

as firmament a flame:  
On the Work of Ann Hamilton

"The forming of the five senses  
is a labour of the entire history  
of the world down to the present."

Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

Since the Enlightenment, thought has been imagined, that is, has appeared, within a matrix presupposing the givenness of time and space and positing a relation between subjects and objects—a relation we live as a relation to nature. Ann Hamilton's work takes us to the moment of the appearance of that matrix and relentlessly questions it. To experience her work is to re-examine what it is to take place, to be in time, to know nature. In these ways Hamilton's work returns us with great patience and insight to the very "nature" of sculpture: the interface between bodies, times and spaces within which objects appear, including ourselves as subjects and objects of knowledge; the hierarchy of the senses employed in the apprehension of any object; the relations between monumentality and intimacy; the articulation of the self at the boundaries/orifices of the body; work as the wresting of form from nature; the cycle of exchange and reciprocity wherein art is produced; and the relation of that cycle to the artist's individual will and imagination.

It is important to note at the outset that Hamilton's work is a meditation on our relation to nature and therefore never merely a positing of that relation. In this sense, her work comments on a world of human action and accountability; she thereby escapes any sentimentality or nostalgia that would be attached to views of nature as irremediably other to the human.

Asking not merely how we can know nature, but as well how nature enables a knowledge of the world, her work takes apart the "objects" of nature and undermines the "natural" status of the human figure. *between taxonomy and communion* (pp. 9-15), the work realized by her residency at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in May of 1990, is the culmination of her thinking in this vein.

Because this work has such a vividly ritualistic structure, it is perhaps not inappropriate to review the order of its experience. As one approaches the work, one is asked to remove one's shoes and invited to put on a pair of black Chinese slippers from a group placed before the entrance. The viewer enters the work through language—a door upon which the titles of animal fables are inscribed. Stepping into the space of the work, one experiences the literal disorientation of a ground that is both brittle and soft. The floor of the room, which slightly slants upward and away from us, has been "paved" with pieces of glass, each the shape, but perhaps four or five times the size, of a microscope slide. This paving shifts and gives above a luxurious, resilient, and musty "carpet" of woolen pelts. With each step into the space one thus has the unsettled and unsettling feeling that one has made an error—for these pavers often in fact break from their human burden.

Yet, at the same time, assuaged by the underlying softness, the visitor can be sure he or she will be saved from such an error by the totally intended, or thought, quality of the work as a whole.

As this floor is crossed, one's visual attention is directed toward three locations. A large steel table at the "height" of the floor's barely perceptible rise draws the visitor forward. It is bathed in light and seems to hold something. Yet approaching it, one becomes aware that the "floor" of wool and glass in fact continues up the wall to the height of what in other circumstances might be a chair rail. And more darkly the visitor feels the presence of something behind and to the left—there attached to the wall is an enormous black iron bird cage from another century. Its open grillwork, sprung door, and starkly empty state make it appear as a souvenir of not only another culture, but as well of another nature. As one continues toward the table, the senses are sharpened: the musty smell of the wool, the odor and dampness of water, the sound of an intermittent, but irregular, dripping, and then, vividly, the surface of the table is revealed: there against a ground of red oxide in long and carefully arranged, yet almost undulating, rows like script, lie 16,000 teeth close at hand. Although each tooth has been cleaned, polished and placed, one gradually becomes aware of the ways the human teeth, here interspersed between the teeth of various species, have been worked upon—in other words, how they seem to have a history. And at the same time the sound of the water becomes a nearly unbearable anticipation and one realizes that the water is dripping below the table, that to touch the teeth is to be stained by the oxide, and, furthermore, that an amber stain is spreading in the wool below the floor of pavers.

To recount the experience of the installation in this way is to seem to have narrated a "trick" or surprise, but this is not at all the way one has any sense of closure regarding *between taxonomy and communion*. For those things that one "discovers" in the piece—what one knows through the experience of it as a matter of an unfolding order—have little to do with what one expects or apprehends. In this is its blessing: that we come to know because we are allowed not to know. As we "recognize" objects here—wool,

glass, oxide, teeth, water—we are returned to the ways in which these objects are themselves. And it is from this integral point that we examine our relations to them—from this point that we articulate human marking, making, staining. Characteristically, Hamilton's title is here a description of the experience of the work and not a "caption" or allusion to it: between the human categories by which nature is known and the moment of death in which we are reabsorbed into nature is the realm of experience itself—the realm of work and knowledge as work. The relation between work and knowledge, then, appears in a trajectory revealing any ritual process as a worked transformation. To "know" materials and to "know" the self is to proceed by a working through of things into their being, their reception, their organization, their use, and, ultimately, their history. Nothing is finished or closed in Hamilton's work, but neither is the work a matter of purporting randomness or openness. Instead, things and beings are revealed in and by means of the procedures of use giving them meaning and direction.

