



ann hamilton: a round

a n n h a m i l t o n : a r o u n d

Louise Dompierre

The Power Plant—
Contemporary Art Gallery
at Harbourfront Centre
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A Reflection

Louise Dompierre

The work begins by conveying a strong sense of displacement. It is unlike anything we know.

Our senses are appealed to, we slow down, and there is a stillness to the atmosphere that contrasts vividly with the everyday world. Yet, at the same time, memory is stirred up and familiar associations emerge.

Sensing Space

A long and narrow white corridor directs me to the hidden doorway. Entering the space, not knowing what to expect, I come face to face with rows upon rows of sacks piled one on top of the other. Slowly, my eyes adjust to the low-lit space. I notice some arms and heads. Human forms. Bodies. For a while, that is all I see. All I *can* see. But as I come closer, wanting to know more about them, my eyes are drawn to the floor where I perceive something strange underfoot, only to discover that the polished wood has been covered with canvas. Silencing my presence.

As I stand there, intruding into the chapel-like atmosphere, I begin to notice other changes. The two large columns in the centre of the space have been dressed and wrapped up in cloth. Their tall and determined vertical presence cuts across the horizontal lines that circle the room. A string, also forming a circle of sorts, has been tied several times over their surface, linking them together. A belt, a growth or, more likely, a ring, standing empty yet suggestive of possible activity. Just about then, I see her/him. (Sometimes the knitter is a female, sometimes a male. This time, a female.) Sitting there, outside the circle, very still, knitting. Her thread, like an umbilical cord, runs to the middle of the space, back to the columns slowly unfolding the string that ties the columns together. As I am about to approach her, I become aware of another sensation. Curious smells inhabit the space, making me suspicious of the air that surrounds me. What are they? Suddenly, I jump, as a noise breaks the silence. And my eyes fly upwards.

All at once, my body is on the alert. All at once, I am made to feel, to be human.

In the boxing ring there are two principal players,
overseen by a shadowy third. The ceremonial ringing
of the bell is a summoning to full wake-
fulness for both boxers and spectators.
It sets into motion, too, the authority of Time.



I find myself de-synchronized with the world. Out of time.
The cavernous space disorients me, setting its own pace. All
is very still and silent and the height of the padded walls
overwhelms me. In fact, everything feels out of proportion.
The walls have never been taller, nor have I ever felt as con-
tained within them. Where am I? The place has an industrial
feel to it with these sacks-bodies piled on top of one another.
There is a sameness to their forms and to their arrangement
that recalls traditional stacking methods. A human depot.

Just about then, the history of the site comes to mind and the fact that this used to be power house serving a working harbour. The Terminal Building next door was a storage facility for goods of various kinds, some of which were similar, at least in shape, to the ones I see here. Nowadays, however, the signs of that history have almost all been erased and industry has been replaced by the pursuit of pleasure.

Other bits of history emerge as I scan the room. Gradually, my mind comes to focus on the changes and transformations that this century has seen on the waterfront.

Three different eras, each with a different purpose. Three tableaux of twentieth-century life: a harbour, febrile with activities; a desolate and derelict site abandoned in the name of progress; slow gentrification. And now this, which seems to encompass all this history, and more.

Memories. They shape me and I shape them but truth lies somewhere in between.

Performing Space

From observers, we become performers.

Striving to understand, we project our-

selves into the work. We come to identify with what we see.

Slowly, I focus on the bodies.

There are well over a thousand of them, lying horizontally, one on top of another. Their legless forms cover the walls from the base of the floor to a height of about twenty feet. Their pale skins are darkened in places, flesh-like, and their most expressive parts are their arms, which appear to be animated by a will of their own. They are genderless, nude figures. They recall Egyptian mummies, primitive goddesses or inflated corpses floating on the water. A friend said that drowned bodies acquire this pale, wax-like quality after being immersed for a period of time.

Outside is Toronto Harbour, and beyond, Lake Ontario.

In truth, these are said to be wrestling dummies based on Greek models. But who knows? Here, they have been constituted into a wall that insulates me from the outside. Suddenly, all that matters is their presence. I want to feel and touch them. I want to know what they are and what they mean. The world outside does not matter any more. I even forget what the space of the gallery is usually like, with its antiseptic white walls and gymnasium-like dimensions. Their thick padding ensures silence and creates a shell which envelops me, totally. This womb-like quality, this feeling of being inside a body, increases the longer I remain in the space. A dialogue develops between myself, my body, my movements, and their stillness. My verticality and their prostate position. I, they, become one.

