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Exploring Excess in the work of Ann Hamilton

by

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Introduction

Excess: *extreme or improper degree, a going beyond,*

the overstepping of the accepted limit of moderation,

Excessive: *more than what is normal or necessary.*

[The Oxford Dictionary]

Collecting, gathering, cleaning, layering, nailing, burning, sewing, folding, erasing...these everyday activities are the skills employed for the creation of many of Ann Hamilton's installations. But the scale of the work means these activities may have to be repeated hundreds and thousands of times. One by one objects are prepared and placed until they form a giant skin that surrounds the viewer. The sheer vastness of these works denies moderation. They overstep the accepted limit for accumulation. But it is obvious that these objects have been chosen and carefully prepared by human hands: one is reminded of the work of an obsessed collector, the collection takes over the space, in fact it becomes the space.

Excess, then, is everywhere in Hamilton's installations: water flows and drips off tables soaking a layer of wool which stretches out covering the floor; shirts are pressed and starched to such an extent that they are rendered unwearable; sitters repeat chores that seem to pass the limit of usefulness. Often the chore is so great that one feels it may never reach conclusion.

In this thesis I wish to examine this excessiveness in the artwork of Ann Hamilton. I am interested in how this excessiveness functions in/as the artwork. Hamilton herself speaks of wanting to create pieces which will "engulf" viewers and bombard their senses. She believes that knowledge should not just be seen as belonging to the intellect and separate from the experience of the body. She celebrates a type of knowledge "that comes through the skin", [Bruce, 1992, p.19]

Hamilton, born and now living in Ohio, has a history as a fabric artist, she sees textiles as a type of skin: a boundary.

> *Cloth, like human skin, is a membrane that divides an interior from an exterior. It both reveals and conceals. It can surround or divide. In its making individual threads of warps are crossed successively by individual threads of weft. Thus, cloth is an accumulation of many gestures of crossing which, like my gestures of accumulation, retain an individual character while accreting to become something else.*
>
> [Hamilton in Wakefield, 1993, p.16]

This idea of cloth contain the two main concerns of this thesis. First the idea of boundary - I am interested in excessive bodies which question and probe socially

controlled limits. Secondly, I am interested in how the labour used in the construction of these excessive 'skins' can facilitate a discussion on labour value, the individual and the community.

In Section 1 I have decided to look at various theories and analyses of an excessive state: hysteria. It is important to state that I am not trying to 'interpret' Hamilton's art through these theories, though I will draw comparisons between characteristics found both in relation to hysteria and Hamilton's work. I am particularly interested in the recent idea of hysteria as a resistant force. Feminists who follow this theory see those in this excessive state as using the body to resist 'Patriarchal Law'.

The freak like the hysteric is a grotesque body. Bakhtin and others have looked to the freak as an excessive body that threatens social order, but it is also a binary by which to construct order. We are told that "through the freak we derive an image of the normal; to know an age's typical freaks is, in fact, to know its points of standardisation", [Stewart, 1993, p.133]. Hamilton's installations allow us to step outside of this standardisation and into the space of the grotesque body.

In the second section I will explore the theme of labour in Hamilton's art. I will investigate how this theme in Hamilton's work might be included in a discussion on excess production and consumption in modern society. I will then look at the evidence and presence of labour in Hamilton's installations. An industrial labour, one which follows a 'machine time' is often echoed in the work: "such repetitions...seem meaningless precisely because they have no capacity for

memory, causality and closure", [Stewart, 1994, p.20]. At the same time the artwork points to another form of labour and to 'other' economies (i.e., peasant and 'female' economies). Hamilton gathers together a 'community' of workers to install these massive works. The mark of the individual labourer, something which has to a great extent vanished from modern work practices, is of importance to Hamilton. The bodies relation to the object and the reliance on the 'knowledge of the body' in labour traditions also concern her.

Section 1

a garage, a place, a platform
mounded, blue work clothing ,laid
a layer of pants, a layer of shirts
the built strata of bodies absent
mountain, belly, shadow, memory
a presence in the face of a response

[Hamilton in Morgan (ed.), 1992, p.25]

Bouts of hysteria may have been viewed or experienced by most people at one time or another. The word is usually used to describe extreme displays of emotion, surpassing the socially accepted code of behaviour. The hysteric (a person, usually female, who displays constant or regular examples of hysteria) has long been seen as a medical phenomenon, (although in recent times, due mainly to feminism, the word 'hysteric' is rarely used in medical or social dialogue).

