

the body and the object
ANN HAMILTON 1984-1996

This publication, including both the book and the CD-ROM, was produced in association with Ann Hamilton's activities as recipient of the Wexner Center Residency Award in visual arts for 1994-95. Her residency continued into 1996 and culminated in the exhibition *the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1996*. The Wexner Center Residency Award program is made possible by the Wexner Center Foundation.

the body and the object:
Ann Hamilton 1984-1996
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COVER IMAGE

reserve, 1996
installation detail: stills from video

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FOREWORD

Sherri Geldin

That's why I don't do paintings. You can't be inside a painting and I want people to be absorbed into a physical kind of mass. I want to be absorbed—¹

Ann Hamilton

4 My own first encounter with the work of Ann Hamilton (and in her case, the term “work” is more than usually laden with the stuff of labor) was in 1988, when she created an astounding installation at MOCA's Temporary Contemporary. Little did I realize at the time how powerfully the experience of those three quasi-surreal spaces would continue to resonate and reverberate—their peculiar scumble of visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile sensations still tugging insistently on my consciousness. So it's perhaps a strictly personal (and possibly unfounded) notion that the title of that particular exhibition, *the capacity of absorption*, harbors a significance in Hamilton's oeuvre far beyond the circumstances of its singular usage. Those words might almost be construed as a gauntlet hurled forth by the artist—into her path as much as our own.

For what constitutes “absorption” and what determines our capacity for it? Depending upon context, it connotes coalescence, mergence, transference,

¹ In conversation with Dave Hickey. Quoted in Hickey, “In the Shelter of the Word: Ann Hamilton's *tropos*,” *Ann Hamilton, tropos* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1995), p. 129.

inhalation, assimilation, engulfment, alertness, attentiveness, preoccupation, raptness. To be “absorbed” is to be meditative, reflective, introspective; or alternatively, to be absent, far away, deep in reverie, or, colloquially, woolgathering (a term that is humorously apt in Hamilton’s case). The thesaurus spews forth terms, but, curiously, no matter what the “spin,” “absorption” is precisely the state through which a work of Ann Hamilton’s is engaged, cognitively, intuitively, or in some pre-linguistic mode we can’t even describe.

For over a decade, and through a range of media, she has probed the often dueling forces of nature and culture, gesture and language, making and meaning. With manual labor no more menial a pursuit than intellectual exertion, Hamilton remains “deeply involved in the culture of domestic activity—and in culture as domestic activity comprised of small creative practices that privilege the cumulative power of iteration...”² Surely the cumulative sweep of her investigations over the past ten years deserves our attention, our woolgathering. Yet despite her bidding, we remain interlopers on her ultimately private preserve, seeking that fundamental ground on which we all roam and graze.

Ann Hamilton’s residency at the Wexner Center over the last eighteen months has offered the artist an opportunity to explore previously uncharted domains or, more accurately, familiar domains with new navigational instruments. Sarah J. Rogers, Director of Exhibitions, and long-time champion of Hamilton’s work, has presided over the residency, the exhibition, and the CD-ROM project with passion, perseverance, and keen intelligence. Resource Marketing, Inc. has been an exemplary partner on the CD-ROM, offering Ann and the Wexner Center supreme generosity of spirit, talent, and technical know-how. We are grateful to the National Endowment for the Arts, the Greater Columbus Arts Council, the Ohio Arts Council, and Arcorp, Inc. for their contributions to funding the exhibition and publication, and we are beholden, as always, to the Wexner Center Foundation for its farsighted support of the Wexner Center Residency Award program. The individual lenders to the exhibition also have our thanks for their gracious cooperation. Above all, we are incalculably indebted to the artist for allowing the Wexner Center to be her living laboratory and for so amply sharing her creative and intellectual reveries with us.

² Ibid., p. 141.



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handed, 1996
still from color video

ANN HAMILTON: *details*

Sarah J. Rogers

The true artist is connected. The true artist studies the past not as a copyist nor as a pasticheur will study the past, those people are interested only in the final product, the art object, signed sealed and delivered to a public drugged on reproduction. The true artist is interested in the art object as an art process, the thing in being, the being of the thing, the struggle, the excitement, the energy, that have found expression in a particular way. The true artist is after the problem. The false artist wants it solved (by somebody else).¹

Jeanette Winterson

In describing the traits of a “true artist,” writer Jeanette Winterson succinctly articulates the clear yet complex, modest yet aggressive artistic impulses of Ann Hamilton. Hamilton’s art questions and animates the processes that link perception, knowledge, expression, and experience—regardless of a specific project’s material, site, or subject. The exhibition titled *the body and the object*, the accompanying CD-ROM publication, and Hamilton’s activities during her 1994–96 residency at the Wexner Center come together at a pivotal moment in her career, as she seeks out the interrelationships and essential ingredients of her powerful art.²

Mention of Hamilton’s name conjures up a myriad of associations. She is the artist who enlists hundreds of hands in the production of an installation, the artist whose work is often described by the enormous quantities of its material making (750,000 pennies; 3,000 ears of corn; 14,000 human and animal teeth), the acclaimed international artist who came of age in the 1980s and became one of the youngest recipients of the MacArthur Foundation’s “genius” awards. She has been described as a multi-media artist whose performances are set in gigantic environments, an installation artist and a performance artist, a sculptor of large-scale theatrical tableaux. But none of these descriptions clarifies that the theatrical scale and materiality of the installations do not create theater, and that the human presence in Hamilton’s installations does not function as an actor or performer. Because of the site specific, temporary format of much of Hamilton’s work, it has been impossible for a wide audience to view a range of her artistic output. (Such is the dilemma of most “installation” artists.) And because of their complex logistics, unnerving quantities of unconventional

1 Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 12.

2 Hamilton was the recipient of a 1994–95 Wexner Center Residency Award in visual arts; her residency activities continued into 1996. These awards are given each year in the Wexner Center’s three main programming areas of visual arts, performing arts, and media arts (film/video).

materials, and sheer material beauty, Hamilton's projects have evoked a mythology that emphasizes a perceived romantic, nostalgic, Midwestern work ethic, overlooking this artist's rigorous passion and invention.