Between, then, two poles—the taking in of sense impressions and the reabsorption of the body into nature—Hamilton conducts her profound meditation on experience, figuration, marking, making, and exchange. Her work always begins with the experiences of the physical body, but avoids the dead ends of mere beauty and mere sensation. To take up the objects of her work is only a first step in thinking about where they have come from, what we know about them, what we don't know, how they resist our knowing, and what might be our relation to them—a relation structured by memory and history and a projection into the future so much as by the immediacy of sense impression. By exploring the processes by which sense impressions are organized and by reminding us of the historical "nature" of such impressions, the objects of the senses are made to appear to us within a human landscape already inscribed by human memory. As a sculptor, she summons her "viewers" to use their ears, hands, feet, noses, and mouths as well as their eyes. Although this work is often visually stunning, the visual is always linked to a kind of hand-eye coordination whereby the viewer is also the user, the enterer, the traverser of the piece. Each sense—hearing, sight, touch, taste,

smell— wavers here between immediacy and history. Thus we are shown that our experience is in fact a matter of intervention. Maker, object, and receiver each takes up a place and time; each has consequences and effects within the work's process.

This point regarding intervention was perhaps made most vividly in her installation, *the capacity of absorption* (pp. 35-41), at the Temporary Contemporary of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in the winter of 1988-89. In the first of three rooms constituting the work, Hamilton hung, on small copper brackets, more than one hundred glasses; each spun a vortex of water—the room thereby filled with a kind of watery humming. From the center of the ceiling hung a fiber version of Athansius Kirchner's seventeenth-century speaking horn, an enormous device intended for sending sound across vast distances. On one side of the "horn" a looped videotape had been installed showing a close-up of water pouring into someone's ear. And hanging from the other side was an instrument like the flared receiver of an early telephone. When visitors spoke into this receiver the room would suddenly become still—as if the space could be called upon to respond and listen at the will of its human inhabitants. Here we find the strongly anti-Romantic aspect of Hamilton's work: this reminder of the systems of intervention, reciprocity, and responsibility is the opposite of the Romantic dream of an Aeolian harp, an instrument played by nature—ineffable, inhuman, and remote.

As one proceeded through the remaining two rooms of this piece, one entered farther and farther into worlds of human system and human making. The second room contained a long narrow table which was constantly traversed by a glassy sheet of water. The walls of the room were covered with dried algae, giving the room an aura of having been filled and then drained by the sea. Somewhere in the room a cricket chirped. At one end of the table an immobile figure sat; he wore a heavy canvas suit that had a kind of tail extending into the third room like a large and clumsy umbilical cord, or perhaps a sad organ forgotten as evolution went forward. The figure sat with his hands in finger-holes drilled in his end of the table. The opposite

end of the long table had an identical set of finger-holes which both beckoned and repelled the participation of the visitor. In the final room the walls were covered by a dense layer of graphite. The floor was covered with tons of linotype slugs. The figure's "tail" ended at a giant rusted buoy lying on this floor; upon the buoy's surface were inscribed phrenology notations. A shelf hung from the wall facing the buoy. Placed upon it, a set of mechanized calipers rhythmically jerked wires extending to a small "limberjack" figure—the figure was thereby pulled in one direction and then another by the wires.

As in *between taxonomy and communion* our path through these rooms draws us to an understanding of a relation with nature balanced between reciprocity and control, a relation acquiring meaning only between two deaths—the silence of the inhuman on the one hand and the chaotic noise of a linguistic/visual overload brought about by systems without a memory of nature on the other. It is not that the artist distrusts language per se here, but that language which seems to have lost its common ground in nature and history as well loses its capacity for resonance and integrity. Nature without human agency and intervention can mean nothing to us: such a nature would be an empty point of pure alterity. But language as a fixed and self-referential system would be equally bereft of human agency and intervention. Hamilton points to the relation between nature and language in this piece as a relation which is most useful when it is unfinished and therefore subject to change and reciprocity.

