplified, contorted, and out of focus, they seem to have been ventriloquized into motion, caught on the brink of speech. From this specular realm, where mute witnesses reflect silently on themselves, the visitor is drawn into a dark, cavernous room around which a single projected image—a stylus that leaves a trail of black ink—endlessly circulates, expanding and diminishing eerily depending on the size of each wall it passes over and that wall's distance from the centrally mounted projector. Overhead, close to the ceiling, spin four speakers cantilevered on extended arms. The elusive sound, which seems to move randomly from speaker to speaker around the room, is made from several voices, all probably female. As they start to hum they shift their pitches and tones until they resonate in unison. When their breath dies away, the sound recommences elsewhere, choreographing and animating the void.

Reentering the corridor, the visitor soon reaches a pair of smaller galleries. One is dominated by a huge tent, the kind used throughout the world for the temporary housing of refugees. Suspended from the

ceiling, it opens to reveal an interior lining of sumptuous pink silk, literally and metaphorically redolent of warmth and shelter. Both inside and outside hang double-ended sousaphone bells that slowly rotate. In a low murmur, three women's voices communicate hesitantly in each other's borrowed tongues—English, Arabic, and French—evoking notions of place and presence, attention and assembly, the here and now. In the adjacent gallery, hanging

In *phora*, sequences of allusion weave back over those already conjured, continually complicating the imbrication of voice, sound, silence, and speech.

on cords from the ceiling, piles of clothing, each of which seems to belong to a different individual, could be read as surrogate figures. A lone sousaphone double bell spills fragments of marching music that must have been recorded on an antiquated machine. An enormous table fills the basement.

The lineaments of *phora* are clear: an exoskeleton constructed from a series of interwoven binaries—residency and displacement, assembly and isolation, commonality and individuality, male and female, speech and silence, public and private. However, as is characteristic of Hamilton's practice, no single narrative entity emerges. Once her preferred vehicles,

material metaphors—like the deployment of clothing as the first architecture of the body—are here enveloped in an acoustic surround and counterpointed by others, spectral, unbounded, and evanescent. While manifold, their associations are not open-ended; in carrying over meaning from one room to another, one component to the next, sequences of allusion weave back over those already conjured, continually complicating the imbrication of voice, sound, silence, and speech.

Individual initiative fueled the rehabilitation of La Maison Rouge, transforming this simple historic house and its industrial appendages from a rudimentary place of habitation and work to a contemporary cultural emblem. The Opéra Bastille (still known as the "new" Paris opera), the principal impetus for this once déclassé neighborhood's recent gentrification, is just down the street. Today a mecca for cultural tourism, in the late eighteenth century the Bastille witnessed the beginning of the overthrow of the old order and the ascendancy of the bourgeois citizen. Glossing this overdetermined context for public speech, founded and grounded in rhetorical and instrumental discourse, in historic modes of address both spoken and sung, *phora* limns a social space by means of the most rudimentary performative utterance. Poised between facticity and the phantasmagorical, its mode of expression—its poetics—is premised as fully and as deeply in the singularity of the site as in Hamilton's abiding concerns. □

Lynne Cooke is curator of the Dia Art Foundation, New York.

Phora is on view at La Maison Rouge, Paris, through May 22.