Hamilton's installations have always asked big questions: How is perception changed into knowledge? What social, economic, or expressive systems are created in the relationships between humans and animals? In her earlier works, answers (or at least suggestive clues that might point toward them) often were framed in terms of a project's materials—a floor of linotype slugs, layers of smoothed work shirts and pants—and in the way those materials embodied a residual accumulation of gestures. Objects, video, sound, and figures also appeared in the installations, but primarily as markers within the larger experience, details that caused the visitor to pause and take notice. More recently, image and gesture, always essential ingredients in her art, have come to the foreground of her thinking in new ways. And Hamilton is now manipulating the traits of video imagery as she had previously manipulated books, objects, and organic matter: to reveal the potency of the detail. Her residency was conceived to support these and other apparent changes in Hamilton's thinking: a questioning of the site as a material container, a focus on specific singular gestures, a more overt use of voice as a "material" within the space.

Amid this general sense of transition, Hamilton began making videos in the Wexner Center's Art and Technology facility. Some of the videos would appear in projects elsewhere before the conclusion of the residency; others were purely experimental and independent of any specific event. The subject of one of her first residency videos was an ink stained finger slowly pushing its way across a transparent surface, erasing the letters of the alphabet. Our point of view is from the other side of the glass (or video monitor), inside the action. Rather than making an artifact as the tactile connector between body and written language (as she had with the erased books from *indigo blue*, 1991), Hamilton captured the process of the gesture, making it both material and artifact.

In very general terms, Hamilton's work of the past twelve years has evolved from presenting the body as object to conceiving of the room as a body of

accumulated gestures to, at present, portraying gesture as container of both body and site. This exhibition is not an installation, but a gathering of photographs, objects, and video and sound works: sites where she often initiates expressions of imagery and gesture. It is complemented by the CD-ROM, which demonstrates the experiential, visceral details of the installations themselves in ways not possible in a print catalogue. The CD-ROM was developed and produced in partnership with Resource Marketing, Inc., a marketing, design, and communications firm with specific expertise in electronic media. Working in close collaboration, Ann, head designer James Towning, and the rest of the team from Resource developed a digital environment that mines the medium's inherent aesthetics and complex connecting capabilities to reinterpret experiences and details of past projects. The resulting program revealed aspects known and unknown in Hamilton's art: the shifting use of the screen as a threshold to experience, the prominence of the gesture of erasing as a means of remaking, the links between sound and light. The CD-ROM also spawned a new group of videos that capture gestures such as knitting, hand wringing, and sewing. Not necessarily destined for inclusion in specific installations, these videos serve as containers of Hamilton's current preoccupations. In this manner, they recall her earlier *body object* photographs.

...s, with the most long-suffering
heart borne with the most gentleness
of all the injury and contempt of
I am guilty by my disabilities
with. With what patience hast thou
me to repent and do penance, in order
that my heart might become wise!
O Lord, hast thou come to possess
it? In order to construct in it a
themselves, and to pour into it thy love.
O my God, how many times have I
knocked at the door of my heart by
temptation! How often hast thou drawn
with thy benefits, attracted me to
temptations, and driven me to thee by
sins! I have repulsed thee, and
thrown my back upon thee. All that
thou hast borne—oh, how kindly!
How justly couldst thou have



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untitled (body object series) #16-flourbreath, 1993/1993

How does the body become object?

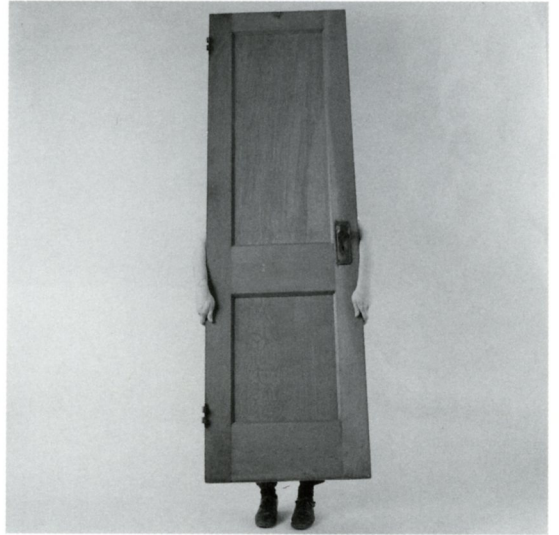
Yet to make from the body a work of art involves the creation of a supplement or extension.³

Susan Stewart

Between 1984 and 1993 Hamilton produced a series of black and white photographs of herself usually dressed in casual clothing and interacting with equally generic objects: a door, a shoe, a boot, a ladder.⁴ Considered by Hamilton as studies or “drawings” for the large-scale installations, the images stand today as telling markers of the artist’s primary fascinations. These “still lifes” document two things melded into a single inanimate being. In one, a shoe protrudes from the mouth of a profiled figure, negating speech but creating an extension at the physical edge of language. In another, a boot “worn” on an extended arm denies the expected functions of both body and object while suggesting a new kind of mobility. In yet another, chairs tied to the front and back of the standing figure are both protective clothing and an awkward burden. Not all the objects are manmade. The “bushhead” image is just that, a frontal view of a figure in a dress whose head is a bush—a blind, deaf, and speechless agricultural mutant. The deadpan, unadorned style renders the subjects humorous, ironic, and curious, reminiscent of Bruce Nauman’s early photographs of bodily contortions.

³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 107.

⁴ Sixteen of the photographs were published in two groups, the first seven in 1991 and the second nine in 1993. See the Checklist of Exhibited Works for a complete list.



untitled (body object series) #10—baskethead, 1984/1993

untitled (body object series) #12—doorbody, 1984/1993

For all their absurdity, however, Hamilton's images reveal the artist's serious preoccupations. The *body object* photographs demonstrate the artist's penchant for studying an object by framing it within a two-dimensional structure, often isolating and silhouetting the form, as she does explicitly in her recent videos. They also show, over a span of years, her continuing impulse to make inanimate what is naturally animate, to confound the senses, to explore those edges and openings of the body where sensorial experiences occur, to camouflage the body, protect it, and transform it into artifact.