Each of Hamilton's allusions to nature and the world as it is given is thereby also an allusion to culture and the world as it has been made. Even if we consider the recurring elements of her "natural" repertory we find, on second glance, a matter of deep cultural references. Her use of honey and beeswax in many of the pieces emphasizes these substances as made or manufactured by animal work—as she puts it, a kind of "animal money" involving systematization, differentiation of roles, exchange, and storage. Materials such as boxwood, paprika, and gold leaf in her work remind us that nature acquires value by means of an investment of human time: boxwood, that staple of the formal garden, being the most slow-growing of plants;

paprika's preciousness tied to its inaccessibility and rare color; gold leaf the "worked" and fragile allusion to the "standard" of value arising where nature is endowed with status as a commodity. The sweetness of beeswax and honey suffused her 1989 work, *privation and excesses* (pp. 43-47). The sharp odor of eucalyptus, arising from leaves papering the walls and Vick's Vapo-rub emanating from a steamer, permeated *still life* (pp. 29-33), her 1988 installation in a Santa Barbara home, and thereby summoned a narrative of deprivation, illness, recovery, and luxury in which the domestication of nature is the foundation for interior space. The interior of childhood, "home-work," and the sphere of private emotion all arise from displacements and transformations of a "nature" outside and within us. We are invited to consider what it means to be inside and, if we are inside, how we form this space on the interface between sensation, experience, and nature. We think through the relations between the scale of the body and the scale of objects, the sphere of extension and the sphere of visuality, the near-musical interplay of motion and stillness as inanimate things "come to life" and living things move inexorably toward death.

Like *between taxonomy and communion, the capacity of absorption* was prefaced by language—in this case an external statement described the childhood pleasure Hamilton took in looking up words in the dictionary with her father. If we follow this "clue" regarding method and look up the meaning of the word *room*, the given space in which Hamilton's work appears, we find an extraordinary gloss on her project. The evolving connotations of room—"the illustration of forms," "dimensional extent," "to install," "sufficient space," "to clear a space for one's self [by making room]," "to provide space by removing other things," "scope," "to do something," "a short space of time," "a space on an abacus or game board," "a seat or place in a theatre," "a space in a series, narration, or logical sequence," "bounds," "a person's position or assigned space," "to board," "a chamber in a building or stall in a barn"—bring forward the ways in which the most simple features of a room, and of being in a room, acquire profundity here. At the interface of the domestic interior and the natural exterior, delimiting the sphere of action and

being, establishing relations between figures and objects, the room defines on the one hand a sphere of social interaction (one thinks of the drawing rooms of Austen and Tolstoy) and on the other hand a sphere of meditation and reverie (one thinks of de Maistre's *Voyage Autour de ma Chambre*, Walter Benjamin unpacking his library, and of course, Huysmans and Proust). Experiencing Hamilton's work, one must, as in the rooms of Beckett and Sartre, decide to enter and decide to leave, and the full ethical and moral weight of action on the threshold and within the scene comes to bear upon our "reading" of these rooms. It would be inaccurate, however, to think of Hamilton's work as "theatrical" in a traditional sense, for one is not positioned within a passive or voyeuristic theatrical experience here. The visitor takes part in the action and thought of each piece once the threshold is crossed. The room is the given frame or grammar within which action and being take place and acquire resonance—the social emotions, the discourses of privacy, ritual as the public display of private transformations, and the role of domestic labor in the containment of nature are all brought to mind by this framework. Yet the constellation of objects, motions, and impressions making up the experiences of Hamilton's rooms also systematically "unpacks" these conventions.

Consequently, nature often seems to "erupt" and/or haunt Hamilton's pieces—the cricket chirping in *the capacity of absorption*, the sheep meeting our gaze through a wood grill in *privation and excesses*, a slowly dying tree in her 1987-88 work at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, *the earth never gets flat*, or the enormous live eucalyptus branch suspended over a pile of ashes in *still life*. Yet this dynamic of eruption and haunting is a matter of the natural being displaced by the cultural and hence transformed. If we do not tend these natural elements they will turn toward the service of death. Just as her work never makes allusions which are merely "cultural," so do these allusions to nature refuse to be merely natural: it is perhaps not surprising that her work seems replete with literary, aesthetic, and mythological allusions. I am thinking of the grills through which one traditionally views sacred paintings in the West, of Goethe's Faust, of the

honey in Bunyan's *Divine Emblems*, of the mutual arrangement of linguistic and topographical space in the accounts of formal gardens and rooms in the English house poem tradition, and of Emily Dickinson's deployment of the natural world throughout her work, but perhaps especially in "I thought that nature was enough/Till human nature came" (the poem that provides the title to this essay). But to drift into cultural allusion in this way is to be called back by Hamilton to the realization that all of human making is a transformation of the natural world.

