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of the
Sexy Shoe

Drug Chic
Fashion
Under the
Influence?

By Charles Gandee



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...he made you understand at ...
...but real desire to understand
...you were making fun of my ball getting ...
...think it was funny!" ...
...I didn't mean to make fun of you, Ken. I ...
...the ball getting run over ...
...Was that it?" ...
...It was ... my leg or something getting hurt ...
...something ... so important getting hurt ...
...nodded and hung his head ...
...Ken ...
...to him ... almost like ... part of him ...
...what I did, I just didn't think ...
...Vic ... "That's OK, I ...
...Vic ... "Of course ... I'll get you another ...
...all for the ... But ... felt that ...
...breeding ...
...happens ... I said ...
...he ...
...later he did ...
...episode ... "But," he said ...

230

...What a lot of things going wrong with ...
...red. "You let the ticket slip and the ... slip ...
...of your hand, so to speak. You have to keep ... hand ...
...on socking Brad. And spelling and writing ...
...all things you do with your hand. And you have to hurt it to ...
...the china. What on earth are you punishing it for?" ...
...you know what you mean," he gripped. "But I don't do much ...
...of that any more." ...
...since when?" ...

He tried to place it. The ... that I ... back to ...
...accidents ... to me that ...
...which he was complaining might be ... dating from ...
...them and carrying with them ... things much further ...
...back. The recent episode of the kick ball ...

As old tea leaves left in a tea cup color fresh water that is poured in, so can feelings that are left as residue color what comes in with fresh experience. So, no doubt, had Ken's feelings left from the accidents ... to color what had come to him since.

Vic had changed. By no greater security with Cathy. The pulse to hurt Ken was gone. But which Ken carried in him Vic's new fatherliness toward

231

PRESENCE OF MIND

By sewing hides, piling up clean shirts, coating walls with honey and smoke, unleashing snails, and penning up sheep, Ann Hamilton transforms big rooms into small worlds. Neville Wakefield examines the labor-intensive alchemy that has made her one of the most admired artists at work today. Portraits by Annie Leibovitz

Hamilton in Columbus, Ohio, where she now lives with her husband. OPPOSITE: In her latest installation, *tropos*, a person sitting at a metal table repeatedly burns out lines of text from the pages of a book with a special tool (detail, below). Horsehair covers the floor, muffling sounds made by a faint voice projected from the frosted-glass windows. The installation is on view at Dia Center for the Arts in New York City through June 19.



Standing in the doorway of the cavernous third floor of the Dia Center for the Arts building on New York's West Side, you linger on the threshold, experiencing a tremor of involuntary hesitation, aware of a dividing line that separates an enigmatic and compellingly private space from the outside world. In front of you lies a vast and uneven floor entirely lost beneath a deeply piled carpet of horsehair laid in thick, loose swathes of varying color and texture. The sheer quantity is overwhelming. It is a bizarre landscape harboring associations both human and animal, alive and dead. Irregularly patterned, as if by the swirls and eddies of a receding tide, this sea of hair is oceanic in its effect—both unsettling and luxuriant—inviting abandonment as well as deep-seated fear.

A faintly discernible smell of burning permeates the still air. From beyond the frosted windows come the intonations of a voice reciting something vaguely familiar but struggling as if with the very substance of language. Through the pillars that divide the massive space, you see a seated figure crouched over a simple metal table. Holding what appears to be a pen, she is immersed in the repetitions of an endless task. The atmosphere is sibylline—it is as if you have stumbled upon the archaic ritual of an unknown culture. Approaching the figure cautiously, negotiating the occasional matted tufts of hair, you detect the source of the smell. Line by line, a book is being singed out of existence with the aid of a small heated implement—language and text disappearing in a thin curl of smoke, leaving behind only the cloying acrid residue of burned paper and a delicate imprint of the erased text.