Although hysteria itself is considered one of the main reasons for the evolution of psychoanalytic practice, it is important to remember that psychoanalysis is largely responsible for the representation of the hysteric. So in varying degrees one creates the other, but it is psychoanalysis that attempts to rationalise the hysteric in a scientific discourse. Bearing this in mind I will begin by looking at two of the

most famous case histories on the hysteric and recent feminist theories which have been applied to them.

The French feminists Helen Cixous and Catherine Clement in their book *The Newly Born Woman* see the hysteric as resisting the Father. In 'Exchange' (a transcript of an oral discussion between both women) they discuss Freud's case of Dora. Dora was an eighteen year old girl whom Freud began treating for hysteria in 1900. She was sent to him by her father after he found a letter in which she threatened to take her life. Her symptoms included nervous coughing, loss of concentration, temporary voice loss, migraine, and at times an inability to breathe. Dora, who is represented as an intelligent girl, attended lectures when she could and was occupied with "more or less serious studies",[Freud, 1977, p.53], but she was expected to take up the role of the female in bourgeois society, and was responsible for the family and domestic duties.

Dora's father was having an affair with Frau K., the wife of Herr K., who were both close friends of the family. Dora believed she was being used as a pawn in the game by being offered to Herr K. by her father, through hints and innuendoes, in return for his wife.

> *overcome by the idea that she had been handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relations between her father and his wife,*
> [Freud, 1977, p.66]

Cixous sees Dora as not conforming to the social laws of the day, which she (Dora) sees as hypocritical. For example, while divorce is unacceptable, adultery

may go on once everyone is willing to keep the secret, or decide (maybe subconsciously) to ignore it.

> *The pact is "no one will say what he knows". Everybody knows but everybody is silent, and everybody profits from it.*
> [Cixous & Clement, 1986, p.278]

But Dora refuses to keep the pact. In what could be seen as a case of the 'Emperors New Clothes' Dora, refusing to play the game, calls out what she sees: the truth. She ignores the unwritten laws of the day and speaks of the 'secret' relationship between her father and Frau.K., one which others even her mother are aware of, but act as if oblivious to the entire affair.

Cixous describes how, while reading the Dora case, she felt that Dora would 'break' under the pressure of her situation. Instead she sees Dora as emerging the strongest while all the male players in this "classic bourgeois comedy"[Cixous & Clement, 1986, p.278] have their false reality shattered (although she is quick to point out that this is only a temporary state). Clement and Cixous see the hysteric as resisting the Father, but also attacking him. They see the place of the attack to be centred on the body of the hysteric. She attacks the father by forcing him to see what he does not want to: "obliging him to see, but also obliging him to endure the attack's indefinite repetition,"[Cixous & Clement, 1986, p.18]. They see the hysteric as a destructive force, "untying familiar bonds, introducing disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life",[Cixous & Clement, 1986, p.5]

Elizabeth Brofen views the hysteric as probing and questioning the law of the family to dictate and enforce 'codes of sexuality'. She sees the hysteric as using "sexuality, an intensification of the body as site and language of self-representation",[Brofen,1998, p.120].

In 1880 Breuer (one of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis) began treating a young woman for hysteria, whom he re-named Anna O. She is described by Breuer in his case study, as a woman of intelligence, "with an astonishingly quick grasp of things and penetrating intuition". This girl who was "bubbling over with intellectual vitality, led an extremely monotonous existence in her puritanically-minded family," [Freud and Breuer, 1991, p.73]. Since leaving school at the age of sixteen, she had no outlet for her intellectual leanings. She was required to stay home and look after her ill father, while her 'less brilliant' younger brother went off to university. It was after the death of her father, that Anna O.'s hysteria began to show in a variety of symptoms.

Anna O.'s speech difficulties began with an inability to "find words". She would stop mid-sentence in search of the next word. She lost her ability to arrange words. "Later she lost her command of grammar and syntax...", and she then displayed an inability to understand others, or express herself in her native tongue, German. Instead she spoke in a foreign language, while "in times of extreme anxiety," she spoke "in an unintelligible mixture" of up to five different languages. Her speech problems reached a climax in total muteness.

