

Ann Hamilton

Present-Past 1984-1997

SKIRA

The Peacock Woman

Jean-Pierre Criqui

La scène est le foyer évident des plaisirs pris en commun, aussi et tout bien réfléchi, la majestueuse ouverture sur le mystère dont on est au monde pour envisager la grandeur, cela même que le citoyen, qui en aura idée, fonde le droit de réclamer à un État, comme compensation de l'amointrissement social.

Mallarmé, *Crayonné au théâtre*¹

In a text as brilliant as it is unsettling, Jean Genet suggested that funerary practices and theatrical performances be brought together physically on the same site: "We shall ask the town planners of the future to make room for a cemetery in the town itself where we shall continue to inter the dead, or to plan some disquieting columbarium of simple but striking design. And there, just close by, basically in its shadow or among the graves, is where the theater is to be built. Do I make my point plain? The theater is to be as close as possible, truly within the empowering reach of the place which keeps the dead or of the only monument that digests them."²

It is hardly surprising then, bearing in mind this covert connivance between drama and our homage to the deceased, that today's museum should at times find itself turned into a stage. When an artist like Ann Hamilton introduces an overtly theatrical element to the space and time span specific to the exhibition of works habitually known as "plastic" through certain of her installations (but perhaps it would be more appropriate to use the term "play" in all the senses of the word), it is primarily the age-old—and inevitably derogatory—comparison between museum and cemetery that

is presented in a new light. For, far from breaking with the commemorative function attached to the museum—and the contemporary art museum is of course no exception, for all that it focuses on the output of still living artists, it has inherited a given typology and a tradition—, Ann Hamilton's stand is on the contrary a commentary on and a transformation of those aspects that make every museum-like institution to a greater or lesser extent reminiscent of "ancestor worship" or of "monuments to the great and worthy dead." It comments on a ritualistic dimension that is made explicit by repetition within the work. It transforms the unchangingness of appearances by using live actors whose presence and acting are not limited to set pieces but overlap, at least from the visitors' viewpoint, with the time frame of the objects generally disposed there.

Take (mattering), created specifically for the exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain in Lyon where it takes up the largest room. The spectator, forced at times to duck to avoid being caught up in the folds of the immense canopy of orange-colored silk that billows in waves above his head and casts a russet light on the ground, is struck first by the fact that he or she has entered the home of five peacocks that strut around the walls as they move from perch to feed bowl. Discretely placed loudspeakers play a recording of what sounds like the exercises used by singers to get their voices in trim. Then there is a wooden pole rising up through a circular opening in the awning. Moving forward, you sight a person seated at the top of this mast, busy wrapping around one hand a ribbon of blue ink, like those used on old typewriters, that he pulls up through a hole in the ground (hence the reel you have seen or will be seeing in one of the rooms downstairs with the line of ribbon rising up and through the ceiling). Once his hand is completely swaddled, the sitter snaps off the ribbon and tugs off the bundle which falls to the ground. Only to begin all over again.

Everything contrives to bring to within the museum walls the echo of a state originating in theater: the metamorphosis of the architecture, transformed into a wind-buffed tent—tent being the original meaning of the Greek *skênê*; the animal presence, a reminder of the link between the birth of tragedy and sacrificial offerings; the use of music and especially of song that Aristotle considered a constituent part of tragedy; an actor in whom are entwined the themes of proximity and

distance. And one could continue citing other features almost endlessly: the remnants of a harking back to prophecy (the little bundles of inking ribbon tossed at our feet like so many enigmatic oracles), a taste for machines and machinery (the motorized device that moves the sky of cloth)... So much so that it is difficult not to see in all this a kind of manifesto that runs counter to the "neo-laocoonian" leanings of modern aesthetics and reverts to the ideal of a rapprochement and cooperation between the arts that Nietzsche advocated at the time of writing *The Birth of Tragedy*—indicating in passing the kinship, no matter how adulterated or diluted, with the cult of the gods: "Sadly we are used to enjoying each art form in isolation, as exemplified in its most glaring folly in art galleries and what are known as concerts. This sorry modern aberration of arts in isolation lacks any order capable of nurturing and developing arts as a complete art form. The great Italian *trionfi* were perhaps the last manifestations of this type and in the present the musical drama of ancient times has but a pale analogon in the reunion of arts brought about by the rites of the Catholic Church³." Working as a "symbolic dream-image,"⁴ (*matterring*), through theater, organizes the instance of representation's return to the museum. This is an instance of a completely different order to mere reproduction. It affects the place of its occurrence, but also equally its visitors.⁵ For what happens to the spectator thus incorporated into the work? Does he or she take on the role of character or actor, does he or she figure together with the other spectators, with the peacocks and the person perched high above the swell, in this half-metred, half-improvised performance? And above all, what is there to see, what should we be looking out for in this center-less, fluctuating representation, devoid of a focal point to capture attention? What really matters (cf the title of the piece)? The experience dramatized by Ann Hamilton, more than any other, is probably that of acceding to or winning back access to speech, in short, an experience of the limits of language. No sooner do I walk onto the stage of (*matterring*) than I am caught up in the work's fiction. I am no longer mere audience nor am I yet fully a *dramatis persona*: it is up to me to invent my own text if I want to act as a speaking being, and in so doing one is struck by how much it matters to appeal directly to those who share one's situation. Meaning that it suddenly seems hard, inconceivable even, not to address oneself to the