To Hamilton, the body is the locus for empirical knowledge: it is through our bodily senses—tactual, aural, visual, olfactory, and cognitive—that we find experience and knowledge. The sensory abilities of the figures in both the *body object* photographs and the installations are often altered, denied or extended, at the very sites where information is heard, seen, or tasted. And the figures themselves become both objects and living presences in a restructured reality, reminding us of the finite and ultimately artificial conditions of the tableaux.⁵ In this subtle way, Hamilton breaks with the heritage of previous installation art that reenacted aspects of the “real world,” whether in the social actions of Joseph Beuys, the interventions of Robert Smithson and other earth artists, the dream states of Jonathan Borofsky, or the powerful feminist creations of Magdalena Abakanowicz or Louise Bourgeois.

From her earliest efforts, it was clear that the human presence in Hamilton's art did not function as symbol or storyteller. Rather, she used the human figure as a site through which to explore perceptual awareness and “aspects” of our being. She was, as early as graduate school, seeking new ways to orchestrate body, meaning, and material within the container of a room. The format she naturally developed melded “studio tableaux,” imagist theater, and dance/performance. From the work of Meredith Monk and Robert Wilson, she learned to create powerful images of the human figure within monumental spaces, to exploit the accumulation of fragmented meanings rather than to define a continuous narrative. And from Yvonne Rainer, Hamilton gained “the permission,” to exploit, to dissect, and to celebrate everyday gesture and movement.⁶

⁵ For example, the figure in *lids of unknown positions* (1984) sat in a lifeguard chair with its head inserted into a hole in the ceiling. That in *still life* (1988) sat immobile in front of a table piled with 800 folded, singed, and gilded shirts.

⁶ Hamilton refers to the significance of this “permission” as one of the greatest gifts a teacher can offer a student. In her many years as a teacher and through working with the communities that often assist in making the installations, she is passing on this tradition.

Hamilton's investigations continued in the mid 1980s with spatial sketches that pitted material, subject, and form against one another to reveal new relationships just as the *body objects* had demonstrated. One of her strategies early on was to camouflage. She found she could cover the body and convert it into an object of protection and aggression. The toothpick suit (from *suitably/positioned*, 1984) and the flashlight suit (from *reciprocal fascinations*, 1985) demonstrate these early attempts to animate aspects tapped in the *body object* photographs and find a way to link them to broader social and expressive contexts. The toothpick suit—a pinstriped suit covered with thousands of toothpick quills—was worn by the artist as a performance for Franklin Furnace in New York. The flashlight suit is from a complex installation of sounds (fog horn and pigeons), objects (vibrating water table), and figures (one seated with its head caught in a fan-blown cloth and the other—the artist—wearing the suit for the duration of the project). The rather jerry-rigged, mad scientist appearance of the suit is in stark contrast to the classical precision of the toothpick garment. Closer examination reveals its own logic of making: an irregular, aggressive collaging, a gestural marking that recalls action painting (in contrast to the toothpick suit, which can be likened to a color field painting).⁷ Both suits burdened the body with a different skin and purpose: one as armor, the other as an awkward beacon. Hamilton not only transformed the body into an object (her figure became the armature of the suit), but she treated the object as its own contained space. Additionally, the forest of toothpick quills is the residue of a repetitive, wonderfully obsessive gesture of making that draws the viewer in to see just how individuated each “mark” of the suit’s bristly covering is. Both objects also represent Hamilton’s early “capturing” of elements from temporary situations by allowing them to exist beyond the life of the original project. With each installation, the artist carefully considers if an independent object will survive the temporary work to stand as its own container of meaning, not as a souvenir.

Hamilton's studies in weaving at the University of Kansas are frequently cited to explain her affinity for materially rich situations and her connection to the traditions of women's work. But this training also provided a system of logic, an ability to envision abstract structures on a large scale. Weaving, whether

7 The connections between Hamilton's sculpture and aspects of painting may at first seem purely formal. However, Hamilton's sense of framing, of composition within a room or on a page or screen, is strongly tied to pictorial traditions, whether those of seventeenth-century Dutch interiors, still lifes, and genre scenes or those of abstract expressionism and color field painting. Examples of such connections are discussed later in this essay.



hand-loom, machine, or freehand, is a kind of mapping, an overlaying of one set of threads with another. One must be able to conceive the finished design from the abstract system of warps and wefts noted on weaving cards, conceptualizing not just the two-dimensional design but also its tactile presence as an object in space. The carpet of pennies in *privation and excesses* (1989) and the wall of wrestling dummies in *a round* (1993) clearly demonstrate the connection to a weaver's sensibility. Equally significant is the basic condition of the weaving process: each thread retains its individuality as it becomes part of the fabric, just as each object, material, or action in Hamilton's installations retains its own identity while part of the whole piece. The assertion that Hamilton both celebrates and extends the legacy of women's work and crafts raises interesting questions. It is clear that the nature and history of making—of making by hand, of the kind of making that clothes us, builds our homes, tends our babies, and tills our fields—are active ingredients in Hamilton's art. However, her true interests are in the labor or condition of making and in the social and economic, as well as creative, imperatives of labor, and these considerations are not gender specific.

indigo blue, 1991
installation detail

OVERLEAF
the capacity of absorption, 1988
Temporary Contemporary
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
December 13, 1988–February 26, 1989
installation detail





How are nature and culture reconciled?

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.⁸

Wallace Stevens

Beginning with the grand-scaled installations such as *the capacity of absorption* (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1988), the body or the human presence became less a camouflaged object and more a caretaker and a witness. This person is engaged in a specific activity and is the singular, constant presence who experiences the environment over time and through direct participation. The architectural space became the “body” whose skin was wrapped, scorched, or covered and the vehicle that connected the individual, the natural order, and cultural constructs. The three rooms of *the capacity of absorption* were remarkable not only for their physical magnitude and eclectic materials but also for the powerful details embedded throughout. The material immersion created by this installation let the viewer feel, smell, hear, see, and taste clues to a world ordered by biology, by invention, and by language.