Hamilton's work often presents us, therefore, with an uncanny sense of time: the objects in her work, as noted above, are often familiar, even intimate, for us, yet they appear in a time frame that resists conventional periodization and even more strongly resists any ease with which we might feel we are in the present. The scale of time is not easily assumed here: experiencing her work, we often feel, because of the depth of the allusions to nature, that we exist in a kind of geological time—a time of prehistory enabling history to appear; a time of inhuman agency before human understanding and its retrospective organization of history. Yet we also realize that the transformation of nature is often worked by a reordering or remaking of time, as if geological time had been ordered within domestic space. Her works have explored especially the relation of the time of the body to the time of the machine: thus we see juxtaposed the temporality of tools, linked to the time of the body and the diurnal cycle, to the temporality of devices, linked to clock or artificial time. Teeth and hands are contrasted in her work as the most rudimentary tools of consumption and production. And when teeth are removed from their bodily context, they acquire another kind of "face value," that borne by coins and other kinds of "currency." (We find a kind of vestige of such primitive currencies in the custom from children's folklore of trading in lost teeth for money.) Inversely, when Hamilton makes use in her installations of a tennis ball machine firing balls at thirty-second intervals on a ninety-minute cycle or of mechanical mortars and pestles pulverizing teeth or pennies, the machine's cyclical activity is foregrounded as an act of repetition. Yet Hamilton often uses devices which transform or

mechanize objects usually manipulated, as the word implies, by hand—pitchforks rhythmically scrape the walls according to a kind of pulley system in *the earth never gets flat*; the limberjack is jerked by a wire; the mortar and pestle seem out of control—as nightmarish as a nutcracker, gingerbread man, or red shoes (or for that matter, a nuclear reactor) taking off on their own inhuman agendas. Such repetitions, though set in motion by human agency, seem meaningless precisely because they have no capacity for memory, causality, and closure.

In several of her early pieces Hamilton presented figures in silent, immobile, and even resolutely fixed positions. *similar predicaments* of 1984 had as part of its installation a person lying on a shelf projecting from a wall across from a toothpick-covered couch painted to resemble a tropical fish. In *the lids of unknown positions* (1985), a person sat at a table with head and forearms covered by a mound of sand, while another person sat in a lifeguard chair at a height making it necessary for his head to recede into the ceiling and outside of the room. For these figures, formally clad and bound by their mysterious duties and responsibilities, time seemed to have stopped. But for the viewer of this pain and inaccessibility, time became replete and unbearable; the viewer was the one who assumed the mantle of immobility here, the one who was caught in a refusal of action. From this problem, Hamilton moved to another domain or responsibility—that of the caretaker or tender role most foregrounded by current debate on our relation to nature. Here the redundant and repetitive qualities of an inactivity are in fact enabling of something else—an intensification of emotion. The figure wringing her hands in a hatful of honey in *privation and excesses* and the static caretakers and tenders of *the capacity of absorption and still life* are imbued with emotional depth because these actions are intended, willed, historical, and of consequence within a human universe even if that universe is private and inaccessible to the viewer. In the dialogue produced by these ongoing projects regarding figuration Hamilton thereby reminds us that it is not enough to act, to enable to act, or to explore the consequences of action; one must as well think through the meaning of one's actions and assume the

possibility that another's actions are meaningful even if incomprehensible. The stillness in Hamilton's work always appears to be apprehensive, on the brink of some decisive and consequential action; and the silence is equally interstitial, an aural space between closure and new forms of articulation.

Part of the power of *between taxonomy and communion*'s ritualistic structure is the way in which the viewer has become a figure of these dimensions. Not incidentally, one's experience of the actor's role is deepened by an understanding of the way one has one's self as viewer become the end product of Hamilton's thinking through of the problem of the representation of agency. Here as elsewhere in her work Hamilton has not assumed the mere inversions and playfulness of typical efforts to abscond with artistic agency and place it in the court of the viewer: rather, as her work has developed, she has systematically explored the mutual responsibilities of subjects and objects of action. If it is a commonplace of her work to conclude that the subject is constructed out of the transformation of need into desire and that space is articulated from the transformations of a natural landscape, *between taxonomy and communion* makes these points in quite specific ways. The piece emphasizes such philosophical problems regarding our relation to nature via several issues which are as well central to the history of sculpture: particularly the issues of figuration, relief, and narration.

In making form, what Hamilton has wrested from nature is a picture of our own agency. In *between taxonomy and communion* we must decide how long to hesitate at the portal where we can barely discern the animal fable titles and where the scant information provided by the titles alone reminds us not of what we know about these stories but of how we have forgotten them—and not merely their contents and characters but, because they are fables, their morals as well. We must decide whether to go forward or retreat as the glass breaks, or does not break, beneath our feet. We must resolve to forget the bird cage over our shoulder. As we move toward the table, we must leave language behind us, the language of the animal fable titles and the language implied by the grill of a talking bird. We must decide whether or not to touch the teeth: their beautifully polished surfaces compel

us to touch them and to explore their interiors and undersides just as surely as to do so will permanently stain our hands and clothes. We must "bear" the slow and irritating anticipation of the water dripping beneath the table and here we realize that what is unbearable is the emptiness conveyed between these significant aural "marks." We must be willing to stand near the encroaching stain the water makes beneath the table and to feel the wool becoming soaked beneath our feet. And, despite the infinite and sublime amount of information provided by the spectacle of the teeth, we must decide to return to language, to leave the space and to re-emerge in daylight once more.