One body, one space. I know no more where I am. Yet, I feel that I am no stranger in this land.



The boxer meets an opponent who is a dream-distortion of himself in the sense that his weaknesses, his capacity to fail and to be seriously hurt, his intellectual miscalculations—

all can be interpreted as strengths belonging to the Other; the parameters of his private being are nothing less than boundless assertions of the Other's self. This is dream, or nightmare: my strengths are not fully my own, but my opponent's weaknesses; my failure is not fully my own, but my opponent's triumph. He is my shadow-self, not my (mere) shadow.

Back and forth. Like fists punching a bag.

Standing still, I recall the words of George Steiner: “One of the radical spirits in current thought has defined the task of this somber age as ‘learning anew to be human’. On a more restricted scale, we must, I think, learn anew what is comprised within a full experience of created sense, of the enigma of creation as it is made sensible in the poem, in the painting, in the musical statement.”

a round not only alerts my senses but physically affects me, drawing me into a relationship, as a living being and viewing subject with these inert bodies. They become the body in which I awaken to new sensations. Their death-like stillness does not threaten but rather pacifies me. I see that their forms are moulded, enfolded almost, into one another in a love-like embrace. They breathe life even in death. They exhibit difference even in their mass-produced sameness. Stored aside, ready to be used and consumed, they at once suggest surplus and imply need.

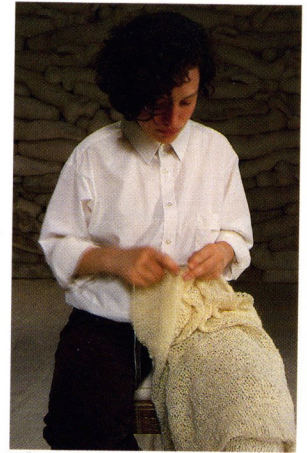
Dormant beings lying in wait for a future that has not yet been defined, or temporarily resting from a past that they can no longer bear.

The passive self, the passive Other, standing by.

The audience, perhaps, lying there, waiting, with no will of its own.

Identity. The relationship of the self to others, to a place and to the layers of cloth that cover us all.

Gradually, however, we manage to establish some distance. Where we only saw an image of ourselves, we begin to notice the other participants. We observe their gestures and see these as signs that act in contrast to one another.



Turning away from this image of stillness and silence, I look at the person sitting on a chair, knitting—intruding upon my reverie. She spells silent industry. In fact, she is life, the centre of the work and the beginning, perhaps, of it all.

I approach her slowly. Intrigued.

A circle. A tube. A body.

The wrapped columns, the tubular shape of the inert bodies, the room, my own body. All is a circle. Circles within circles. Human forms.

She is re-constituting life. There, next to her, is the bigger circle which, in a way, she is re-making in tight little strands. Passages. The work goes full circle as I stand there, trying to negotiate all its parts. But she, too, embodies a dualism for she is also the spectator, like me, and like the French women during the Revolution.

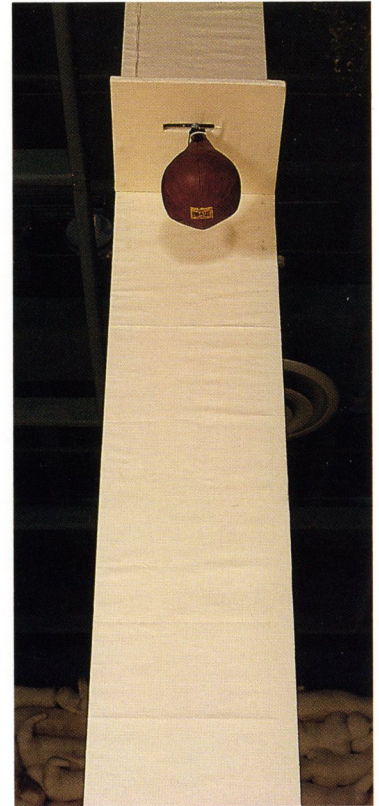
The young welterweights are surely conscious of the chorus of jeers, boos, and catcalls in this great cavernous space reaching up into the cheap twenty-dollar seats in the balconies amid the constant milling of people in the aisles, the commingled smells of hotdogs, beer, cigarette and cigar smoke, hair oil. But they are locked desperately together in their futile match-circling, "dancing," jabbing, slapping, clinching—now a flurry of light blows, clumsy footwork, yet another sweaty stumbling despairing clinch into the ropes that provokes a fresh wave of derision as the referee helps them apart.... When the bell sounds at the end of the fourth and final round the crowd boos a little louder.