For two weeks she became completely dumb and in spite of making great efforts to speak she was unable to say a syllable.
[Freud and Breuer, 1991, p.71]

Diana Hunter, in her book *Hysteria, psychoanalysis, and Feminism: the case of Anna O*, connects Anna O.'s speech disability with a refusal of patriarchal language. Referring to Lacanian thought, she states: "In patriarchal socialisation, the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father", [Hunter, 1985, pp.474-5]. Elaine Showalter in the *Female Malady* continues this train of thought stating that Anna O.'s loss of speech coincided with a realisation that she no longer had a place in the world of men: "We might say that words failed her, as her father had failed her in consigning her to a subordinate role in the family,"' [Showalter, 1987, p.157]. Showalter sees Anna as instead adopting a female language, this afore-mentioned "semiotic babble" which takes place between the mother and the child, "a language partly of the body and partly a pastiche of foreign words, gestures, and neologisms", [Showalter, 1987, p.157].

In *Tropos* (New York, 1993) an installation created by Hamilton, one passes through a doorway into a large room, the floor of which is entirely covered in an undulating carpet of horsehair [figure 1]. Situated in the centre is a sitter who is reading, and after destroying text from a book (see CD-ROM):

The figure remained absorbed in this task, ritualistic in its deliberateness. Over the duration of the piece, the text - transformed into smoke -became absorbed as smell into the odor of the horsehair that covered the entire floor.
[Nesbitt(ed.), 1996, p.59]

Figure 1

Tropos (1993)

"Indecipherable murmuring" can be heard from outside the exhibition space, beyond the windows. This soundtrack has confused viewers who at first thought it was someone speaking in English, but then realised that it wasn't 'real' language at all, but spoken noise taking on the tonal patterns of language. As with Anna O's language, this noise has been compared with various communicative sounds passed between mother and baby, sounds which do not appear to make any sense. Hamilton is concerned with the trust we put in language and a tendency we have to ignore the 'knowledge of the body'. Language can only ever be a representation of the 'truth'. It "suppresses the unbearable realisation of what remains outside of codification and human systems of knowledge: what Lacan calls 'the Real' of nature and death", [Stewart, 1990, p.23]. Hamilton's installations credit the body as a receiver of knowledge, not merely visual displays, they position the viewer within the work and inform him/her through a sensuous bombardment of sound, smell, touch and sight.

> *Hamilton's repeated gestures of dissolution are important in the post-modern critical dialogue, especially given the contemporary tendency to confuse reality with its represen -tation...Language [she] reminds us, is a classified experience and a system of communication - not "knowing" or "that which is known".*
>
> [Geer, July 7 1994, p.21]

What may be seen as an act of destruction in erasing the text she sees as one of re-creation, replacing a written text with one of colour, markings and texture [figure 2](see also CD-ROM).

In *malediction* an installation Hamilton created in the Louver Gallery, New York in 1991, the viewer on entering the exhibition hears a voice reciting Walt

Figure 2

Tropos (1993)

Whitman's *Songs of Myself* and *The Body Electric.* They see a figure sitting with her back to them, whose jaw is moving as in speech. Hamilton describes the voice as "containing the quality, pace, and tone of an internal dialogue," and "the sound was that of one reading softly to oneself,"[Nesbitt(ed.), 1996, p.56], but as the viewers approach the sitter they realise that the voice does not belong to her, but is coming from a source outside the sitter's body (speakers buried in the wall), just as the voice in *Tropos* came from outside the room. The movement of the mouth is the result "not of speaking but [of] filling her mouth with dough to make an impression"[Nesbitt(ed.), 1996, p.30]. The dialogue in which the sitter is involved is between the body and the object making an impression of a space, an orifice that is the point of oral communication, the point where ideas and thoughts become language, the border between the internal and external expression. And for the likes of Anna O., the point is where the internal must be altered or moulded to fit the language of the father.

Wakefield tells us of Jorge Luis Borges, who sees language as imposing structure and order, drawing boundaries, labelling and classifying and yet it, "remains always an abstraction, separate from the world of lived experience, separate from the very thing it seeks to describe,"[Wakefield in Cooke and Kelly (eds.), 1993, p.9].

Many feminists believe that rather than using language the hysteric uses her body as a site for attacking the father. Luce Irigaray sees this as the "only possible means for women to speak within patriarchal ideology", [Wills in Apter & Pietz (eds.), p.144].In a similar way to Clement and Cixous, Irigaray sees the hysteric

as being in a suitable position to attack the Father. She believes that the patriarchal cannot be properly confronted from within phalocentric discourse since, "any theory of the subject is always appropriated by the masculine,"[Irigaray, 1985, pp.66-73]. The hysteric situates herself 'outside' of this discourse.

