

Ann Hamilton Aldrich Museum

Ridgefield, CT

Last year, as part of the Larry Aldrich Foundation Award, Ann Hamilton created an installation piece, white cloth, for the 200-year-old portion of the Aldrich Museum, a typical white clapboard New England building set on three and a half acres of rolling lawns and trees. Nicknamed "Old Hundred," it has been used as a grocery and hardware store, town meeting place, post office, private residence, and Christian Science church, and, in 1964, Larry Aldrich bought it to house his extensive art collection. Adapting the structure to its new function he removed most of the domestic architectural details and erected walls in front of fireplaces and windows. In creating white cloth, Hamilton deconstructed these renovations in order to expose the building's historic soul. She exaggerated the dichotomies of exterior and interior and presence and absence and made use of the location, the architecture, and the Puritan heritage that infuses the site to serve her concept.

As in the groundbreaking works of Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, or Mabou Mines, Hamilton's installations are meta-theaters in which she abandons linear narratives in order to restructure space, time, and sense perceptions, creating a liminality and allowing one to walk, like Alice, through a threshold into a completely absorbing arena. Employing repetition, motion, and sound, she generates a dramatic spatial presentation of social and communicative functions and dysfunctions. Objects, gestures, and various apparatuses collaborate with site and viewer in white cloth to unveil the historical architecture and to play with the fugitive nature of memory.

Hamilton removed most of Aldrich's museum renovation to create a continuous tableau dictated by the multi-roomed space. Using domestic objects, tables, chairs, a book, a window and encompassing the private activities of writing and reading, she also employed hidden chicanery to jog human and architectural memories. "As a maker I want to animate the history of ecstatic voices," she said.

On opening day, Hamilton herself could be seen walking through the exhibition while stitching the hem on a stained white cloth. "My first hand is a sewing hand," she said. Attached to an awkward mechanical pulley, the cloth runs through sawed holes in the floors and walls, like a hysterical ghost. When it passes in front of 13 newly exposed windows, a motion detector triggers a speaker beneath a copper drum, causing the water within to ripple.

The next room contained a long table on which a dining table-sized white cloth was suspended in fluttering animation. Air hissing through tiny holes in the table legs and surface created this effect, hinting at the moments before the cloth came to rest: perhaps to receive the decades of table settings, communions, sacraments of birth and death, of ancestors.

Hamilton's weeping wall, *welle*, was first installed by itself at PS.1. Brought into the context of the Aldrich, it evoked Puritan notions of ecstatic mysteries, as well as the histories embodied in the architecture. Unlike a medium or magician, Hamilton reveals the mechanics of the work, since her intent is to expose, not mystify. To make the wall weep, she contracted with a pharmaceutical company to supply experimental intravenous technology. The wall, referencing bodily secretions, also arose from Hamilton's reading of John Donne, "who was writing at a time when the word was animate and spirit existed in everything."

Writing and text have played a major role in Hamilton's works, not as narrative but as deconstructed language which becomes object. In *mne*, an installation she created in Liverpool in 1994, she portrayed a seated figure incising lines of text, which were then wrapped into a ball. In 1993, at the Dia Foundation in New York, *tropos* contained a person seated at a table burning text from a book. In white cloth, an open room flagged left from a wide center hall, where the inclusion of a too-precious antique butcher-block table was

upstaged by a sermon from Cotton Mather that was set like a fragment of stained glass in the window. Hamilton copied the text in a continuously cursive, blood red line, jumbling the words and spaces so that the words dissolved into an illegible web. "As I write," she said, "each undoing is an art of making: or reframing the terms," like a preliterate level of knowing not short-circuited by language. Another red text, inserted under a satin cloth inside a desk, referenced the skin as exterior while pointing to the interior private realm of sexuality. This contrasted with the cultural delirium of an American colonialist pathology that emphasized devotion and denial of the flesh.

A spinning disk of floor incised into the parquet of another room was supposed to be a vehicle for disorientation or sensory release, alluding to Dervishes or other group ritual practices. But it worked only by implication: the patrons of the museum alighted, balancing awkwardly in semiserious congregation, while the preponderance of weight slowed the disc's revolutions to a sluggish drone. Hamilton's continued heavy explanation was consistent, however, with her concerns about perception, that, "at floor level, the disc directs one's perception to see through the body and not the eyes."

Often in this installation, Hamilton's abstruse significations required a serious stretch for the viewer. A more successful piece, in the same room as the disc, was a collar sitting on the wall, made of metal and mirrors, and similar in overall form to Elizabethan and Puritan ruffs. If donned, this collar would blind the wearer with reflected light while, at the same time, the wearer's view of the lower body would be blocked by the breadth of the collar.

Another less heroic work illustrating Hamilton's concepts was a tiny blurred photograph made by placing a miniature pinhole camera inside her lips and exposing the film using apertures created by various sounds she made. The camera sat in her mouth, the border between interior and exterior, between feeling and articulation. The image portrayed was a staring omnipotent eye, a stunning conceptual move that needed no trappings to succeed.

Unlike tropes, mneme and Hamilton's other large single focus installations, white cloth seemed a transitional work whose surreal and intellectual focus was often uncomfortably esoteric. Working within a meandering domestic space, she was unable to create the singular pictorial theatricality that is a most fascinating component of her oeuvre. White cloth was instead, much like a puzzle that could be assembled only with certain arcane information.

-Carolee Thea

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