Richly evocative, the mass of hair suggests the presence of a vast collective body. At the same time, the soft voice and steadily obliterated text remind you of the frailty of language, the inadequacy of communication. The experience ends up being intensely private. Awakening sensations and memories normally dormant within the body, these strange elements combine to produce an effect that is powerfully disturbing. Leaving, you notice the occasional hair littering the otherwise pristine stairwell. Like ideas, they have surreptitiously crept out the door.

Tropos, the title of this, Ann Hamilton's latest piece, she tells me, is derived from the biological term *tropism*, used to describe an organism's internal response to external stimuli—such as a plant's growing toward the light. It is also suggestive of the way that we respond to the work. It involves a quiet persuasion not just of the eyes but of the entire body. Hamilton's strange installations recruit all of the senses to form a poetry of sensation—smells, textures, sounds, and associations that elude photographs and touch you only as you walk around within them. She describes the experience as akin to changes in barometric pressure—changes that you can feel without necessarily being able to describe.

Hamilton's oeuvre is by now famously bizarre. Her reputation has been steadily growing, and she has created more than a dozen major works in Europe, the United States, and South America. These extended and complex installations have included an examining table arranged with 16,000 freshly cleaned teeth, a copper mosaic made of 750,000 pennies, a floor covered with ten tons of outmoded cold-metal type, a huge cylindrical structure composed of tens of thousands of votive candles. Often these environments are watched over by a solitary figure performing a simple, repetitive task.

Sometimes an animal as well as a human presence is included: In Pittsburgh canaries flew through an old house while wax sculptures in the form of human heads melted, dripping down through the floors below; in San Francisco the gaze of the spectator was met by that of three sheep penned behind bars in a small enclosure at the rear of the room. A variety of natural substances, including honey, turkey carcasses, sheep fleece, beetles, wild grasses, pigskins, and moth larvae have all, one way or another, been given a sculptural role within these strange rooms. Sounds and smells are introduced: in Holland the dank earthiness of thousands of bulbs; in Santa Barbara, California, the medicinal scent of eucalyptus. Despite this vast and complex palette of materials, Hamilton claims that hers is a surprisingly straightforward ambition, simply "to slow you down enough for you to be able to pay attention differently."

Born in Lima, Ohio, Hamilton grew up in a stable and supportive family focused around a strong midwestern work ethic. After completing an MFA at Yale in 1985, she moved to the West Coast, where she took a full-time teaching post at the University of California at Santa Barbara. For the past two years she has led a frugal and peripatetic life, living off stipends from the museums and institutions that sponsor her work. A recipient last year of the prestigious and valuable MacArthur Award, she is now less reliant on grants and commissions. Recently married to a fellow artist, she hopes to be able to spend more time at their home in Columbus, Ohio, that they share with their much-loved basset hound, Chester.

Hamilton, a small woman of 37, emerges from behind an industrial-size sewing machine at the Dia space where she is preparing her installation. Hers is one of those rare, strangely ageless faces that appears to have found its form early on and then stuck to it. We settle into a quiet corner of the vast room, next to a mound of horsehair. She prefers to work as she talks, and the slow, practiced movements of her hands seem to dictate the tempo of the conversation. Her easygoing manner seems curiously at odds with the scale and ambition of the works themselves. But this attractive aura of diffidence belies a considerable resolve: an ability to enthuse and motivate helpers as well as cu-

Hamilton's 1988 sculpture, *still life*, on view at New York's Louver Gallery in 1992, is composed of a table holding 800 men's shirts that have been starched, ironed, folded, and then singed and gilded on the edges. The work was originally part of Home Show, an exhibition by a group of ten artists in private homes in Santa Barbara, California.







rators in projects that typically combine a daunting amount of work with little or no financial reward.