So in a sense the hysteric can be seen as a symbol of the 'unofficial' where the laws of the Father do not apply. As illustrated below by Mark Micale, hysteria has always remained allusive in the face of medical examiners and institutions. This inability to 'pin it down' may itself be testimony to the theory of the hysteric as resistant.

> *The disorder has been viewed as a manifestation of everything from divine poetic inspiration and satanic possession to female unreason, racial degeneration and unconscious psychosexual conflict. It has inspired gynaecological, humeral, neurological, psychological and sociological formulations, and it has been situated in the womb, the abdomen, the nerves, the ovaries, the mind, the brain, the psyche, and the soul. It has been construed as a physical disease, a mental disorder, a spiritual malady, a behavioural maladjustment, a sociological communication, and as no illness at all.*
>
> [Micale, 1995, p.285]

The hysteric state in its defiance of definition is a threat to 'male science' and other forms of patriarchal knowledge, who 'know' by objectification and rationalisation of the subject.1 Such dangers are 'controlled' when they are understood and categorised. In fact as Charles Bernheimer points out, throughout history from Plato's *Timaeus* to Freud's case histories, a recommended cure for

female hysteria is marriage and childbirth: returning her to her given role within patriarchal society, [Bernheimer, 1990, p.3].

There is often a sense of a loss of control in Hamilton's installations, substances appear uncontainable in there excess. On entering *Tropos* the viewer encounters a 'sea of horsehair' stitched together and laid out as a carpet covering the entire ground of the installation (see CD-ROM). To reach the centre of the room the viewer must wade through the horsehair. I want to use this image of the 'sea of hair' as a means of entry into a discussion on excess in relation to Hamilton's work. In Collins Thesaurus seas are described as "ocean, the deep, the waves; expanse, mass, multitude..."

This excessive mass of water brings to mind Hamilton's excessive use of gestures and objects. The 250, 000 copper tokens pinned to the floor and walls of *Parallel Lines* (Sao Paulo, 1991), the deep layers of 14, 000 pounds of clothing in *Indigo Blue* (Charleston, 1991), and the 750, 000 pennies laid on a carpet of honey in *Privations and Excesses* (San Francisco, 1989). As in *Tropos* these installations all have either the constant presence of a sitter repeating a given task, (such as the figure in *Tropos* systematically reading and destroying text), or are testimony to the repeated gesture of labour involved in their construction (stitching together of the horsehair floor, or nailing down of copper tokens). Each individual gesture and individual hair in their accumulation form a massive body which floods the gallery floor.

The hysteric is often seen as one prone to uncontrollable emotional outbursts. In her essay on emotional states, Deborah Lupton points to the use of language concerned with water and fluidity when describing the emotions. Such as E. Grosz's description:

> *Like body fluids, emotions 'flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed'.*
> [Grosz in Lupton, 1998, p.97]

Lupton in her research on emotion, conducted interviews with forty one men and women between the ages of 19 and 72. The majority of these while feeling a need for the expression of emotion were concerned with controlling how much they 'let out'. "People are said to 'lose control' or 'lose it' if they openly express their emotions". Therefore this flowing is often looked on with suspicion, with fear of an overflow. Emotions may be expressed, but only if this expression is in accordance with the social laws of the day, [Lupton, 1998, pp.87-90].

The hysteric is often described as a grotesque body and the grotesque body can be seen as a representation of the emotional body, "a body that is able (or unable) to contain itself in socially acceptable ways, a body that threatens to burst apart its boundaries," [Lupton, 1998, p.91].

Heywood (1996) tells us that in society 'self-management' is conducted by the denial and avoidance of excess. "Emotional states, according to this logic, are impure, defiling, animalistic," [Heywood in Lupton, 1998, p.96]. And therefore,

according to this logic, excessive bodies, such as the hysteric and the content of Hamilton's installations, do not adhere to the current laws of society.

Lupton discusses the fluidity of emotions as being 'problematic' in that they can be seen to dissolve the boundary between the interior and the exterior. This idea of boundary is of great importance in Hamilton's art. The work probes, examines and questions our ideas of social and bodily boundaries. Her work often positions itself on these boundaries: language/experience, words/things, public/private, animal/human, body/object. It allows subjects to push or cross these borders.