Here as elsewhere in Hamilton's work one is aware that exercising the will to enter, the will to continue, and the will to leave are the ultimate acts of the spectator. The issue of figuration in Hamilton's work is therefore not merely a matter of noting whether or not there are people in her work and if so what they are doing or not doing. Rather, human figuration as the notion of "taking place" has to do with a reciprocity between the work's intentions and the reception and action of the participant. If we consider the pun on "woolgathering" presented by *between taxonomy and communion* we realize that we have, by entering this room, entered into another's thinking and thereby enabled our own thinking. The piece is not merely a representation of various boundaries but as well it compels us to think through the inevitability and possibilities of boundaries. As part of this thinking regarding boundaries, the piece is a meditation on its own site (and thereby a meditation on its own conditions of possibility): the situation of the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art on the boundary between sea and land and on the North-South geopolitical axis that is the boundary of the United States and Mexico; the radical cultural and temporal boundary between native and non-native settlements (particularly exemplified by the iron oxide as a reference to sand painting); and La Jolla as a paradigm for a garden by the sea which evokes both a lost state of nature and the willed human quality of a landscape completely transformed by gardening and the importation of non-native plants. The work takes on the conditions of expulsion from the

Garden of Eden—the conditions of pain, knowledge, and accountability—and constructs from them a kind of Paradise of thought. The spectator must be willing to risk a mutual incomprehensibility nowhere more evident than in the spectacle of the teeth. One must ask: Where is the human in this multitude? How can this display of death present us with such an abundance of life? How are we recognized by our bodies, and the features or elements of our bodies, such as these teeth, at the same time as the physical conceals our true “natures” from ourselves and others?

Hamilton thereby continually links the problems of figuration to the problems of relief, in this way recapitulating the emergence of three-dimensional figuration from the pressures upon the relief and frieze forms. She presents us with this aspect of the history of sculpture in the West in its profoundly lived, most everyday qualities: that any fullness of identity and being arises from a relation between surfaces. Hamilton herself often refers to such surfaces as “skin.” By this she intends to bring forward the permeable, information-laden, and reciprocal qualities of surfaces touching surfaces. As an instrument, the skin is alive and receptive, and thus it is a tool that is also a thing. In Hamilton’s early work her elaboration of surface often involved the construction of a human armor: the still figure in *Suitably Positioned* (1984) wearing a suit of painted toothpicks; a figure covered by a dense layer of burdocks and another wearing a catcher’s mitt in her 1984 piece *detour*; a figure wearing a suit of flashlights and reflectors in *Reciprocal Fascinations* (1985); a figure wearing a suit of grass seed in *the earth never gets flat*; the figure in the heavy canvas coat and “tail” in *the capacity of absorption*. These pieces of “armor” elaborate the constructed nature of identity. They point to the work involved, the mediation posed, in any interaction between producer and receiver. Culture is the border between nature and human knowledge here. And human signification, ornament, and systems of meaning are shown to be on a continuum with the coats, mails, hides, markings, and colorations of animal existence.

Relief as an issue and object of thought is further emphasized in Hamilton’s use of the table in her work. *Reciprocal Fascinations* of 1985

contained a steel table covered in a surface of vibrating water; a large dining room table in *still life* displayed a stack of 800 men’s white shirts, each singed and gilded at the edges, while a smaller table against a wall displayed empty velvet jewelry forms; *the earth never gets flat* used an autopsy table covered in vibrating water; *the capacity of absorption*’s seventeen-foot wooden table was deliriously, slowly, washed by a sheet of water; the hard and damp steel surface of the table in *between taxonomy and communion* contrasts sharply to the soft and powdery quality of the red oxide lining it and forming the bed for the teeth. The presentational space of the table becomes laden with allusions to production and consumption. The table is a three-dimensional object posing a two-dimensional relation to the viewer. Here, as with the microscope slide alluded to in *between taxonomy and communion*, something with depth is “flattened” to appear as something that is surface. But when one truly looks, one rediscovers the depth and particularity of the object at hand. As in the long tradition of “table painting,” the viewer is made radically aware—in circling the table, looking under it, and standing at various heights in relation to it—that his or her agency is both defining and limiting the point of view. Hamilton’s tables often hauntingly remind us of operating and/or autopsy tables: tables prolonging life and tables exploring death in a dialectic of the restoration and dismantling of identity. Display, arrangement, relief—Hamilton shows us that these artistic conventions regarding articulation are matters of drawing the viewer forward and keeping him or her at bay. *between taxonomy and communion*, as it compels penetration and intervention on the part of the viewer, continues her thinking regarding the problem of “skin”—the problem of relief and surface. If the wool gathered here is a transformation of the exterior and the protective coat of the animal, we are invited to enter into the skin—to smell and touch it, to break the glassy shell, to turn the elements of nature inside out and upside down, and, in knowing the boundary, to know where we are and how we have come to be here. Taxonomy is thereby the vehicle of a communion otherwise refused us.