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⁸ Wallace Stevens, “The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 512.



the capacity of absorption, 1988
installation view

Hamilton treated the different elements within this complex environment with the same interests in repetitive, non-hierarchical gestures embodied by the making of the earlier suits and studio tableaux. The installation's scale and placement of objects may have appeared theatrical, even operatic, but the journey through the three rooms was not a narrative event with the denouement acted out in the third room. Rather, discoveries unraveled bit by bit, as viewers moved through spaces that triggered sensory and cognitive responses. In the first room, a pervasive aroma of beeswax (from beeswax covered walls) commingled with sounds of spinning water, and a miniature video of water flowing over an ear peaked from an enormous flax megaphone that served as the conduit between speech and hearing. The viewer became the catalyst for sensory interactions in a universe of components that paralleled elements we might expect to find in nature; here, however, the interactions were always unexpected. In the second space, a figure stood silently with its fingers inserted into ten holes at one end of a long, narrow table covered by a sheet of water. Another set of holes to the right of the figure invited a viewer to join in the activity. Witness and viewer shared a common yet isolated experience, all the while serenaded by the sound of crickets. The witness's coat tails trailed into the third room, leading the viewer into the final space, at the center of which was a large buoy. Ten tons of linotype slugs covered the floor. Every step noisily reminded viewers of their bodily movement and the linguistic systems they seemed to be drowning in.

The object that still exists from *the capacity of absorption* is the water table. Tables are so familiar to us as sites for eating, working, and other solitary or communal activities that we assert our intimacy by calling their parts "legs" and "heads." Hamilton frequently uses tables in her environments, building on that familiar intimacy, but also counteracting and baffling it. The water table provided the central moment of connection in *the capacity of absorption*. Outside the experience of that environment, it still invites us to participate—it can't be completely understood by looking. The table's surface appears highly polished and reflective; only by the accident of touch do we comprehend it as covered with water. Standing at the table, with our fingers in the holes, we begin to apprehend a nexus of associations: life, labor, nourishment, and nurturing.

Hamilton draws on the associations of sites as well as on those of objects and materials. It is not just the architecture or the aesthetics of a room that can trigger meaning, but the neighborhood, its history and contemporary use, and Hamilton's own intuitive response to the "life" of that built environment. All sites, even ostensibly neutral art spaces and museums, are connected to social and economic histories. Hamilton is curious about how we, as social beings, grapple with such issues as constructing economies from land and animals, about how we seek to control and coexist with nature. One human response to enormous concepts has been to create systems and to classify: Linnaeus's ordering of the plant world, monetary systems of barter and purchase, the "rational," scientific studies of biology or geology or chaos theory. With her inclination to cast a wide conceptual net and the opportunities offered by specific sites, Hamilton was able to investigate such topics in a number of installations from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Her investigations were supported by her voracious and eclectic reading habits, which lead her from history of technology texts to literary criticism to social histories. Even more than interest in specific subjects, a desire to understand the inherent intellectual processes motivates her reading. She ponders the relationships and interconnections among the fields—and probes their systems and structures as a means of revealing form and image.

Privation and excesses (1989), *indigo blue* (1991), and *malediction* (1991) were logistically complicated projects that reconciled economic structures and human needs within complex systems.⁹ They live on today in specific objects: a chair on which sits a felt hat filled with honey (*privation and excesses*); blue history books with the text smudgily erased from their pages (*indigo blue*); a table, chair, and coffin-shaped basket (*malediction*). These objects are usually from the site of human presence in the installations, and they record either the place of activity or the results of that activity. In a sense, each one objectifies—or even personifies—the action of its project. Hamilton also chooses to let these things live on because they transcend the specifics of the site-projects through their intrinsic associations and meanings.

Privation and excesses was commissioned by Capp Street Project, an innovative artist's space in downtown San Francisco. It was located in a neighborhood

⁹ Please see the Checklist of Projects on the CD-ROM for complete descriptions of these and other installations featured on the disc. The Checklist of Exhibited Works includes annotations on the works in the exhibition.