other players involved in this chance cast. From which we see the necessity of the word that forms in a way the inlay of *matter* for such a setting, akin to the words unprinted by the ribbon that leaves its mark only on the skin of the actor handling it (the room below from which the ribbon emerges houses two circular, motorized bearing curtains proudly parading inwards upon themselves, somewhat hysterical figures of indifference and self-containment). Elsewhere in the exhibition one comes across books whose substance has been burnt out line by line, or obscured by little pebbles stuck directly onto the page, or else cut up into strips and wound into indecipherable balls of paper—long strings of sentences like the one which the artist, or rather her shadow, constantly unravels from her mouth in one of the projections of (*salic*). Without exhausting this register, mention should also be made of (*aleph*), a video shown on a minute screen set into the wall. It shows a close-up shot of an open mouth (Ann Hamilton's) full of marbles that make a mumbling sound as they bump against each other. The parable—from parabola that also has the meaning of discourse—, whether an inchoative stage of language or oratory gymnastics, works just as well: “Only speech brings us into contact with dumb things. Nature and animals are always already prisoners of a language, they speak and answer signs ceaselessly, even in their silence; man alone manages, in speech, to interrupt the infinite language of nature and to confront for a while dumb things. The unformulated rose, the idea of the rose exists for man only.”⁶

And what of the spectator postulated by (*mattering*)?

My hypothesis is that the work stages precisely the latter's appearance as the author of a commentary. From the start it looks like a scattered puzzle, perhaps without even a master image to be recreated, but it soon transpires that in this instance we are not on the outside of an arrangement that we are supposed to recompose or the sense of which we are to divine from a confined set of given elements. In fact, we are the missing piece in the puzzle and the puzzle begins to fall into place, to come together as soon as we have grasped that self-evident fact. What ensues is a two-fold movement: encompassed in the figurative mesh imagined by the artist, working from this *in vivo* figuration, we set in motion the concatenation of its meanings; in return, in a veritable operation of maieutics it is the work itself that bestows upon

us the full status of spectator, of discourse-emitting subject accounting for both the appearances laid out before him or her and his or her situation therein. Hence, the image of breath and its life-giving properties, materialized in the form of the rocking and swelling of the sail-like canopy does indeed fit in well with the way words are breathed to us here.

(*matter*) is an *anemophilic* work, akin to those plants whose flowers open up for their pollen to be borne away by the wind. This involvement of the spectator, summarily commandeered, requisitioned to participate actively in the elaboration of what is displayed, brings to mind not only a kind of open theater in which the boundaries between the audience and the play are blurred,⁷ but also various contemporary artists such as Bruce Nauman or Dan Graham whose endeavors have often consisted in establishing a mutual activation between the work and its “occupier” (the word “viewer” with its connotation of mere contemplation being of course inadequate for what is involved). The historical—and pictorial—model for such arrangements is to be found in those celebrated pictures based on an explicit challenge to the viewer and his own space, a taking possession of the world, the effect of which goes well beyond the realm of imitation. It is thus that *Las Meninas*, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* function, remaining embedded in the mind of each of us as outstanding moments of experience. The *Madonna del Parto*, the fresco, or rather what is left of it, painted by Piero della Francesca at Monterchi, close to his home town, entertains a reflexive understanding of the subject whose repercussions are probably of even greater magnitude. In a book devoted entirely to this magnificent ruin, Hubert Damisch, following in the steps of Freud and his study of Leonardo da Vinci, contends that Piero’s work allows a reversal of the terms of the interpretive task: “In fact, it is as though, in a shift similar to that imposed on the contrivance of perspective, the fiction implies that the work manages, if not to take on the function of the analyst, at least to occupy his place, the spectator (maybe a devotee) being expected to accomplish on his own behalf the labor of work that acquires its justification only when the construction at some point rings true, the effect being commensurate with the artifice from which it proceeds. At some point, meaning the right point: in the unconscious, each of us playing his own part on the stage, as is the case in analysis. In this instance, Freud’s contribution is the supposedly paradoxical