With the sole exception of *malediction*, an installation made for the now-defunct Louver Gallery in New York, all of Hamilton's work has taken place in noncommercial spaces. Less for ideological reasons than for the simple fact that the nature and scale of her work make it hard to market, her success is largely dependent upon the support and sponsorship of institutions. It is an unusual situation in which she looks to curators as much as to fellow artists to serve as her mentors: Mary Jane Jacob, Kathryn Clark, and Lynne Cooke have all been instrumental, assisting in the "enormous leap of faith" required to get these ambitious, messy, and time-consuming projects off the ground.

Asserting the experience of making art over the acquisition of the art object, Hamilton's installations have more in common with the environments, performances, and happenings of the sixties and seventies than with the art of the last decade. Visual antecedents can be found in the work of Jannis Kounellis and the Italian *arte povera* movement, which used such humble materials as bricks, timber, and building rubble. But it is Joseph Beuys, the spiritual forefather of so much contemporary art, who is felt most deeply. Not only does her work share with his a common material vocabulary—wax, copper, honey, and organic matter—but Hamilton has also inherited a conception of creativity no

longer confined to the traditional idea of discrete objects exhibited within a gallery space: the idea of sculpture as thought. Hamilton's other, more direct influences come from outside the art world. As Mary Jane Jacob, a longtime friend, tells me, Hamilton's work has "more to do with poetry, literature, psychology, and writing from other fields, thinking that she sees as parallel and that informs her work. Hers is not an art-about-art situation. I think that is why it has its distinction and power—because she is drawing from other resources that she funnels through herself and sees as a kind of totality of human existence."

Driven by an old-fashioned sense of industry, Hamilton's installations invariably involve considerable planning and huge expenditures of labor both on-site and off. Motivating small armies of volunteers, sometimes even requisitioning the help of her parents, she turns the creative process into a collective effort revolving around simple tasks and the opportunity to participate in extended conversation. With the possible exception of Christo, few contemporary artists produce work that is more labor-intensive. Because the work evolves organically, it is often hard to predict the amount of time and effort a single piece will require: "It's not that I am purposefully difficult or disorganized," she says, "it's just part of the chemistry." Reprieve often comes at the eleventh hour. At the Hayward Gallery in London, an installation was completed thanks to the fortuitous arrival of a college professor with a class of

►432

The artist in her
studio, and, OPPOSITE,
a study in texture.

presence of mind



PRESENCE OF MIND

(Continued from page 378)

30 art students in tow, all of whom set to wiring together the hundreds of pigskins that lined the space.

But the ability to pull off these feats of communal effort is due less to any particular administrative skill than to a sort of inclusiveness that she refers to as the "life within the project." Tapping into this energy is clearly one of her

many strengths. Genuinely modest, however, she plays down her role as motivational force and stresses instead the pleasures inherent in the projects themselves: "What I do know is that the activities of doing these things are very restorative and satisfying in a way that other kinds of activities aren't, and the way that the decisions get made within the work follow that. It doesn't happen in a way that everything is planned out and then you execute it. There are, like, these rhythms within it, and each one moves to the next decision, and so on, to the next decision."

Hamilton is an avid reader of social and anthropological histories, and often her installations address the specific conditions and the past of the places for which they are made. The centerpiece of *indigo blue*, made for the 1991 Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, was a huge pile of 47,000 blue work uniforms, folded and stacked on a low-slung platform. From the eaves above the main space, which had once served as an auto garage, came the musty odor of soybeans. Hung in individually woven bags from the wall of what had once been an overseer's office, they resembled a series of pendulous breasts, ripening in the heat and humidity—rotting, germinating, and often overflowing. Downstairs, seated in front of the mound of empty uniforms, a solitary figure (often Hamilton herself) methodically erased the text of an old history book, using her own saliva. The "action" seemed to speak of written history's tendency to ignore the labor movement with its oral traditions and anecdotal history.