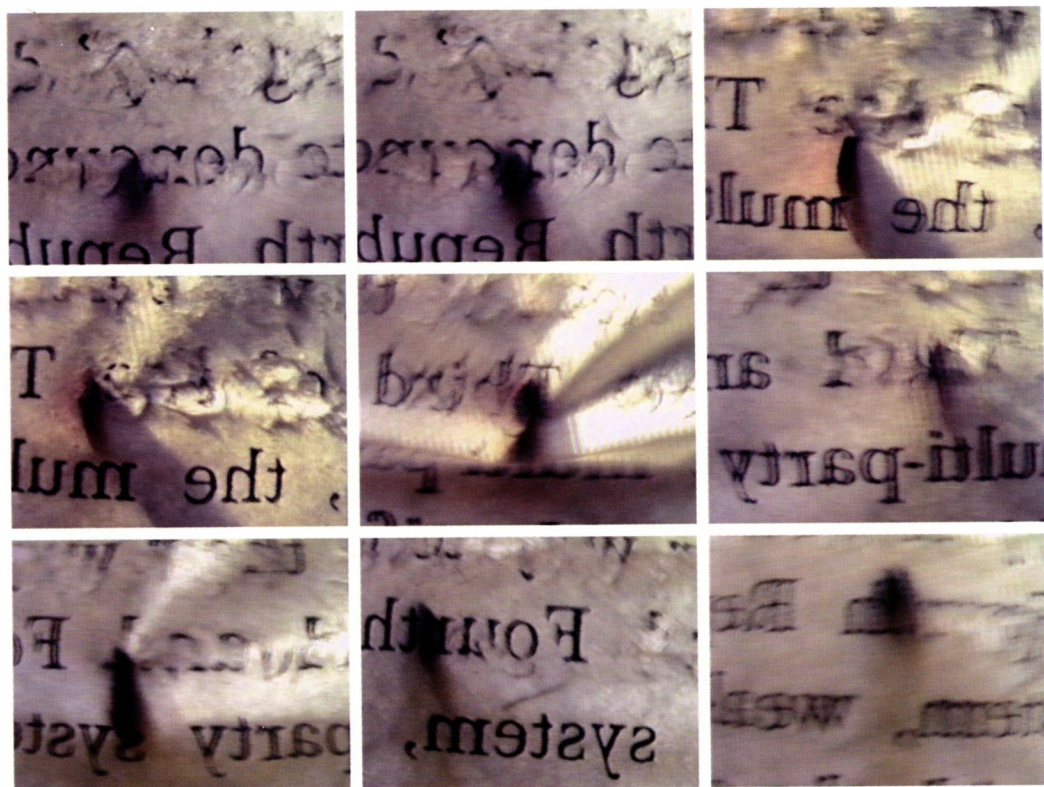


privation and excesses, 1989
stills from color video for CD-ROM, 1996

GATEFOLD
privation and excesses, 1989
installation view







indigo blue, 1991

stills from color video for CD-ROM, 1996

where displaced people circulated among commercial businesses. Walking around the area, Hamilton was frequently asked for money, and she remembers feeling self-conscious about pulling only pennies from her pocket, thinking about the magic pennies had in childhood and about how devalued and yet still of value these coins are. As the project developed, she converted most of the artist's budget into 750,000 pennies that were laid on a field of honey on the floor by a team of volunteers. In the space surrounding the penny carpet were three sheep in a pen, mortars and pestles grinding teeth and pennies, and a figure who sat on a chair wringing its hands over a honey-filled hat. The romance and reality of trade and exchange, the commerce of animals, and our relationships to economic and biological systems are all meanings Hamilton accumulated and investigated here. By allowing the honey hat/chair to exist beyond the life of the installation, Hamilton identified the human figure—in its physical extension, the chair—as the focal point of the intersecting systems and sensations. The seated figure and its obsessive gesture of greed and cleansing crystallized and perpetuated the sense of innocence lost, the inevitable realizations about the economics of agriculture and exchange, that permeated the installation. The honey hat/chair also remains as the private context that existed within the social. The chair, like the table, is a potent image for Hamilton. Even without the background of the installation, the honey hat/chair is both material object and gesture of an expressive condition. The two objects of this still life seem abandoned, awaiting someone's return to complete a chore or task. As a container for such expectations, the chair embodies a power described in a text by theorist Elaine Scarry on the subject of making and unmaking: "The chair is therefore the materialized structure of a perception; it is sentient awareness materialized into a freestanding design."¹⁰

Indigo blue was commissioned by the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, which specifically asked artists to respond to the social history of that city. After living in the city for six weeks (and reading about American labor history for a year), Hamilton selected an old garage as her site and 14,000 pounds of recycled work clothes as her primary material. The project's title and the color of the work clothes acknowledged one of the region's first cash crops—indigo. The clothes were laid out piece by piece, a layer of pants then a

¹⁰ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 290. This book has been an essential source of inspiration and study for Hamilton over the years. Its complicated text examines the human body, war, torture, and the arts from the perspectives of literature, politics, philosophy, medicine, religion, art history—in order to comprehend the relationship between the act of creation and cultural artifacts.

layer of shirts, to form a giant mound. Behind the pile of clothes, a figure sat at a table erasing history books from back to front with saliva and a Pink Pearl eraser. The rhythmic gesture of laying out and smoothing each garment was not seen but rather contained in the careful strata of cloth that created the enormous mound of blue. The books remain as records of another kind of stratum. The history preserved in their printed words was replaced by a history documented in traces of saliva and eraser, in the marks of an immediate, bodily gesture. The erasure did not destroy the page site, but rather excavated it in search of new meaning. For Hamilton such gestures capture a cycle that intermingles social history with personal experience through the conduit of language. That is why the book as artifact of gesture appears again and again in her work.

Malediction, Hamilton's first project for a commercial gallery in New York, addressed labor and social economies in a more indirect way. To enter the main space, the viewer had to step through a field of wrung-out, wine-stained rags. Turning the corner, one heard a voice quietly reciting Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* and *The Body Electric* and saw a woman seated at a refectory table, with her back to the entrance. The woman's head was moving up and down—speaking, perhaps—as she faced a wall of rags. Coming round to face her, the viewer learned she was not speaking but filling her mouth with dough to make an impression and then placing the dough object into the large basket (a child's casket) on the table. The voice emanated not from the sitter but from the gallery wall. The task of filling a body cavity—the point of speech, of eating, of pleasure—to make bread seemed at once perverse and disquieting. The gesture was a labor that truly externalized the human form, a notion underscored by the fact that the sitter was the artist. There was a reverent, almost religious overtone (wine, bread, prayer) and a sense of penance: the artist's self-imposed sentence was to perform this task for hours at a time over a period of weeks. The surviving chair, table, and basket were the centerpiece of the environment and, most importantly, the site of making. Today, as objects taken beyond their original conditions, they express a much broader interpretation of life's precarious cycles. The austere beautiful table represents a site of gathering, of eating, yet there is only one chair, and what is being served is a casket, a bodily receptacle. The objects are suffused with suggestions of nourishment and nurturing,