Perhaps the most prominent site of elaborated boundary in *between taxonomy and communion* is the mouth. As a site of sexual merger and

penetration, of the consumption of nature, and of the production of language and narrative, the mouth becomes emblematic of the most concrete and abstract of boundaries and itself appears on the borders of the private and the public, the silent and the articulated. The mouth, like the skin, is unable to be merely an object. At the mouth, need is transformed into desire. All physical satisfaction is transformed into the infinite and discursive possibilities of language; Hamilton explores in *between taxonomy and communion* the many dualisms of this location of the physical and abstract: its liquidity; the plenitude of the body erupting at its surface; its dual messages of aggression and attraction; its ornamentation by means of staining and marking; its appearance as a two-dimensional outline; the orderly placement of the teeth in this interior of an interior. Perhaps most strongly, the mouth is the site of the eruption of language, first in the cry and then in sounds produced via systems of articulation, meaning, allusion, narration, and ritual as private history is made public and public history is made natural. When we consider the forgotten fabular language of *between taxonomy and communion* and Hamilton's story of her father and the dictionary in *the capacity of absorption* where the origins of the self are connected to fluid etymologies, we discover a kind of Lacanian allegory in which language, and desire in language, comes to compensate for the impossible demands of the body. And at the same time, language suppresses the unbearable realization of what remains outside of codification and human systems of knowledge: what Lacan calls "the Real" of nature and death.

We can begin to see the lined rooms of Hamilton's work as themselves the mouths or interiors of architectural bodies. Her work confronts us with the simultaneity of the desire to fill in space and the desire to empty it. The desire to fill space with language and meaning is here a matter of making allusions, tending objects, memorializing what has been said and made. The desire to empty it appears as a gesture toward monumentality, toward the erasure of particulars, and the clearing away of a space of reproduction, chaos, and sublimity. As human beings we are poised between our ability to articulate particularity through our sense

impressions and our inevitable helplessness in the face of a nature signifying our collapse into disintegration, decay, and reabsorption. Hamilton has often posed this problem as a matter of the relations between accumulation and accretion. The monumental scale of labor in her work is assembled by means of minute, yet consequential, actions gathering effect over time. The mechanical and systematic aspects of accumulation lead, however, to the seemingly "natural" status of the completed whole: a proverbial whole bigger than its parts, yet clearly assembled from parts acquiring significance from their relation and not merely from their individuality. In contrast, accretion takes place within an organic sphere of time, a matter of the breaking down of form into larger aspects of form. If accumulation is accomplished by means of human agency, accretion seems a matter of default or "natural" agency, a growth untended and unintended. But the objects accumulated here—whether pennies, leaves, wool, or teeth—are revealed in their materiality. And what is accreted—the stain, the crust, the mold—refers to the monumental time which human labor cannot transcend. Everything "counts" in Hamilton's work, but not everything is subject to human systems of accountability.

The teeth in *between taxonomy and communion*, replete with meaning but emptied of their contexts, follow then the logic of Hamilton's *palimpsests* (pp. 49-53), an installation constructed with Kathryn Clark at The New Museum of Contemporary Art earlier in 1989-90. In this piece the walls of a room were lined with small pieces of fading newsprint. On each piece bits of remembrances, personal narratives, and oral histories from friends and printed sources had been handwritten in pencil. Other pieces, embedded in beeswax tablets, covered the floor surface. In the middle of the room a large steel and glass vitrine held two large cabbages and a collection of living snails—the latter reproduced at a stupendous rate, stripping the cabbage leaves and boring holes in their surfaces. The second part of this installation, a window space opening onto Broadway, was lined with block-printed text partially covered by layers of yellowed plaster. Within this space, a felt hat coated in beeswax and rubbed with graphite hung from a stand under a broken



strand of electric wire. A mirror in the upturned hollow of the hat reflected light to create a lozenge shape on the back wall. Under this reflected and empty lozenge two film transparencies were attached to the surface of the window—a viewer on the street could thereby see through the transparency and project its image—a person's head cradled in a gesture of tenderness—into the space.

