



# SEE YOURSELF SENSING

REDEFINING HUMAN PERCEPTION

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publishing





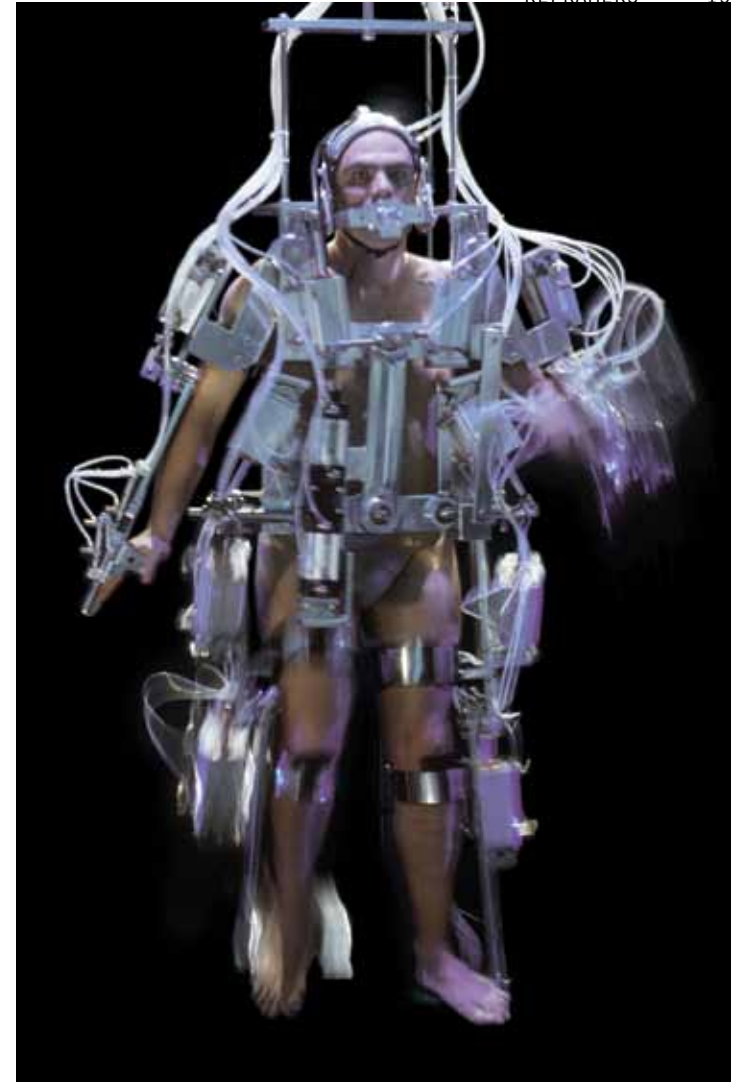
Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, *Epizoo*, 1994. Photo ML Vargas. Image courtesy the artist.



Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, *Epizoo*, 1994. Mechatronic Performance. Eax Scene, general view. Photo Nuria Andreu. Image courtesy the artist.

Roca's interactive pneumatic exoskeleton *Requiem* gives the spectator more control over Roca's body but less power to inflict pain. In fact, pain is not an issue, since, as the title implies, this is a project about giving the appearance of life to an insensate body—a corpse. As Roca's beefy aluminium exoskeleton hangs from a gallows, spectators activate eight sensors around the room that force his principal joints—hands, elbows, shoulders, jaw, knees, thighs, groin, and hip—into various naturalistic poses including Greeting, Walking and Falling, and even more athletic and artistic ones, such as those of Swedish Gymnastics, Tai chi, Flamenco and Contemporary Dance.<sup>12</sup> If the extreme eventuality of the prosthesis is the end of the body, *Requiem* represents an interim state: a flesh body entombed in a robotic puppet. In contrast, the visceral performance *Afasia*, restores to Roca full body control. The “dreskeleton” or exoskeletal body interface he wears even gives him god-like powers. In this one-man interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey*, Roca hurls his limbs around the stage, orchestrating musical robots, real-time images and sound with switches and digital readings of his body movement. But it is all non-verbal. *Aphasie* refers to a disorder that affects one's ability to express and understand language.

For some artists the sensory apparatus are sites for signification: for references to history, memory and the unconscious.



Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, *Requiem*, 1999. Interactive robot, body in. Photo Darius Koehli. Image courtesy the artist.

Artist Ann Hamilton, like Roca, appears in her work but in a far quieter and meditative way. While sometimes she uses her body viscerally—the inside of her mouth for example—her work explores more than just the body site itself. The senses are a conduit for conceptual and intellectual ideas, for revelations into the site of the installation, local history, social history and body memory.