malediction, 1991
stills from color video for CD-ROM, 1996

GATEFOLD
malediction, 1991
installation view



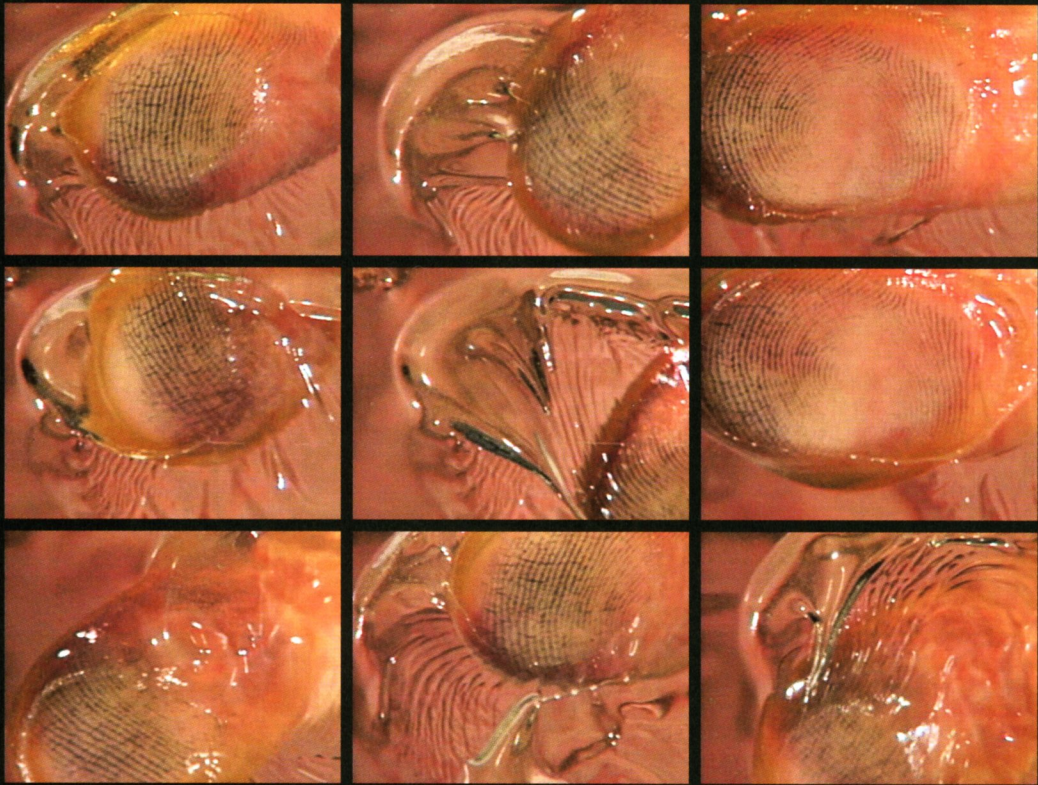


the service of life as well as of death, and, looking at the table, the viewer anticipates the return of the sitter, who will then continue the task at hand. Again, Elaine Scarry explains: "...the act of human creating includes both the creating of the object and the object's recreating of the human being, and it is only because of the second that first is undertaken..."¹¹ Hamilton pursues this inextricable connection between object and maker, between desire and need, throughout her body of work. Beyond the temporary events that she creates are the actions and expressions implied by the artifacts, thus rendering specific situations into universal conditions. In the works that followed, Hamilton used the gesture itself to represent these conditions and to explore how meaning is designed by melding material and form. She began to ask what happens when the room is no longer an immersive container and the object is no longer the conduit to meaning.

volumen, 1995
installation detail

¹¹ Ibid., p. 310.





seam, 1994

Projects 48, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

November 10, 1994–January 3, 1995

installation detail: stills from video

*Scratching the surface:
what is negotiated between artifact and image?*

Heard by the soul, footsteps
in the mind more than shadows,
shadows of thought more than footsteps
through the path of echoes
that memory invents and erases...¹²

Octavio Paz

The format, inherent aesthetic qualities, and immediacy (as both product and process) of video are beautifully suited to Hamilton's current concerns and impulses, and her experiments with video became the focus of her creative activity during her residency. Video details had first appeared in Hamilton's installations in 1988. *Dissections...they said it was an experiment* was a rich accumulation of insects, fish, fermentation bottles, paraffin, paper ashes, a figure, a bathtub, a large negative transparency—and a tiny video monitor. The video image was a tightly cropped view of a neck, water running over it, apparently excess from swallowing too much. We don't see the mouth or chin, but make our assumptions based on the neck's undulating movement. The image is hypnotic, with the rippling of the neck's muscles slowed down so that

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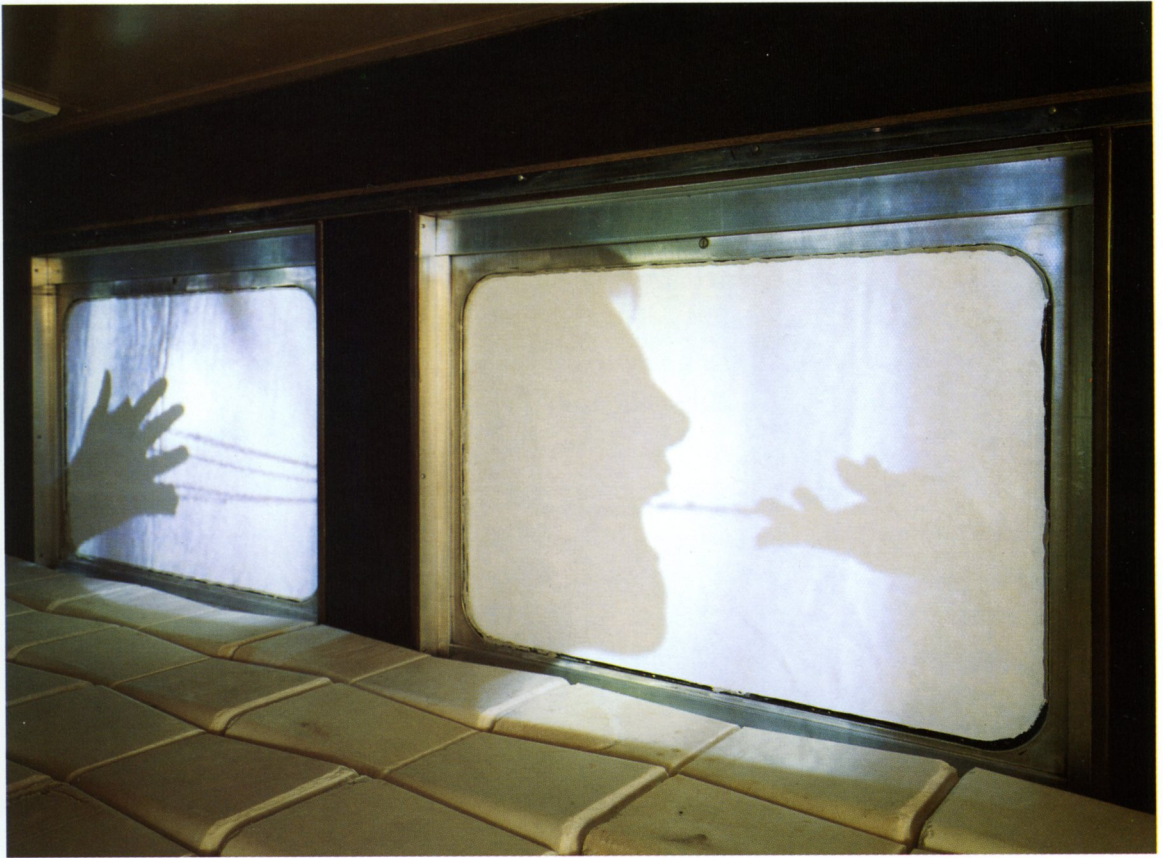
¹² Octavio Paz, "A Draft of Shadows," *A Draft of Shadows and Other Poems*, edited and translated from the Spanish by Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Books, 1979), p. 123.

it appears at once figurative and abstract. The body part is clearly a neck, but it also appears torso-like, becoming ambiguously visceral. This video was followed by three others, which were also incorporated into larger installations and which showed water filling/running from an ear, water filling/running from a mouth, and stones filling a mouth.¹³ The videos performed roles similar to those of the projects' objects and figure/witnesses, but with greater specificity. They mark the orifices of language (mouth and ear), isolate this site, reduce its scale, and confound expected functions. The videos are shown on tiny (3½" x 4½") LCD monitors, embedded flush into a wall. These monitors present an elusive, toned image, that almost disappears in direct light, underscoring the furtive, inaccessible realm of the gesture. They are abstracted both visually and contextually by their reduced scale and isolated framing. With these moving images Hamilton was free from the limitations of a static object, allowing her to identify the temporal presence with a continuous image.