In the tension here between the ravaging productivity of the natural world, which can also be construed as the rampant and chaotic forgetting at the heart of the construction of any history, and the ordered tending of artifacts meant to represent and domesticate such a history, Hamilton once again addresses the ethical and social foundations of aesthetic processes. For the human urge toward animation of the physical and inanimate world—an urge always projecting some necessarily human context—stretches here from the moving statues of Plato's *Meno*, to the Galatea myth, to the arrested transformations of Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, and to the theoretical quandaries of Lessing on the Laocoön, as the aesthete wonders if he has arrived at this sculpture too early or too late. *palimpsests, between taxonomy and communion*, and other works put into conflict varying narratives, varying temporal frameworks. Words scattered by the wind, words protected by beeswax, objects tended, objects transformed, the intervention of natural process driven toward death and reproduction regardless of any human agenda, mechanisms powered by their own interior systems—such elements of Hamilton's work once more remind us of time as a force of separation and human memory and making as both significant and doomed to closure and reabsorption. Thus although Hamilton's work has, because of its room-sized scale and focus, been termed a series of *tableaux vivants*, this appellation does not do justice to the more relentless sense of temporality she explores. The *tableau vivant* is, like the still life, an attempt to "capture" nature, to fix objects for visual consumption. It is therefore appropriate that what is subject to decay is most often "preserved" here for posterity. But Hamilton's work puts into motion a dynamic between nature, history, and artifact that the viewer is forced to confront as an irreconcilable assemblage of terms. It is the

very notion of "killing off" nature by representing it that she is determined to question. Therefore, the fundamental sculptural act through which time is arrested and the dream of animation begins is taken apart and re-examined in Hamilton's work as a relation to being, viewing, speaking, and entering. Here the work "leaks," substances are replete or scarce, the senses struggle against one another, the figures are both caught and animate, and nature arrested is nature in the process of dying and being reborn. The viewer may go out the way he or she came in, but the intervention of knowledge and the experience of temporality will inevitably transform any "identity" here.

To complete a Southern Californian aboriginal sand painting would have involved as many as forty assistants working eight to ten hours each. Hamilton's work—with walls of paprika, beeswax, and dead algae; with a floor made of tons of linotype slugs; with thousands of handwritten slips of memoirs; with thousands of teeth, each cleaned, polished and carefully arranged; with 800 men's shirts, ironed, singed and gilded; with 750,000 pennies arranged in a pattern and covered with honey—analogously stretches the bounds of individual agency. Her work starts with the fundamental questions regarding artistic production. Who is the artist? What is an artifact? What is the difference between making, tending, and laboring? How do things acquire value? Where do things come from and where do they go?

Just as in Hamilton's work every natural allusion is a cultural allusion and every cultural allusion is underlain by a natural allusion, so does every "thing" appear here as a made thing and hence as something remembered, something storing up a history to be received and re-used. If Marx's nightmare was that under capitalism a relation between humans appears to be (merely) a relation between things, Hamilton's work recalls us to the human relation and to the root of the human relation in a transformed or "worked" nature. In this way she draws forward the conflict between an aesthetics based upon triumphing over the limitations nature imposes on form and materials, an aesthetics perhaps best illustrated by the Baroque, and an aesthetics based upon an imagined sympathy and cohesion with such natural limitations, an aesthetics perhaps best illustrated by Modernism.

Hamilton shows that the struggle to overcome nature is in fact defined by nature and that the struggle to “work with” nature is an impulse defined by human culture and human history. Completely dependent upon and involved with others as makers, caretakers and receivers of her work, Hamilton’s artistic production includes the social relations and shared histories emerging from the fabrication of her pieces. Each of her works creates a society; it is in fact no accident that she finds that professional museum guards often enjoy her pieces and enjoy taking care of them: they have been witness to, and have often helped with, their manufacture.

Such issues of production were explored systematically in Hamilton’s 1989 installation, *privation and excesses*, at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco. Hamilton took the budget for this project and converted it into 750,000 pennies. The pennies were arranged on a skin of honey defining a forty-five by thirty-two foot rectangle on the floor; this extraordinary multitude of copper pieces—and mixing metaphors seems to be precisely the point—seemed splashed in reptilian waves across the space. Facing the display of pennies, a side room housed three sheep behind a wood grill. And, as mentioned above, a person sat dipping and wringing her hands in a felt hat filled with honey while two motorized mortars and pestles were at work, one grinding a bowl of pennies and the other grinding a collection of human teeth. At the conclusion of the project, the pennies were cleaned and counted. Expenses were covered and then the remaining pennies were donated to fund a day-long dialogue on art as process between San Francisco artists and public schoolteachers.