But the power of the piece was more metaphoric than literal. Describing her intentions at the time, she said: "I wanted to make a piece that in some ways paid homage, honored, made you feel the presence of those bodies. And so the clothes are all laid out, a pair of pants and a shirt—they're all bodies, but they are empty, they're absent. And it's about the absence of their lives in the main story." Weaving a rich quilt of substance, memory, and association, *indigo blue* was both a paean to a lost agricultural past, during which South Carolina had produced the indigo used to dye military uniforms, and to blue-collar workers, a monument not just to the men who wore the shirts but to the women who pressed and laundered them—the productive economy of which they were a part.

Underpinning all of Hamilton's carefully ordered environments is an interest in natural systems and patterns of growth and accretion. But in the process of coaxing the work into an image of accumulation, nothing escapes the mark of the human hand. The tasks involved are often compulsive and repetitive, mimicking perhaps the Sisyphean nature of domestic labor—the ironing and pressing of hundreds of men's shirts; the coating of walls with pond algae, beeswax, or paprika; the sewing together of innumerable strands of

horsehair—the endless reiteration of a single action or object to produce an organic whole. But for all the preparatory labor that feeds into the creation of Hamilton's sumptuous surfaces, the experience remains fundamentally aesthetic. In these landscapes of color and texture, visual information and sensual pleasure can be found in a state of balance, held in a delicate equilibrium.

"If you have ever done weaving," she explains, "you realize that every part accumulates to make a bigger thing, and unconsciously, my things always maintain that kind of structure." As an undergraduate studying textile design at the University of Kansas, Hamilton developed not just an acute sense of the tactile and sensory qualities of cloth but also the sense of fabric as a second skin—a boundary layer between ourselves and the outside world. Her early work often literalized what she has termed this "articulation of the self at the boundaries of the body." For her first performance in New York in 1984, at Franklin Furnace, she wore a suit made of toothpicks, a prickly acknowledgment of the role of the skin and the surface of the body as the border between nature and personal awareness. The same concerns are present in a different guise in the later works. In a 1989 piece titled *privation and excesses*, made for the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, Hamilton converted the \$7,500 grant into pennies, laying them on the floor in a thin coating of honey to form a vast expanse of mosaicked copper. Here, as she put it, "the money becomes a substance, creating a skin on the existing architecture. Like skin and like money, they function simultaneously to protect, conceal, and reveal."

Sometimes the ambition of the work appears to be to put us back in touch with the kind of tactile experience that has been lost to technology. For a 1992 installation, *aleph*, at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, one entire wall was lined with stacks of outmoded and obsolete patent books, confronting the viewer with the blank wall of now-defunct technology. Embedded among the books were sawdust-stuffed wrestling dummies. A sheet-metal floor resounded with footsteps. At the far end of the room, a video loop showed pebbles being rolled around inside the artist's mouth. Closer by, a solitary figure sat at a table sanding the silver off the backs of mirrors and then piling the erased mirrors in two parallel stacks. The piece suggested a loss of sensation to the constantly shifting ground of technology. As Hamilton put it, "There you are in MIT, in this institution that is all about extending our presence in the world technologically, and that piece was about the irony of recognizing that what has accompanied that is an increasing self-consciousness. It becomes very difficult to experience yourself as other than an image. The act of erasing is to remove that and actually be able to see through it—so that the act of being present in a situation is not through one's own

reflection and projection."

But counterbalancing this tendency to describe the contemporary world in terms of loss, as well as Hamilton's own benign, sometimes Quakerly attitude toward natural systems and what might be termed an ecology of work, is a darker side that cuts through more romantic idealizations. The silent, catatonically withdrawn figures are suggestive not only of a lost paradise of direct communication and satisfying work but of the nostalgic futility of attempts to reclaim these activities for our times. Often the installations themselves seem to be stalked by the immanence of their own decay. In *palimpsest*, a 1989 installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, Hamilton, in collaboration with Kathryn Clark, addressed this aspect of her work head-on. Pinned to the walls and ceiling were innumerable small squares of paper covered with written reminiscences of the past and personal histories. Underfoot, more of the same sort of paper histories lay embedded in beeswax, forming a sarcophagus-like space, literally enclosed by the past. Inside a steel-and-glass vitrine in the middle of the room, two cabbages, suggesting oversize brains, were being steadily dismembered by a proliferating population of snails. Fluttering in the draft of a small fan, the intimate yet anonymous recollections seemed to have fallen into the strange gap that exists between language and understanding, resemblances and identity.