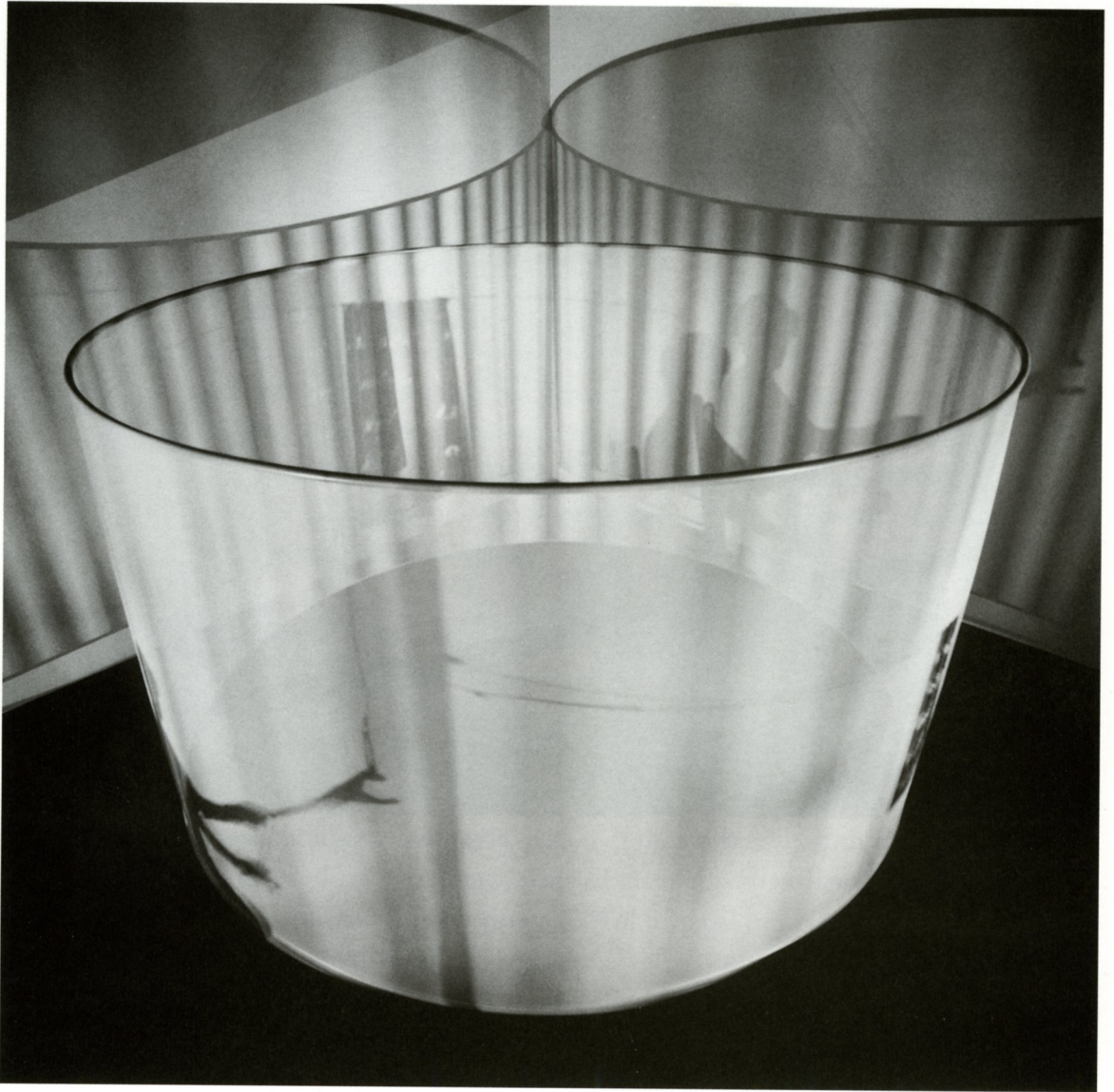
During the residency, Hamilton conceived four video works specifically for commissioned projects at other sites: *seam* (1994) at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; *lumen* (1995) at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; *salic* (1995) for SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico; and *reserve* (1996) at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Interestingly, all installations completed during the period of the residency, which would add *lineament* (1994) and *volumen* (1995), signaled Hamilton's transition from staging objects and gestures within environments of material complexity to using imagery and light—both projected and within video—as the containers for the installation's ideas and experiences within a more reductive material presence. Though it is as yet too soon to discern if this marks a continuing and dramatic shift in Hamilton's methodology, it does clearly signal a refocusing in her approach to the nature of site-installations.

The central element of *seam* was an enormous video projection in a darkened space, flanked by two benches holding mounds of red clothing. The context of the *Projects* series at MoMA, an institution that is the repository and the guardian of "Modern" painting, encouraged Hamilton to think about this history and her artistic relationship to its traditions. Projecting the video at the

¹³ The car video was used in *the capacity of absorption* (as discussed above), the water/mouth video in *linings* (1990), and the stones/mouth video in *aleph* (1992). The four videos were also published as independent edited works in 1993. See the Checklist of Exhibited Works for details.



salic, 1995
installation view



lumen, 1995
installation view

larger scale was prompted by a lecture Hamilton gave on her work at the Wexner Center. Because of the exigencies of the lecture hall, the earlier videos were projected at a larger scale than usual, which piqued Hamilton's curiosity about what happens when the moving image takes on a theatrical scale (something she explored more fully in *salic*). The acutely visceral subject of the video in *seam* was simply a finger in honey moving against a glass surface. As in the video of the finger erasing text mentioned above, Hamilton used the screen as both edge and entrance to the experience, drawing the viewer inside the activity. At this scale, with the image tightly framed and the real-time slowed down, however, the viewer cannot readily identify the subject. The tip of the finger makes marks on a surface as a painter would mark canvas with a brush. Yet unlike in painting, what remains is not a residue of marks (figurative or abstract) but the act itself. Additionally, the sequence pays homage to a range of painting traditions: from the linear perspective and triptych formats of the Renaissance (the glass screen is in three parts) to the more recent conventions of color field painting and gestural abstraction. Viewers' intuitive responses to the image led back to a sense of the body (as so frequently happens with Hamilton's art), causing one visitor to question whether what was being projected was happening inside his body. Here the animated scenes on the screen replaced material, object, and figure as cues to sensory experience. And, for the first time, it was the video image—rather than the quantity of material or the surrounding architecture—that was gigantic.