In *Tropos* one enters a large space, its surface covered with hair. We leave speech behind (murmurs heard outside the window). If we compare the room with the body - the door becomes the mouth, an opening which controls the intake and release of matter into and out of the body. The mouth, an orifice, situated on the border between the internal and external, a place where language is formed and released from the body. The idea of passing through boundaries is echoed in the sitter's action of reading the text, allowing each line to pass into the memory of the body before transforming it into smoke. The smoke itself is then absorbed by the horsehair.

If we continue with the idea of the space as a body we realise we have entered a grotesque body, a monster. Hair grows on and covers the skin of the body. Something is not right; we are asked to walk on hair which lines the internal instead of the external. Hamilton is aware of this uncomfortable situation. She says, "it is very difficult for us to deal with anything that's supposed to be inside

that's outside, and supposed to be outside that's inside," [Hamilton in Simon, 1995, pp.21-30].

> *The grotesque body thus can be effected by the exaggeration of its internal elements, the turning of the 'inside out', in addition to this interpenetration of the exterior and interior of the body... an exchange between animal and human also can be used to effect the grotesque and its corresponding sense of interchange and disorder.*
> [Stewart, 1993, p.105]

Hair itself is a substance that dissolves the boundary between that which is part of, and that which is not part of the body: Hair is, to a large degree a dead substance and so cannot be said to be fully part of the living body, yet it contains vital information about the body; "its scales bear the imprint of everything the body has consumed and suffered," [Warner in Cooke and Kelly (eds.), 1993, p.92].

Kristeva the French theorist developed the idea of the abject. Often the abject such as bodily excrement disgusts us. Our society has declared them taboo, and banished them from public space. But by its very nature the abject is, "the marker of the very boundary of the body with society"[Meskimmon, 1996, p.9]. Hair cut from the body is considered a bit revolting (as are cut fingernails), and should be swept out of public view and disposed off. Mary Douglas, the anthropologist, studied the categorisation of dirt in societies, and found that "dirt was a by-product of the creation of order", [Douglas, 1966, p.162]. But by its nature the abject can never be fully expelled from society.

> *In all cases, the abject threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject. It calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed.* [Oliver, 1993, p.56]

The hair we are walking on is not human but animal. Hamilton on many occasions includes an animal presence in her installations. She investigates the interplay between animal and human. She is interested in the animal as a commodity, the economy of nature, the border between the domestic and nature and the communal labour in natural living structures (such as the quilting bee). In *Tropos* the border between animal and human is brought into play, the edges become a little unclear. It is within this confusion that the grotesque body exists.

> *The hysterical body challenges the interpreter not only to find its story, but to revise conventional stories, to recognise that bodies exceed and infringe the social constructions of gender and desire.*
> [Brooks, 1993, p.244]

This grotesque body is also known by the name 'freak' or 'monster'. Rossi Bradiotti and Mary Russo have included in their work the history and origin of 'the freak'. They see this as being very much linked to the development of the natural sciences, particularly medicine. They see the 'freak' or 'monster' as functioning as 'the other' within science, that by which we define 'healthy' or 'normal'.

We remember Charot's hysterics, how their insane illness also functioned as a gauge for which to measure saneness.2

> *So-called monsters and freaks were identified, used for experiments, explained and controlled through forms of knowledge which normalised 'correct' and 'proper' bodies.*
> [Meskimmon, 1996, p.7]

In Hamilton's work substances are in such an excess that they are at the point of being uncontrollable. There is too much hair, so many shirts that they threaten to fall on and cover the labourer [figure 3]. Water drips and overflows from tables soaking wool-covered floors, bags sagging full of Soya beans drip moisture, sound is mumbled continuously, inexhaustible amounts of objects are supplied to the sitter to be laboured on. These all echo the grotesque body which fails to control and contain as a 'normal' body should.

Bahktin saw the grotesque body as belonging to the hysteria of carnival. It is within the space of the carnival that 'freaks of nature' were displayed. Bodies whose excessiveness or lack make them 'monsters', undefinable as 'normal' human beings. The grotesque body had an accepted place in the carnival. Bahktin describes the carnival as being a time and place where the 'official' structures of society no longer exist. During the carnival the order of the state, the church and other official ruling bodies are ignored, there is no governing force, no higher power; "it is a festival offered not by some exterior source but by the people to themselves," [Bakhtin, 1984, p.246]. There is also a suspension of all hierarchic differences, of all ranks and status.

