

# A NECESSARY VIOLENCE: DECONSTRUCTING ANN HAMILTON'S

## *TROPOS*

By Susan Brandoli

Installation art is not permanent; it is an act of art - an event that takes place over a certain amount of time and is conceived of only for a specific location. Of an installation, of the event itself, one can say that it consists of a series of signs, endlessly shifting in relation to each other, to themselves and to the viewer. The work *tropos* by installation artist Ann Hamilton focuses most notably on instances of repetition, what the artist sometimes calls the “accretion of small gestures” (qtd. in Hickey 129), and from this we can discern ideas that constitute notions of presence and absence. In order to investigate these ideas within Hamilton’s work, we can use as a starting point the strategies of deconstruction, drawn from the writings of Marx, Freud and Derrida, to begin to unravel the many varied parts of the whole.

Hamilton’s installation *tropos* at the Dia Centre for the Arts in New York spanned from October 1993 to June 1994. Seven thousand square feet of horsehair shearings imported from China and bundled together cover the floor. As in many of her installation works, Hamilton places an attendant within. The gender of the attendant changes from day to day. The attendant sits at a metal desk immersed in a repetitive activity, in this case the act of burning away all of the text from the book in front of him or her, letter by letter, line by line, page by page, chapter by chapter. Exterior light filters through the tall, translucent windows, catching the resulting haze of acrid smoke. Interspersed with the distant, everyday sounds of traffic and human activity outside beyond the windows, a

muffled, disembodied voice struggles to read text from a book. The taped recording of the voice is activated by motion sensors as the viewer moves about the room, stopping and starting again and shifting from speaker to speaker.

The word *tropos* is derived from the Greek, meaning “turn” or “change.” From *tropos* comes the English word *trope*, which can refer to the bending or movement of a plant or animal toward or away from external stimulus, like light, heat or gravity. In Hamilton’s *tropos*, one is immediately drawn across the dim room toward the light, toward the muffled speech, and toward the activity of the attendant, located in one section of the vast industrial space.

On a purely visceral level, one first encounters the bundles of horsehair, which evoke the early horsehair industry in New York, where the building is located. The industry has shifted overseas in recent years to access cheaper labour and possibly more lax animal husbandry practices. Although a symbol of the historical industry in New York, it is in fact a fiction, removed from the original context, yet signifying it.

We are confronted with principles of substitution, synecdoche, and fetishism throughout the work. The horsehair, still used in the production of human wigs, maintains its associations with both animal and human. Freud once commented that we do not like anything that reminds us of our animal origins (Warner 97). We are both drawn to and repelled by the hair, disturbing because of its human resemblance, linking the slaughter of horses to ethical questions of the treatment of animals, and blurring the lines between the human-animal divide (Medoro and Calder 42). It is both anonymous and personal at the same time. Severed from its origins, it exists in its alterity.

In the physical presence of the horsehair we are presented with the binary opposition of nature and culture, and reminded of pre-industrial economies of livestock and agriculture, where human work and living nature overlap (Hickey 121). It is a nature modified by human culture, questioning our human role in the laws of supply and demand that have necessitated the industry. We are isolated from the means of production and ignore larger issues of responsibility for the process and end result.

Marx compares the division of labour to the separation of commercial from agricultural, town from country and the conflicts between them (Marx 654). The rift between town and country can also be extrapolated to differences between nations at different stages of development, such as China and the United States. By deliberately placing the horsehair within the framework of the industrial building, and by the sheer amount of hair presented, Hamilton lifts it from the context of individual subsistence (animal farming) to also address the larger issues of animal-based industry on a mass scale within commodity culture.

Marx denied the existence of the spirit, believing that life consists of merely physical or material processes of which consciousness is a result. Our current society views the horse mainly as a means of leisure or sporting activity. We are conscious of the inherent rift between animal and human because we are removed as a society from daily contact with the horse as hide, food, or glue, and producing instead perhaps synthetic fibres for false hair production. Now, from a distance of both time and place, we revisit the horror inherent in the sacrifice of so many creatures for the sake of human aesthetics. These material forces form our consciousness, and thus our perceptions.