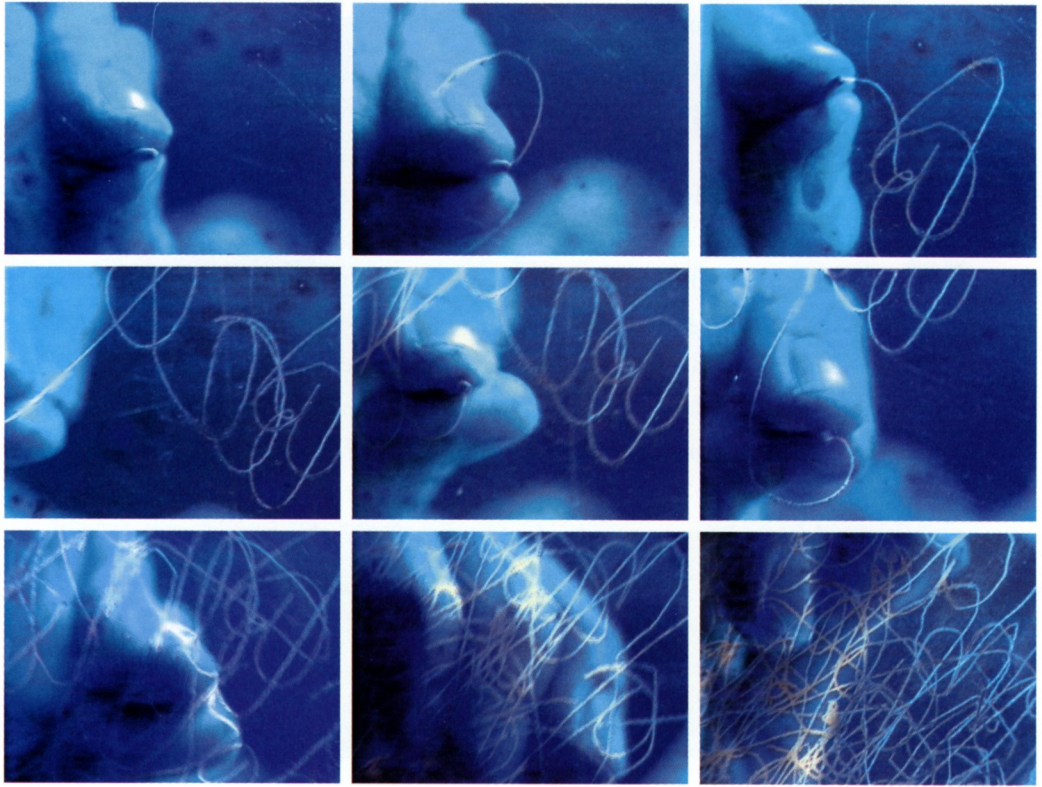
The installations *lumen* and *salic*, developed in response to two very different sites (one a gallery, the other a passenger train car), further reveal Hamilton's reductive impulses at this moment, impulses she could fulfill by using the ethereal video imagery. In *lumen*, Hamilton created extreme contrasts between the gigantic space enlivened by the mesmerizing shadow of the hidden zoetrope and the tiny monitors embedded in the walls in an erratic pattern. The video imagery framed the mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy and its action of slowly opening, then snapping shut. Between these extremes were the shadow of a figure grasping at a ring with a prosthetic hand, the sharp clacking sound from the video, and the viewer. Visitors perceived the architecture, the snapping sound, and their own bodily movement as tangible. All else was shadow and

Again a telling explanation comes from Elaine Scarry, who writes on the sources of creation: "The imagination's object is not simply to alter the external world, or to alter the human being in his or her full array of capacities and needs, but also and more specifically to alter the power of alteration itself, to act on and continually revise the nature of creating."¹⁵

The *lineament* and *salic* projections also allowed the artist to think about how form and expression might be revealed in two-dimensional pictures rather than in orchestrated events. In seventeenth-century Holland, Jan Vermeer, Dirck Hals, Gabriël Metsu, and others recorded intimate moments in interior spaces: a woman reading a letter at a window, a girl writing at her desk, another learning to play a virginal. The viewer is allowed access to a moment of reverie and concentration that is at once personal and universal, specific and timeless. From these images, Hamilton has learned about the power of ordinary events and about the ways compositional framing, light, isolation, introspection, and details convey that power. Viewers often enter a Hamilton space as intruders, approaching the attendant from behind or the side. They are unable to disturb the attendant's task, whether it is winding up balls of text or wringing hands over a honey-filled hat. The views and pathways within and through her spaces—where a door appears, where sounds are heard—are all precisely defined. Using video imagery as both material and site, Hamilton can now translate this pictorial vocabulary to the screen, which in turn functions as both frame and threshold to experience. The visitor does not need to physically pass through a doorway: the monitor screen itself marks this passage. Video allows Hamilton to isolate the subject within the composition: to make it micro or macro in scale, to silhouette or exaggerate it. This process of making also feeds her incessant desire to connect artifact and image and to clearly link the material (whether body or object) to its intrinsic language or sound. Perhaps most dramatic is how expressively video responds to her increased curiosity to get "inside" the gesture so that it becomes the experience itself rather than just the means of material making.

A recent group of videos offers a powerful lexicon of Hamilton's gestures and takes the viewer as far inside their making as is possible without dissecting or

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 324.



reserve, 1996
installation detail: stills from video