

## “Ann Hamilton at the Miami Art Museum”

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Ann Hamilton's works extend over the nine capacious spaces on the second floor of the Miami Art Museum (MAM). These are two separate exhibits: One – "the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1996" – a comprehensive mid-career show, curated by the Wexner Center for the Arts; the other – *mantle* – a new work commissioned by MAM and created especially for the museum, following the artist's 1997 visit to Miami and her encounter with the materials indigenous to this subtropical city located between the Americas.

Hamilton's installation works are always labor-intensive, usually monumental in scale and maintain an affinity (historical, anthropological or social) to the specific location for which they were created. Her art is characterized by a poetic, sensual, magical quality, and is saturated with influences of sociology, literature and psychology. Joseph Beuys is often mentioned as her spiritual ancestor, and his impact is indeed conspicuous in the extensive use of various natural organic materials (honey, lamb's wool, weeds, pig's skin, moth caterpillars, beetles, snails, and even animal carcasses), in the perception of sculpture as thought in space, in the totality and in the deviation from producing salable objects.

The video works, the sound, the photographs and the objects presented within the framework of "the body and the object" are remnants, objects and evidence from Hamilton's projects executed in the past 12 years. In this sense, the show is documentary and herein also lies its problematic nature for it is impossible to recreate the scent, the temperature, the touch, and the authentic setting of things at a given time and place—such as the variety of live birds, horse hair, or disintegrating carcasses that she has utilized in several installations.

The new work, *mantle*, created especially for MAM, compensates significantly for the absence of authentic human presence and for the cold

nature of the documentary works. In an elongated room with a window in its elongated outer wall stands a wooden table, 50 feet long. On the table a huge heap of 60,000 flowers towers above viewers' heads. In varying degrees of withering, wilting and drying, they fill the room with a strong smell of blossom and decay. Standing near the table one becomes aware of a cacophony of muffled sounds, a mixture of languages and signals from different parts of the world, that are emitted from the heart of the flowers. A closer look into the flower heap reveals peculiar, exposed wires hanging from a shelf near the ceiling, originating in 40 tiny radio receivers which transmit the sounds of life via short and long radio waves. With her back to the table and her face to the window – a typical Vermeerean pose – a woman sits on a white wooden chair slowly and carefully re-stitching the detached sleeves and collars of heavy woolen Northern coats. Upon completing the stitching job she hangs the coat on the back of the chair and starts the process all over again.

A new motif of sensory pleasure is intertwined in this work alongside Hamilton's familiar imagery. There is something festive, elegant, almost decadent, about the atmosphere created around the flower table; it is theatrical and mysterious, but with a smaller dose of horror and a very large quantity of hedonistic beauty. It is the kind of beauty that pierces the heart before the consciousness starts deciphering and wrapping it with a web of meanings – one of which is that the abundance of flower-species represents the plenitude of cultures characterizing Miami's social texture, as well as Miami's giant-scale wholesale flower industry. In a similar vein, the productive, laboring hand recurring in Hamilton's works acquires a new, more positive meaning – less Sisyphean and more functional. Whereas a previous, *seam*, also comprised an action involving clothes, there the artist unstitched thousands of clothing items prior to the opening of the exhibition, so that the act of unraveling was charged with symbolic meanings linked to the act of erasure. In *mantle*, Hamilton is restitching, mending the unstitched pieces to render them useful again. The title of the work, too, refers to the process of creating a covering, just as it refers to the flowers blanketing the

space, the coats wrapping the body and the totality which is supposed to envelope the viewer.

Indeed *mantle* embodies almost anything found in the Hamiltonian oeuvre: perfect spatial perception, poetic beauty, sensory totality, rich materiality, sound, smell, color, elements suspended from the ceiling, and a human presence engaged in painstaking manual labor – an entity which serves simultaneously as "a subject, an object, and a witness." With this installation, however, labor acquires an added therapeutic aura, not only in the utopian, value-oriented sense of perpetuating the human touch, but also in the sense of healing – curing the soul. The meditative, hypnotic effect of the act compels the viewer to slow down, to be self-attentive, to activate all the senses and tune in to his or her reactions. In the dense atmosphere of our life, such rare moments have a metaphysical, if not magical, value.

**Translated by Daria Kassovsky**