

tropos

The Greek word “tropos” means turn, as in a physical turn of the body. The biological term “tropism” denotes the reflex reaction or response of an organism to turn toward or away from external stimuli, such as light.

Hamilton’s relatively restrained, austere treatment of this former factory space immediately focused viewers’ attention on an image/activity occurring at its center. The walls, ceiling, and pillars of the immense (approximately 5,000-square-foot) room were unaltered, but the clear windows were replaced with translucent, textured industrial panes, bathing the space in hazy light. Through this light, viewers at the entrance saw and were drawn toward a solitary figure seated at a small metal desk in the center of the space. An acrid odor of smoke and burning permeated the air. Its source became evident as viewers came closer to the seated figure. As the attendant read a book, she/he burned away the printed text line by line. The figure remained absorbed in this task, ritualistic in its deliberateness. Over the duration of the piece, the text -- transformed into smoke -- became absorbed as smell into the horsehair that covered the entire floor.

The horsehair, sewn in bundles, seemed to rise and fall like sea swells over a subtly graded concrete sub-floor. The ocean of hair surrounded and isolated the figure. The sounds and the difficulty of walking on this dense blanket accentuated viewers’ awareness of their presence and movement in the space. Movement through the space also activated the audio component of the installation, the low murmur of a man struggling to speak. His voice emanated from nine speakers located outside the windows at the perimeter of the room, disturbing the almost reverential silence.

—Ann Hamilton