idea of a *two-fold stage* seen in both cases as underpinning analysis.⁷⁸ Reversal, parallel stages or the upsetting of the usual order of things: the turn of phrase—the *trope*—to quote a term often used in her titles—occurs frequently in Ann Hamilton's work. Over and beyond the ensuing sense of disorientation is the sense of a process at work within the work itself that takes shape, takes on a presence that echoes our own. This can be seen in, for instance, (*reserve*), the reduced dimensions of which in no way make it any easier to apprehend. It consists of an old-fashioned school desk, clearly well-used. The middle of the desk is covered with a rectangle of beige cloth beneath which luminous shapes seem to be moving. The fabric can be lifted up, like the pushing aside of a curtain, to reveal below a screen set into the wood. The screen shows us the scene of a hand drawing loops on a glass plate with a stylus (subsequently, the film more or less doubles back on itself, to show the same hand, making exactly the same movements in reverse, erasing what it had initially set out). The image is bathed in a bluish light, the criss-crossing lines are of a dazzling snowy white. The cutting noise on the glass is all there is by way of background sound. Because of the way it has been filmed (reminiscent of Hans Namuth's documentary on Pollock), it is as though the spectator were looking up from beneath the inscribed surface, although, standing in front of the desk, he or she also looks down upon the screen with which this surface is identified. The downward gaze (us looking down) and the upward view (of the camera) coincide, creating a symmetry on both sides of the plane and of the stage on which the writing is played out. Few works can have summoned up so powerfully and with such economy of means the impression of an extending outwards to the spectator's side. It is interesting to note that Ann Hamilton proposes a similar experience in a piece quite different in appearance. I am referring to the striking 22-meter long and 5-meter high wall that makes up one of the two halves of (*bounden*) and which the artist also designed specifically for her Lyon exhibition (the other half consisting of nine vast gauze curtains embroidered with a never-ending, barely decipherable text). Confronted with this expanse of white one can easily miss things. But a closer look will detect a slight sheen on the surface or a wetness where the wall meets the ground. Reason enough to pursue matters and discover that the wall is covered from end to end with

hundreds of minute openings with a water droplet bubbling from each. Here too, this trace of an activity from beyond the flat surface has the effect of a sideways shifting in the work's scope and its potential feedback of work to spectator—a role switching, if you will, there being some grounds for seeing in (*bounden*), turned inside out, the sentimental cliché of the tears shed by sensitive souls when presented with art works. In a slightly more earthy vein, Jean Genet comes again to mind and his only cinematographic opus *Un chant d'amour* (1950), in which he uses the theme of the wall, central to the entire film, in a similar logic (thinking of the unforgettable images of the cigarette smoke the two prisoners blow into each other's mouths through a straw inserted in a hole in the wall between their two cells).⁹ I say this, if only to insinuate by way of a provisional conclusion, that the stage constructed by Ann Hamilton has also an undeniable erotic dimension.

¹ "The stage is the obvious seat of pleasures partaken together, and also, after all due consideration, the majestic opening onto that mystery, the greatness of which we are on earth to behold, on which the citizen, to whom it should occur, may base his right to make demands of a State, as compensation for social belittlement."

² Jean Genet, *L'Étrange mot d'...* (1967), *Œuvres complètes*, tome IV, Gallimard, Paris, 1968, pp. 9–10.

³ Posthumous fragment (winter 1869–1870 – spring 1870), from the French Colli-Montanari edition of *The Birth of Tragedy, La naissance de la tragédie, Œuvres philosophiques complètes*, vol. I, Gallimard, Paris, 1977, p. 197.

⁴ *La naissance de la tragédie*, 2, *ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵ Cf. Pierre Legendre's description of the dual workings of the *instance*: "On the one hand, instance designates a way of being constantly present, an unremitting holding on to someone, a clasping tight that may even be a threat. On the other hand, instance also entails the sense of insistence, demanding satisfaction or merely being entitled to express or address a demand to authority in certain places; hence also this idea of place, instance as a feature of topical differentiation" (*Dieu au miroir. Étude sur l'institution des images*, Fayard, Paris, 1994, p. 42).

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Idée du langage*, I, *Idée de la prose*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1988, p. 102.

⁷ Regarding this attempt to abolish such boundaries, Artaud springs immediately to mind: "We do away with the stage and the auditorium. They are replaced by a kind of single space, with no divisions or barriers of any sort, and this becomes the very theater of the action. Direct communication is to be restored between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, because the spectator placed at the center of the action is enveloped and caught up within it. This enveloping arises from the very layout of the setting" (*Le Théâtre et son double* (1938), *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 4, Gallimard, Paris, 1964, pp. 114–115).

⁸ Hubert Damisch, *Un souvenir d'enfance par Piero della Francesca*, Seuil, Paris, 1997, pp. 171–172. Whether relating to classical representation or modern architecture, Damisch has on many occasions and in great depth resorted to the notion of "stage," in particular cf. *L'Origine de la perspective* (Flammarion, Paris, 1987) and *Skyline, La ville Narcisse* (Seuil, Paris, 1996).

⁹ Cf. Jane Giles, *Un chant d'amour. Le cinéma de Jean Genet*, Macula, Paris, 1993, and more particularly on the theme of the wall, the text by Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Champs d'amour*, published as an appendix, pp. 91–110.