> *In the world of carnival all hierarchies are cancelled.*
> *All castes and ages are equal. During the fire festival*
> *a young boy blows out his father's candle, crying out...*
> *"death to you, sir, father!".*
> [Bahktin, 1984, p.251]

Figure 3

Still Life (1988)

Therefore it could be said that by creating an alternative world, the carnival can be seen as resistant to all that is official. The 'monster' always escapes definition, its very uncontainability is its form of resistance and rebellion.

Footnotes

1. A discussion on the mind/body split in relation to the rational sciences can be found in Toril Moi's essay 'Patriarchal thought and the drive for Knowledge', [Moi, 1980, p.191]. In this essay Moi discusses the work of feminist writers who have pointed to and attempted to deconstruct binary oppositions in the philosophy of science. Evelyn Fox Keller sees male science as separating the world into the knower (mind) and the knowable (nature). She believes Patriarchal ideology genders nature female, while knowledge is gendered male. She calls for an end to the divide between reason and emotion, and between the subject and the object. This she feels can only be achieved if those qualities gendered female are included in the world of science. Moi agrees with Keller but rather than calling this new mode of knowledge 'female' she believes it should not be gendered. It should just be seen as a more inclusive and rounded "universal" science."The feminist solution is to work for a transformation of male science by demanding that the female virtues of empathy and understanding , so often called 'female modes of knowing', be included in the scientific enterprise".

2. The French physician Charot was the first European 'expert' on hysteria. He carried out his work in the Paris clinic at the Salpetriere during the late nineteenth century. During his public lectures hysterics and their symptoms were put 'on show' before an eager audience. These tightly choreographed shows became a 'theatre of hysteria', where the Grande finale amounted in the performance of a full hysterical seizure'. We are told that images of the hysteric were met with such interest that he established a technologically elaborate photo studio within the hospital in which to record images of the hysteric, alongside this a sophisticated method of observation and choosing of models was developed, [Showalter, 1987, pp.152-5].

Section 2

In *Indigo Blue* 47, 000 uniforms were cleaned and folded with care and arranged in layers (the trousers first and then the shirts). In front of this mound a person sat at a table systematically erasing text from small, blue history books using a pink pearl eraser [figure 4](see also CD-ROM). This repetition of object and labour is very relevent in modern industrial society. A mechanical often monotonous continuous labour that is mainly associated with the lower working classes. There is a reminiscence of alienated actions repeated by individuals in a monotonous, mechanical manner, (i.e., a conveyor-belt labour process). The clothes folded and placed perfectly layer after layer echo these mechanical actions (we are also reminded of woman's work in the home where a chore is constantly repeated without end).

In modern society we experience what has come to be known as commodity fetishism. That is, we focus on the surface of the object and ignore the labour that has gone into its creation. The value of the commodity becomes separated from the value of the labour. Marx uses the word 'hidden' to describe this:

> *the determination of the magnitude of value of labour*
> *time is the secret hidden under the apparent movements*
> *in the relative value of commodities.*[Marx in Capital, 1967, p.48]

Figure 4

Indigo Blue (1991)

Fetishism occurs when an object or image is seen as a representative for something else. The term fetishism first became widely used to describe the worshipping of religious objects by African tribes and later with cult objects of western religions. Hal Foster discusses the movement from religious fetishism to commodity fetishism where, like the religious object, the commodity is "endorsed with a special force or independent life," [Foster in Apter and Pietz (eds.), 1993, p.25].

Hamilton's work appears to have a fascination with the object, with 'things' whether it be thousands of candles, workclothes or coppertags. Much of Capitalist society is built on a fascination with the commodity, the 'thing'. We are told that for us the value of the commodity has gone far beyond its use value.

> *It was not simply the embodiment of value; it could also contain many other 'magical' attributes. Once the separation from use value is made, the door opens to allcomers.*
>
> [Gammen and Makinen, 1994, p.31]

Commodities now offer us 'lifestyles', consumer choice is closely linked to personal identity.

Hamilton's collections of objects, the workshirts or the thousands of human and animal teeth in *Between Taxonmony and Communion,* could be seen to be the work of an obsessive collector. In most cases Hamilton's mass of objects don't seem to hold much economic value. In *Privation and Excess* she collected 750, 000 pennies. Here she used a coin of such little value that it is often discarded as

worthless in modern society. In *Still Life* she pressed and singed the edges of shirts so that they could no longer be worn, declaring them useless, thereby stripping them of their value. Her work reminds one of those who collect for sentimental reasons rather than economic. Such a collector is characteristically female.