As early as 1984, her first year of graduate school, Hamilton emerged as a sense reframer. Her game-changing *toothpick suit* worn for (*suitably positioned*) was her first installation to include her own body. Hamilton had purchased a used men's suit and covered it with a dense layer of protruding toothpicks, denying the flexibility of the garment and turning it into an armoured second skin. Her initial intention had been to display it on an inanimate structure. On the suggestion of a classmate she decided to wear the piece herself, standing for periods of three hours within her studio coming face to face with visitors to the Yale School of Art's sculpture studio Open House, including this author, who was a graduate student at Yale at the time.<sup>13</sup> Hamilton's work at these bi-yearly open studio events was mesmerising and unforgettable. In the span of over 25 years between now and seeing her early work in person in the 1980s, those early installations have continued to serve as an inspiration for my teaching and ultimately for the writing of this book.





Ann Hamilton, *body object series #13 • toothpick suit/chair*, 1984–1993. Photograph, 11x11cm. Image courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

(*suitably positioned*) was the last time that Hamilton would face the viewer for more than a decade until her *Face to Face Series*, but it was that very moment of being inside of the piece, immobilised and vulnerable, part live/part object hybrid, an integral part of the spatial continuity, present yet removed, that began her addiction to being present in her installations, usually performing some difficult or repetitive task tied to the themes of the work.

For the next 15 years her presence in installations would be less approachable. One could go near her, but not within her cone of vision. So began a stream of works in which the body and the body's senses are restricted or forced to work over time at a job normally done by another part of the body. In *lids of unknown positions*, another graduate school installation, Hamilton included two humans with heads in extreme positions. One body was positioned on a lifeguard chair that was too big for the room. The person's head poked up into a hole cut in the ceiling. The ceiling served as an uncanny blindfold or afforded the spectator a peek into the secret space between the ceiling and the roof. The other body was flopped onto a wood table, the head buried in a mound of sand. Despite the evocation of death, Hamilton's images don't read literally. Hamilton took *lids of unknown positions* out-of-doors to Yale's Beineke Plaza, to express her solidarity for a massive ongoing anti-apartheid demonstration. Meanwhile in the gallery the spectator, the only one whose head is still viable, gets to puzzle out the meaning of another seaside ingredient: an entire wall clad with local blue/black oyster shells—including a cantilevering lawn roller in their midst—that filled the room with the smell of the harbour.

In the *body object series*, Hamilton photographed her body with a range of mundane objects replacing a key body part—a paddle, a door, a shoe. In *Untitled (body object series) #5-bushhead*, 1984–1993, Hamilton's head is replaced by a dense bush. Her hands and legs stand out for their fleshiness in this hybridised form. Though the bush is mute, silent, and un-body-like, somehow the image makes sense. The viewer is left to wonder about the implication. Should the image be taken at face value—as humourous, surreal or disturbing—or should we read into it questions about embodiment and sensation, and attempt to reason out the body's

new functionality? It is almost impossible to avoid the latter. Habit prompts us to imagine embodiment in even the most vaguely recognisable human images. We cannot help but wonder about the bush head's muted senses and imagine a scenario where the body moves using touch alone.

Another reframing trend in Hamilton's work is the use of one part of the body for an extraordinary or unusual purpose, or to replace another body part. The mouth has been an ongoing site for Hamilton's art. In the *untitled (aleph)* the fourth in a series of four videos from 1993, Hamilton is filmed struggling to talk with her mouth stuffed full of smooth marbles. In *malediction* her mouth is a workhorse, helping to produce dough imprints of its negative space for an entire month. *malediction* refers to local Soho history of immigrant labour and sweatshops, exploited workers and clothing manufacturing. Her mouth imprints—teeth marks and all—are carefully piled in a casket-shaped basket until it becomes full. In the background one hears an ongoing murmur of two Walt Whitman poems—“Song of Myself” and “The Body Electric”, from *Leaves of Grass*, poems that praise the body and speech, even as the artist, with her back to the gallery-goers, continues her repetitive work, her mouth otherwise engaged.