This project of course echoes other Postmodern efforts to foreground the commodity status of the art work and to find new relations between the production and reception of art. One is reminded of Joseph Beuys’s 1982 piece at Documenta 7 in Kassel, *7000 Oaks*. Beuys piled 7,000 large pieces of basalt in a triangle that pointed to a single oak tree. He intended that this stone “currency” would be bought by the community; each stone would be “cashed in” for an oak tree to be used to restore the trees of Kassel. Here, as in her frequent deployment of honey (an allusion

to the liquid, the sweet, the ripe, the surplus and the crystalline/sculpted) and her deployment of felt (an allusion to “pressing” as preservation, the transformation of the animal body, the lamb as pet, food, and protection), Hamilton is continuing Beuys’s “actions,” his radical interrogation of materials and processes. But Hamilton’s project, unlike Beuys’s, does not ultimately refer to her own history so much as to the ways in which materials acquire history as they are worked. Noting that pennies in denominations under \$200 are not legal tender, she takes the notion of accumulated or stored wealth to a breaking point—the point where the material’s weight and mass, its literal materiality, comes to signify independently of the system of money in which it is generated. Like the decontextualized teeth of *between taxonomy and communion*, the pennies are neither raw nature, symbols of luck, nor true “money” here—they are a made configuration wrested from a prior condition and destined to further transformation.

If Hamilton’s projects in this vein seem willful, it is not because the artist has attempted to transcend the scene of artistic production: Hamilton’s work is an attack on spontaneity, originality, and genius to the extent that it always makes evident the historical and causal relations underlying the status of aesthetic artifacts. When we say that her work is “labor intensive,” we must recognize that every facet of the work is labored: the labor of thought, the labor of production, the labor of reception. No single person could produce these installations, even given all the time and strength in the world, for in their very formulation these works are designed to make us remember all the reciprocal acts of communication, fabrication, tending, and receiving that are part of any effort of artistic production. Following Hamilton’s logic, we would necessarily conclude that a work that would be produced by a single individual would be unintelligible. In order to assemble the 800 shirts at the heart of *still life*, Hamilton bought the shirts from a rag dealer and used the shirt-folding machine in a local laundry. In this reflection upon the meaning of domestic labor and accumulation, in which things are “done perfectly” so as to reflect the completeness of the interior world and the private self, Hamilton points to the necessary connection such labor bears to the exterior

worlds of culture and nature. To “do” these shirts is to both destroy them as material objects (to singe them) and to revere them as the physical manifestation or projection of one’s own labor or mark (to gild them). In order to gather the 16,000 teeth needed for *between taxonomy and communion*, Hamilton had friends and associates send her specimens; she contacted all the dentists and oral surgeons in the region; she gathered teeth from taxidermists; she collected animal carcasses from slaughterhouses; she visited osteology laboratories, including those at the Smithsonian Institution, in order to learn how to boil down animal heads and how to clean and prepare the teeth for exhibition. Although she often relies on friends, associates and even family members to help with her projects, she has at times had to rely on paid labor to construct special devices or, in the case of the linotype floor in *the capacity of absorption*, to finish an otherwise unsurmountable task. The relations between paid and voluntary labor, public works and private patronage, individual and collective work are thereby never assumed in her installations, but rather presented as a problem—something to be put into question, remembered, and considered. One is reminded of the perennial response to works of domestic labor, “Oh, how beautiful! How long did it take you to make that?” The equation of time with money in the public world of paid labor and of time as emptied of value in the private world of domestic, unpaid, labor is dramatically brought forward and critiqued in these pieces.

Furthermore, these explorations of the meanings and consequences of systems of production appear as an attack on mere novelty. Here and

elsewhere in Hamilton’s work we find contrasted the activities of making and tending. Hamilton emphasizes the creativity and responsibility of the acts of maintaining, caring for, and preserving the world. Such tasks are shown to be necessary for the continuation of a productive relation to nature and of reproduction on a global and environmental scale as well as on the domestic scale that is here posed as a model. Our attention is drawn thereby to the production of art as only a first step in a history of preservation, tending, and even restoration destined to follow that production.

To speak of Hamilton’s installations one must use the past tense: these works, assembled, disassembled and re-used both within and outside of themselves, have a dramatic existence in time. Their perpetuity is ensured only by means of memory and the narratives by which memory is expressed. Hence arises the dialectic between accumulation, loss, and intervention running throughout Hamilton’s oeuvre. If museum-goers are said to spend an average of fifteen seconds before a work of art, we find that Hamilton’s work, as it compliments our intelligence, just as surely summons our memory to the service of art and to the service of memory itself—that space of meaning where work, thought, and our relation to nature begin to take place and form. Monumental and intimate at once, these works reveal in their stillness a site of action—compelling us to represent to ourselves where and how we would like to be.

Susan Stewart

*between taxonomy and communion*

an entrance wall incised with the names of animal fables, the floor moves  
with the pressed weight of the body on glass, small glass panes  
laid over raw sheep fleece, crossed by a table of iron oxide, on it are laid  
a collection of animal and human teeth, the underneath of the table drips red,  
staining the skins below, on the wall, a cage

1990

San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art