> *Men for instance, have collections - stamps, cars, art, etc. that add up in financial terms, while women collect items of sentimental worth.*
> [Foster in Apter and Pietz (eds.), 1993, p.35]

Mary Kelly's exhibition *Post-Partum Document* deals with the mother's sense of loss as the child is weaned from the breast and grows physically distant from her. The exhibition is made up of objects from and related to the child (a lock of hair, a child's shoe) which Kelly believes are objects of maternal fetishism. "The mother's memorabilia...signals a disavowal of the lack inscribed by the separation from the child," [Kelly in Apter and Pietz (eds.), 1993, p.353]. The objects represent the absent child for the mother and so are considered 'priceless'.

Many believe that there is a separate economy to that of the father. Cixous speaks of an *economic feminine*. A masculine economy is seen as one with many characteristics of capitalism, "presupposing some kind of allocation of property rights (mine and thine) and assuming that individuals behave rationally" [Still in Wright(ed.), 1992, p.91]. Any emotional input is thought of in terms of investment and return. Whereas a female economy may be seen as a gift economy where a return is not necessarily expected nor the main reason for the gift,

"Cixous suggests that while there is no absolute free gift, yet there can be a gift which does not involve a profitable return,"[Still in Wright (ed.), 1992, p.91].

Such a gift service is gendered female and usually offered by the mother, wife, female carer in the home. Tending to children, repeating domestic chores hourly and daily, preparing food, washing clothes. It is a labour of giving which produces no product and no profit. It is a cyclical labour. Much of Hamilton's work can be seen to refer to or echo this labour. Even *Indigo Blue* which has an industrial setting hints at those 'others' of society whose labours go unpaid and unpraised the woman, and the slave (the table on which the sitter was working was once used in a local slave market), while other installations have as their subject domestic labour. *Still Life* illustrates the excesses of domestic toll, with a pile of shirts on the verge of falling and covering the sitter.

Throughout the period of Hamilton's exhibitions there is often the constant presence of a sitter repeating a task. This task appears to have no end at all, no point of arrival or relief. Like housework there is an inexhaustible supply of things to be laboured on or with.

> *It would require a Herculean feat to transform the yarn strung between the pillars into a knitted sheath; similarly the goal of erasing the texts from books which, because they appear generic, were endlessly replaceable, carried the implication that there was no imminent end point, no foreseeable terminus.*
>
> [Cooke, 1993, p.69]

The feminist Charlotte Gilman conducted an analysis of housework. She described domestic work as, "a state of development through which all kinds [of work] pass," [Mertes in Fuenmayor, Hang and Ward (eds.), 1992, p.61]. She saw all industries as having originated from a domestic setting; "that is they were performed at home and in the interests of the family," [Mertes in Fuenmayor, Hang and Ward (eds.), 1992, p.61]. Here domestic work is described as still existing in a 'primal' state where almost all other industries and forms of work have moved on and up. Therefore in the hierarchical order of work unpaid domestic labour takes the lowest position.

> *All industries have since that remote period risen to higher stages, except one or two which have never left their primal stage.*
>
> [Mertes in Fuenmayor, Hang and Ward (eds.), 1992, p.61]

Marcel Mauss was the first to speak of the gift economy. This was not necessarily in relation to the female, but to primitive societies. He believed that gift-giving started off a form of exchange between individuals and societies. To receive a gift meant one was obliged to give one in return. "This form of gift exchange meant that at all times one side was in debt to the other. Thus ensuring a continual cycle of exchange within and could be developed securely," [Mauss in MacKay (ed.), 1997, p.22].

Hamilton often speaks of the influence these 'gift economies' have on her work. She refers to John Berger's book *Pig Earth*, which discusses French peasant society. The fast declining peasant society still contains a lot of the characteristics of a gift economy. While belonging to a capitalist state Berger believes it can

almost be seen to function as a separate community within 'official' society.1 An economic interdependency within the community has a lot to do with this: "Unlike any other working and exploited class, the peasantry has always supported itself and this made it, to some degree, a class apart," [Berger, 1992, p.xii].

Lewis Hyde in a discussion on 'the gift' differentiates between work and labour. For him labour is not carried out primarily as a response to a need for financial payment. The labour itself dictates its own speed and, unlike work, payment cannot be measured by the hour.