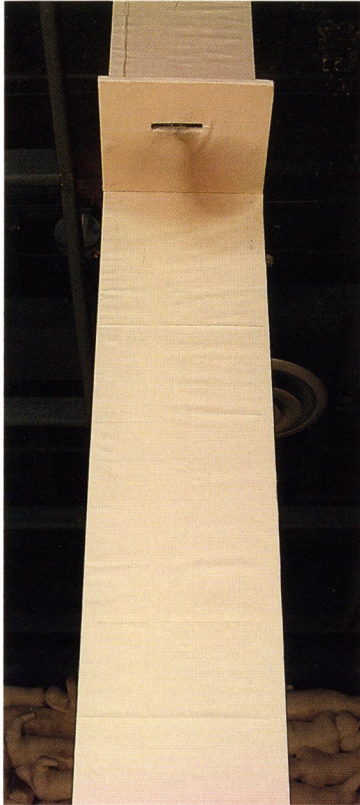


The ring remains empty no matter how long I stay in the space. In the same way that the bodies do not move and that the knitter pursues her task, endlessly. Still images, moving images. A stage between rehearsals and performances. A stage for the imagination to perform.

I am the performer. Yet, I have no script. Nothing and no one to tell me what to do next.

I hear the noise, again. The punching bags moving back and forth. On and on.





My concentration is broken, temporarily, as I watch the bags moving back and forth. They echo my own movement in the space as I attempt to absorb the work. It reminds me of the bodies who could be punching the bags around the room. But there are no boxers, only spirits, beings I must imagine punching these bags. I wonder about these absent bodies. Their presence is, perhaps, felt more intensely than any other body in this space. My own, even.

Hands punching bags, hands knitting. The masculine and the feminine intertwined. The gestures are rhythmical, yet they represent such contrasting activities. The boxer is alive with energy in a desire to build strength. Yet each time he hits his target, he destroys it a little more. The knitter adds on more and more.

One form, lying still and horizontal. Two gestures: punching and knitting. Columns keeping the balance. Images of life, death and renewal. Time and continuity.

I think about the body in all its forms: industrious, inert, spirit-like, active, aggressive, suggested. It could all be one body. One self broken down into parts to be better absorbed. Not decomposed or decomposing but de-constructed to be understood. Grasped.

I cannot rationalize this work. I can only see it from within.
I am the performer.

Having completed the circle, several times over, I exit through the door I came in. Feeling human again and with new memories.

The Work

Installed in the Royal LePage Gallery of The Power Plant, this work consists of 1,200 human-shaped cotton bags, cut and sewn industrially, and filled, manually, with sawdust; canvas to cover the floor; two mechanized leather punching bags; cotton thread.

The Artist

Ann Hamilton lives and works in Columbus, Ohio. A graduate of the Yale School of Art (1985), she has since received numerous honours and awards including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award (1990), a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship (1989), and the Bessie Award, New York Annual Award in the Performing Arts, Creator Category (1988). In 1991 Hamilton represented the United States at the 21st São Paulo International Bienal in Brazil. Her recent solo exhibitions include major projects at such institutions as the Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1992); the Mattress Factory, *Carnegie International*, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and the Fundación Caja de Pensiones, Madrid, Spain (1991); the Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, the New Museum, New York, and the Capp Street Project, San Francisco (1990).

Volunteers

This work could not have been realized without the support of numerous volunteers. The artist and the gallery would like to acknowledge the following for their generous assistance during the installation of *a round*:

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Endnotes

Page 8: “In the boxing ring there are two principal players, overseen by a shadowy third. The ceremonial ringing of the bell is a summoning to full wakefulness for both boxers and spectators. It sets into motion, too, the authority of Time.”¹

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1. Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (New York: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987), p. 8.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 4.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.



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