Contradictions and ambiguity are hallmarks of Hamilton's works. Hamilton juxtaposes the mass-produced aspects of the horsehair with the singular, isolated, repetitive movements of the attendant. She situates the act of burning texts by this lone attendant within the realm of handcrafting or what has been traditionally considered "women's work," akin to weaving or knitting, especially when taken in the context of Hamilton's other works. Yet, within these singular acts Hamilton presents us with a contradictory activity also reminiscent of a production-line. What is the purpose of these repetitive acts? Particularly within *tropos*, there appears to be a darker purpose than that of the creative tasks of knitting or weaving, although when using these forms of tasks in her other works the objects produced serve no real apparent purpose. Is this a soul-less act, one without spirit, as Marx would perhaps claim? The acts have a trace of the production line about them, a kind of puritan commitment to labour. However, Hamilton isolates movement for its own sake. It is the act in itself that contains meaning, the "accretion of gesture" once again. This is an originary gesture. Each repetition is a presence in and of itself, yet never quite the same – a beginning and an ending, both the first and last time. A trace.

Freud speaks of a recurrence of the same situation, things and events, which, when combined with certain conditions, awaken a feeling of the uncanny, recalling the sense of helplessness felt in dreams (427). These endless repetitions raise questions about their ultimate purpose or intent. The reality behind the uncanny is not something new and foreign, but something old and familiar – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. Freud reverts to Scheller's definition of "the uncanny

as something which ought to have been concealed but which nevertheless has come to light” (429). What is revealed within the parameters of this dim room?

On the edge of a sea of horsehair, on the threshold of a transformed space, we are poised at a place of transition, a space different from the one we are leaving behind. Derrida’s demarcation of boundaries, his erasure of borders and limits are in full play here. Derrida writes of the *subjectile* in art, the material support on which a work of art is made. Julian Wolfreys describes this as “a becoming between, at once a support and a surface. The term marks and remarks a certain crossing and recrossing of borders, instituting the very borders it crosses, while having no consistency apart from that of the between” (85). The architecture of the room acts as the *subjectile* in *tropos*; it both contains (frames) and informs, while in itself it is untranslatable, an alterity that supports meaning but is never part of what is represented. Wolfreys writes: “Any representation is only ever possible through such support, and through the violence of appearance and penetration, the weaving motion that is figured through the motif of writing” (86).

The history of the industry and the building is written in the horsehair, intertwined with that of human activity. Is this a sanctuary? The word “sanctuary” itself denotes an inside/outside dichotomy. We leave the outside world behind, yet traces of it remain in the muffled street noises distantly heard through the panes of glass. Without the outside, this interior space would not exist; interior is defined in relation to exterior. Is this a holy space? Certainly, it is an uncanny one. Using a mythological analogy, the human-animal hybrid of the centaur is also evoked. We acknowledge that there is a narrative unfolding before us, but it is unclear precisely what form it will take. Perhaps this is an “arche-

writing”? Derrida uses this term to refer to an original, non-phonetic form of writing not derived from speech.

Where is the centre located within these myriad signs? Is there one? Derrida states that “history and knowledge. . . have always been determined . . . as detours for the purpose of the reappropriation of presence” (307). In the text of the horsehair we sense a shift in our perception, a questioning of history and boundaries. Deconstruction decentres the transcendental subject, the *logos*. In a logocentric view, if speech is the original signifier of meaning, the written word is derived from the spoken word and therefore a representation of the spoken word. If language originates as a process of thought that produces speech, then speech produces writing. Deconstruction, on the other hand, reverses hierarchal oppositions by producing an exchange of properties and displacements.

Meaning is always in motion or transit, and is made possible by differentially linking signifying elements (Macey 93). Derrida also uses the word *trait* when referring specifically to art, synonymous with the term *trace*, and writing. The trait is a mark, transmissible and available to reading, subservient to representation and ontology. Wolfreys says that “the appearance of *trait*, is therefore always a *retrait*. Never appearing for a first time simply, any *trait* always implies repetition” (87). The trait marks a passage *between*, a process of doubling.

Hamilton challenges metaphysical, logocentric ideals through repetition, distortion and erasure, subverting language, speech and writing, and inverting or erasing meaning. In *tropos*, the spoken text in the room is the voice of comic actor Thom Churley, who has suffered a stroke that has left him with aphasia – the loss of functional

speech. He reads from the text of Illich and Sanders' treatise on literacy, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, and also from T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," the first section of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which is a poetic meditation on time and memory.

Churley presents us with a broken, disjointed version of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*. We would most likely not be able to isolate or recognize any particular passage of text in what we are hearing. We are not allowed to access the "Word." If speech is indeed closer to truth and presence than the written word as postulated in metaphysical theories, then we are set adrift on a sea of horsehair to wade through sounds that have no fixed meaning, that stop and start without warning or reason, expressing incomplete thoughts and unresolved ideas. Here, in this instance, the written word holds meaning over speech. The speech is unintelligible. Hamilton reverses and challenges, as might Derrida, the pre-conceived hierarchies of language, of speech over the written word. Churley invents his own speech, and his own "interpretation" of the written language. Lakoff and Johnson suggest this is an "Experiential Realism" (Honeck 280). Essentially, this theory states that the meaning of parts cannot be changed without changing the meaning of the whole. Churley's erratic and disjointed reading of the texts constitutes a breach of meaning that no longer reflects the meaning of the whole (Johnson and Henley 6).

