

Acknowledgments

The realization of a project of this scale is larger than any single effort. It is a process that relies on the commitment and participation of many individuals. Although it is not something you can point to and name, for me, the felt presence that informs this work grows out of the generosity of all who helped. I would like to acknowledge and thank for their support the core community that made this project.

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Selected Bibliography

ann hamilton. La Jolla: San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991. Text by Susan Stewart.

Ann Hamilton. Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1992. Texts by Chris Bruce, Rebecca Solnit, Buzz Spector.

Doubletake: Collective Memory & Current Art. Zürich: Parkett in association with The South Bank Centre, 1992. Texts by Lynne Cooke, Bice Curiger and Greg Hilty.

Ann Hamilton was born in Lima, Ohio, on June 22, 1956. She earned a B.F.A. in textile design at the University of Kansas, and an M.F.A. in sculpture at Yale School of Art. Since graduating in 1985, she has made numerous installations in North America and Europe. In 1993 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship.

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A catalogue documenting the installation is forthcoming.

Susan Stewart, Professor of English at Temple University, will give a lecture on *tropos* on Thursday, February 10, 1994 at 6:30pm.

El Jardín Salvaje: The Savage Garden: Landscape as Metaphor in Recent American Installations. Madrid: Fundacion Caja de Pensiones, 1991. Text by Dan Cameron.

Pagel, David. "Still Life: The Tableaux of Ann Hamilton." *Arts Magazine* (May 1990), 56-61.

Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival, New York: Rizzoli in association with the Spoleto Festival, Charleston, 1991. Text by Mary Jane Jacob.

tropos, 1993

Photo: Thibault Jeanson

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ANN HAMILTON

tropos, 1993

"You have to trust the things you can't name," Ann Hamilton contends, adding, in a related thought, "you feel through your body, you take in the world through your skin."¹ Experience, for Hamilton, leads to knowledge, or, more precisely, to a form of knowledge which is of far greater value and significance than mere codified information. Such knowledge comes as much through the body and the senses as through the mind. Consequently, she views verbal language as a deeply limited or flawed vehicle for communication since, with the exception of certain forms of poetry, it remains at best an abstraction, at odds with the immediate affectivity of sensate, visceral experience.

Over the past decade, Hamilton has made numerous installations. Complexly structured environments they provoke both strong somatic responses and wide-ranging metaphorical associations that, together, weave a nexus of layered, nondiscursive meanings. Recognition and recollection—that is, a kind of understanding based in memory and past experience that bypasses or even precedes intellection—are the principal tools for apprehending these works. *tropos*, Hamilton's title for the Dia installation, relates to the concept of tropism, which may be defined as a natural inborn inclination, an innate tendency to react in a definite manner towards stimuli, exemplified in the behavior of plants when they bend towards the source of light. It is, however, perhaps equally appropriate to recall Nathalie Sarraute's adoption of this term for her celebrated book of the same name in which she charts "interior movements that precede and prepare our words and actions, at the limits of our consciousness."²

In *tropos*, as in many of her previous works, Hamilton binds the site into a unity by affirming the continuity of the skin enclosing the structure. The fabric of this building is clearly revealed yet subtle changes have been made to its surfaces. The window panes have been modified by the substitution of translucent for transparent glass, and the concrete floor gently, if irregularly, graded. Light as well as sound still penetrates the membrane of the building, though the outer world is no longer revealed to sight. Woven into the contingent noises from the exterior is an intermittent and barely audible recording of a voice attempting to speak. Although these articulations are virtually unintelligible, a certain level of communication and, above all, traces of the desire to communicate, are nonetheless discernible. Entering *tropos*, the viewer traverses a floor covered with a vast pelt of animal hair. Stitched together in slowly undulating, often interrupted, swirls this epic "hide" starts to resemble an endlessly surging ground, an oceanic topography. Floating on its swelling eddies is a small metal table and stool where a seated figure meticulously erases the text of an old book. In singeing the printed letters, he or she causes coils of smoke, languorous

silhouettes in the muted light, to waft upwards then slowly dissolve.

Recourse to language to describe what is there inevitably and necessarily falls short: the somatic, carnal impact being far richer than can be intimated verbally. Moreover, the work is structured so that each component is meaningful in its relationship to all the other elements and to the context at large, and not as an individual entity. In addition, the presence of a person, an attendant rather than a performer, makes the spectators both witnesses to an experience and participants themselves. The stress on the present moment that ensues is set against an awareness of the passage of time, evidenced most immediately in the changes in the light over the course of the day and, more distantly, in the gradually evolving character of the exhibition during the year it will be on view.

Sensing through the feet, so central to this work, means knowing where your feet are, which in turn implies being well grounded. That this seductively luxurious floor-covering is the product of substantial amounts of hand labor, and of laboring together, is central to Hamilton's practice and philosophy. "There's a kind of conversation and a kind of community that develops out of that [mode of working]," Hamilton believes, plus "a satisfaction in touching things."³ Through such manual labor a bonding takes place, a feeling of collectivity that derives from the "mass" production of a material artifact but which continues to resonate at the level of shared memories of mutual endeavor. Like nurturing, tending requires an engaged attentiveness that is both physical as well as mental in character. By means of such tending the viewer is brought back into contact with raw material, and, more particularly, with organic matter. For Hamilton, loss of contact with the living world, and more particularly, the dearth of unmediated experiences with the natural, is a major source of many contemporary ills, psychological and social, ecological and environmental. In *Real Presences*, George Steiner argues that a root-impulse of the human spirit is to explore possibilities of meaning and of truth that lie outside empirical seizure or proof. There are values and energies in the human person—"and *per-sonare* means, precisely, a 'sounding,' a 'saying through,'" he notes—which cannot be revealed with analytical and empirical tools.⁴ Hamilton's installations provide access to such intimations, intimations which if inimical to reason are nonetheless instinctual to humanity.

Notes

1. Ann Hamilton interviewed by the author on September 30, 1993, unpublished.
2. Quoted in Jason Weiss and Shusha Guppy, "The Art of Fiction CXV: Nathalie Sarraute," *The Paris Review*, no. 114 (Spring 1990), p. 154.
3. Quoted in Rebecca Solnit, "On Being Grounded," *Artweek* (April 5, 1990), 20.
4. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 226.