Talking to Hamilton during the final preparations for the Dia installation, I was once again made aware of the importance of patience in both the assembly and the appreciation of her work. Unlike many of her contemporaries who force upon their audiences dissertations on every kind of social malaise, Hamilton refuses to publish her program and pass it out at the door. Instead, she makes it present physically. The work is a kind of gentle meditation on the frailty of the balances that sustain natural life, the incomprehension caused by the breakdown of language and the decline of once-productive economies. Yet, if the meanings are tantalizingly elusive, the pieces themselves are always compelling and powerful.

Undoubtedly, Hamilton has raised the stakes in the practice of installation art. Dave Hickey, the author of one of the essays in the Dia catalog, sees it as the "triumph of the art over the space." It is a triumph as literal as it is metaphoric: Smells and sounds drift through the building; hairs creep out of the confines of the space. Hamilton's art has never rested easily in the places for which it has been made, and the more it is contained, the more it overflows. It is this uneasiness, manifest in all the gestures aimed at diffusing the space—the smoking of the walls, the releasing of the birds, the pouring on the floor of tons of concrete—that endows the work with its true strength. "Ann," says Hickey, "is such a lovely person that people tend to soft-pedal the basic ag-

PRESENCE OF MIND

(Continued from page 433)

gression of the work."

Considering Hamilton to be distinct from the current generation of installation artists, whom he compares to a band of roving fresco painters producing art specifically for the museum or market, Hickey sees her work as stretching the very limits of possibility in an innovative art form that has already fallen prey to orthodoxy. For all their extraordinary beauty, Hamilton's installations, in the end, perhaps have as much to do with the breaking down of what has become something of a standardized practice as with the reenchantment of art. In any case, he points out, it's a hard act to follow: "I am beginning to believe that she represents the culmination of a culture of installation art, the end of something, the absolute confrontation of artistic practice with its institutionalized environment. As George Bernard Shaw observed regarding Wagner, if everybody likes something and says it's the next big thing, it's probably not the next big thing but the end of the last big thing."

It was only after I had returned several times that Dia curator Lynne Cooke revealed to me one inspiration behind Hamilton's latest installation. It all started two years ago in Vienna, where she and Hamilton were involved with a traveling exhibition. With two days to kill, they took a trip to Kraków. The small hotel where they stayed overlooked one of the many churches for which the city is renowned. The congregation that was gathered outside seemed unnaturally jubilant, their gestures forming an elaborate but incomprehensible pantomime. Only after observing this scene for quite some time did it dawn on them that the entire congregation was deaf and their communication was taking place in sign language. It was this indelible memory that was finally given form at Dia.

With this knowledge, I become more acutely aware of the insulating qualities of the horsehair that muffles sound, the faltering voice, and the burning erasure of the text. Treading through the huge space, you feel forced to participate in some uncomfortable drama taking place beneath the surface. But for all the loading of associations, histories, and layers of meaning, *tropos*, like all Ann Hamilton's work, is never reducible to these things. Rather than coldly analyzed, it is best appreciated through its beauty, its sensual use of material, and the comforting presence of the human hand. In the end it is this human investment, this whole huge enterprise of art-making, that, in Mary Jane Jacob's words, "in a metaphysical way lends energy and meaning to the work. In some alchemical sense these materials are transformed from being horsehair or teeth or whatever they are on a more mundane level into the sort of magical art that her work is."

And it is hard not to agree with Hamilton's