The de-construction of all the significations in the text that is being read aloud in the work *tropos* particularly targets the signification of truth. The original link to the written word has been broken. Writing in particular, more than any other form of signification, has been associated with the loss of presence and with untruth. In *tropos* Hamilton manipulates written texts through erasure, as well as through variances of

speech and pronunciations in the taped audio recordings, thus questioning ordinary concepts, meaning and hierarchies.

What, then, to make of the act of burning the texts in Hamilton's *tropos*? The significance lies in the passage of the written text into the burned handwriting, into traces of smoke. None of the books have chapter or title headings, so that no specific significance can be given to the viewer who may be reading over the shoulder of the attendant. Each attendant also touches and therefore burns the text in a different way, thus producing a distinct "handwriting" all their own, superimposed over the disappearing text. In this way the attendant becomes the writer or author of the particular text they are erasing, creating a kind of palimpsest by cancelling out the written text.

Through erasure, disruption and repetition, Hamilton subordinates both speech and the written word in *tropos*, upsetting the hierarchies of language, and reversing existing oppositions. Derrida writes: "The idea of the book ... is profoundly alien to the meaning of writing. It is the encyclopaedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing ... If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book ... denudes the surface of the text. That necessary violence responds to a violence that was no less necessary" (313). It is the passage of one into the other, of speech into writing and writing into speech, that is important.

Is what we are witnessing a form of censorship? Repression? An annihilation, perhaps, of the logos and all of its implicit metaphysical qualities? Is it simply a rewriting of the existing text? Does it add to the text through the supplement of the handwriting produced by the burning tool, as posited earlier, similar to a palimpsest? The words are of no particular significance to the viewer, only to the attendant/reader (and even this is



questionable), who carefully annihilates all traces of what they signify, transforming the written words into transient *traits* of smoke that fill the room, superimposing the attendant/reader's own burnt writing (*trait*). Like the sounds in speech, the text is transformed into wafts of smoke that linger in the air until they dissipate into nothingness: the smoke as a trace of language. We smell the burnt ink and paper suspended in the air. The repetitive gesture is an act of "writing in reverse, unreading the book, beyond erasure, language's incineration" (Lunberry 120). If the text is a sign of the *logos*, then the erasure of text is an erasure of the *logos* (sign).

The attendant, engaged in the task of burning text, refuses engagement by the viewer. He or she is the performer, part of a giant tableau, repeating these gestures in a kind of rehearsal for a performance. The disembodied voice of the recorded audio tape is also placed in a performative position. Although never actually present in the room, its human origin is represented by the sound of the voice. Yet, like the attendant, we are also unable to ever engage with it in a meaningful manner, except to trigger the motion sensors that start and stop the recordings. And what of the viewer? Here the idea of theatre breaks down. As one enters the room one is, in fact, crossing the stage, breaking the boundary between stage and audience. One becomes, at the same time, both audience and performer. Contradictions abound throughout the work

The binary oppositions found in *tropos*, such as that of inside/outside, absence/presence, human/animal, for example, are concealed or repressed within *différance* or supplements. By deconstructing the overall text, or artwork/installation, through these oppositions, we can uncover the contradictory and sometimes confusing logistics hidden within it. Between sanctuary/interiority and exteriority lies the boundary

that forever doubles itself. One cannot exist without the other. Derrida calls this border *parergon*. He describes it as a *passe-partout*, both a master-key and also a frame composed of two sheets of transparent material mounted back to back: “a double border (...) and transparent. It is therefore a condition of possibility for both the visible and the invisible” (Wolfreys 89). These borders are in continual motion. In *tropos*, we are handed a *passe-partout*, presented with a *parergon*. We must make of it what we can.

Bruce Ferguson writes that when the non-linguistic is expressed as art, it resists language for as long as possible (111). Hamilton creates uncanny spaces that exist on the threshold of language. Through ritual and repetition, she places language under erasure, situating it forever on the border of understanding. These borders are eternally a doubling: a boundary where overlapping signs reflect both inside and outside, presence and absence. The violence of deconstruction is in turn buffered by these shifting boundaries – the liminal space in between – that both reflects and dissolves binary oppositions and dualisms.

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