For her *Face to Face Series* Hamilton invented a pinhole camera for the mouth. She first used the device to photograph herself, aiming to take a picture of her face in that vulnerable moment where one is completely engaged, and the mouth hangs open unselfconsciously. She was also interested in a form of sensory substitution—in the idea of taking a picture at the orifice where speech emerges, thereby replacing speech with vision. What she did not realise, until the pictures were developed, was the extent to which the mouth aperture mimicked the perimeter of the eye, and how the image of herself would appear to be like the pupil with some hazy reflection in it. Not only was Hamilton seeing herself sensing, she was tasting herself sensing. She then turned the mouth camera onto friends, colleagues and landscapes. The photographs are mysterious and varied due to the changing aperture of her fleshy shutter lips and to the affects of the long exposure, which give the subjects a blurred or ghostly border.



Ann Hamilton, *body object series #17 • toothpick suit*, originally part of the installation (*suitably positioned*), 1984–2006. Photograph, 11x11cm. Image courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.





- 1 Ann Hamilton, *Untitled (body object series) #5-bushhead*, 1984-1993. Image courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.
- 2 Ann Hamilton, *the lids of unknown positions*, 1984. Installation tableau: two versions: live (two figures), duration of the tableau, approximately two hours, and static (without figures). Overall dimensions: 25x56x61cm. Materials: wall; mussel shells; lawn roller; lifeguard chair; ceiling hole; wood table; wood chair; pile of sand. Open House, Sculpture Department, Yale School of Art and Architecture, New Haven, Connecticut, Fall 1984. Photo Bob McMurty. Image courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.
- 3 Ann Hamilton, the artist exposing a pinhole image from a camera placed in her mouth, 2010. Image courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.
- 4 Ann Hamilton, *Face to Face* images, 2001. Image courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.







Olafur Eliasson, *The weather project*, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding, 2670x2230x5540cm. Installation view Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, 2003. Photo Olafur Eliasson. Image courtesy the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York © 2003 Olafur Eliasson.



Olafur Eliasson, *Green river*, 1998. Los Angeles, California, 1999. Uranin, water. Image courtesy the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. © 1998 Olafur Eliasson.

In her artist's statement Hamilton describes the conceptual core of her work:

In a time when successive generations of technology amplify human presence at distances far greater than the reach of the hand, what becomes the place and form of making at the scale and pace of the individual body? How does making participate in the recuperation and recognition of embodied knowledge? What are the places and forms for live, tactile, visceral, face-to-face experiences in a media saturated world?"<sup>14</sup>

Hamilton's work slaps us in the senses. That is what reframers do. They yank us out of passive perceiving; they yell at the senses and demand of us to smell when we expected to see. They challenge our assumptions about our own embodiment, skipping norms to cut to some alternative truth about sensation.

Reframers exist across multiple art practices, from the hand-made, to the machine driven, to networks, responsive and virtual environments. Some artists with cutting-edge practices—Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller and Hyungkoo Lee—find inspiration in non-nostalgic mechanical and object-oriented projects for the body. In a review of Olafur Eliasson's exhibition *Visionary Events*, Jonathan Crary wrote critically about our "passive and obedient acceptance of the idea that significant cognitive perceptual innovations will inevitably be within the wired terrain of cyberspace, computer graphics and communication systems".<sup>15</sup>

Perceptual innovations also emerge from originality and instinct. Two projects worth mentioning—Eliasson's *The weather project* installed at Tate Modern in 2003 and Christoph Büchel's

sensory-bending installation *Untitled* at Marracone Inc in 2002—defied installation norms and created provocative spaces that reframed the senses despite the enormity of the experience and the transparency of the mechanisms. Both of these artists inspired the writing of this book.

In *The weather project* installed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in London, Eliasson created an interior microclimate equipped with sun, mist and what became a tanning beach of sorts. Based on the evidence of 1,000s of museum goers lounging, sunbathing and congregating in the sun, it seemed easy to temporarily forget the artifice of the installation. But only for a second. Eliasson mounted a mirrored ceiling in the Turbine Hall to remind spectators that it was a conceptual event, that it was indeed taking place within an art institution, and that there would be moments for pure sensation and for seeing yourself sensing—self-reflexive ruminations on sensing. Daniel Birnbaum's description of Eliasson's *Beauty* installation holds true for *The weather project*: "There are no secrets, just a fascinating optical phenomenon to behold. Instead of being tempted to look for some veiled gadgetry, the viewer is thus confronted with the thing itself: the fact that light and water in combination produce colour."<sup>16</sup>

While many of the artists in this book engage perception at the scale of the body and local space, Eliasson's perceptual wake-up calls involve enormous landscapes, astonishing natural phenomena (often fabricated), scientific research and human interaction on the scale of whole cities, not merely gallery space. What better way to wake up an entire city than to dye its river green (*Green river*), if only for a few hours, or to erect a second