> *It sets its own pace and hence is harder to quantify in terms of payment; while the initial groundwork may be set, thereafter it will develop its own schedule, dictated by its own course rather than by any external one, carried forward by its own rhythm.*
> [Cooke, 1993, p.71]]

This idea of labour is at the core of much of what Hamilton's pieces are about, both in their construction and the viewer's experience. In the space of the installation this rhythm of labour seems to set its own time-scale. Rather than counting by 'official' time (seconds, minutes, hours), time is counted by repeated gestures. One letter is erased, then a line, then a whole book. In *Indigo Blue* the erasings were left to accumulate about the sitter, as were the erased texts, like the sands in an hourglass - testimony to movement through time.

The average time for a viewer to spend looking at a work of art in a gallery is fifteen seconds [Stewart, 1992, p.19]. Hamilton's pieces often employs methods

which physically slow down the viewer's movement through the work, enveloping him/her in its own internal time-scale. The physical scale of each piece in relation to the viewer's body positions him/her in a type of landscape through which they can move. But the excessive amount of objects which are normally in direct relation to the scale of the body, in their mass form, become giant-like.

On occasion the objects in the work themselves become physical obstacles to the viewer's pace of movement and sense of geography in the space. In *Tropos* the horsehair covering the floor means the visitor must wade carefully through the space and cannot possibly walk in a 'normal' manner. In *Between Taxonomy and Communion* small, square, glass panels were placed on a ground of wet wool. To travel into the space led to a distortion to the visitor's secure pace of movement. In order to move through the work the viewer themselves take on a rather laborious task, one which relies on the knowledge of the body. In *Mneme* (1994) layers of cloth only inches apart hang from the ceiling to just above the floor. Viewers literally had to 'feel' there way through the fabric. Our body navigates us so successfully through everyday life that we are frequently unaware of our own movements and gestures. Positioned in these challenging environments the viewer has a heightened sense of his/her own body.

In Section 1 I discussed the excessiveness of objects in Hamilton's work. A large group of people are required to help in the preparation and placement of these. Hamilton could not physically execute many of the large scale works herself.

> *At MOCA I got into a predicament; the installation*
> *I had proposed wasn't going to get done unless a lot*

of people volunteered their time. Then I realised that in fact I had designed the work to reach that predicament... With that piece I saw how involved I'd become with the ethic of social interaction, interaction that is conceptually tied in to what the art is about.

[Hamilton in Saunders, Jan. 1993]

The labour required is for the most part unskilled and usually involves the repetition of a simple task such as folding. Yet this (seemingly) repetitive process differs greatly from that in an industrial workplace.2 These people, sometimes paid, but often volunteers, are referred to by Hamilton as a 'community'.

In contemporary, commodity economies the product is removed from the labour. In peasant economies what is produced by the labour (i.e., food) is physically linked to his/her survival. The value of the product equals the value of the labour. All the objects laboured on in Hamilton's art contain traces of the individual labourer, the labour value becomes part of what the finished work is about. Hamilton's work seems to celebrate a type of communal labour that is fast disappearing in modern society.

for the worker, working for wages in a money economy, can be easily deceived about the value of what he produces, whereas the peasant's 'economic' relation to the rest of society was always transparent."

[Berger, 1992, p.xiii]

The labour involved in setting up Hamilton's installation is often compared to communal labour in nature, such as that in the beehive, where one task is repeated continuously, merges with others, and makes up the living system: "I'm interested

in the accretion of small gestures, in the way we build the world with them,"[Hamilton in Simon, 1994, p.129].

Yet each mark differs from the next. Hamilton's process is described as sometimes being less concerned, "about getting things done than it is about handling, touching, adding layers of personal history and energy,"[Bruce, 1992, p28], inscribing the work with a history of touch. Chris Bruce describes how Hamilton encouraged a degree of individual decision making on the part of the volunteer when it came to arranging the tokens.

> *I asked Ann to show us just how she wanted the tags, we all gathered around her to watch. She took a handful and spread them out on the floor, played with them a little, then swept them away; you know, kinda like that.*
> [Bruce, 1992, p.19]

A similar freedom was allowed when it came to burning linear marks on the walls using candles [figure 5]. Hamilton is less concerned with perfect repetition and more concerned with the mark of the individual:

> *There's a political aspect to my work, I think its very much a part of the structure of it, which is about acknowledging the individual voice, the individual experience, wanting to allow its place in the world where increasingly the individual has no forum.*
> [Hamilton in Bruce, 1992, p.33]

When laying the pennies in *Privations and Excesses* she describes how the end result reflected the collaborative labour of individuals: "each person had a different

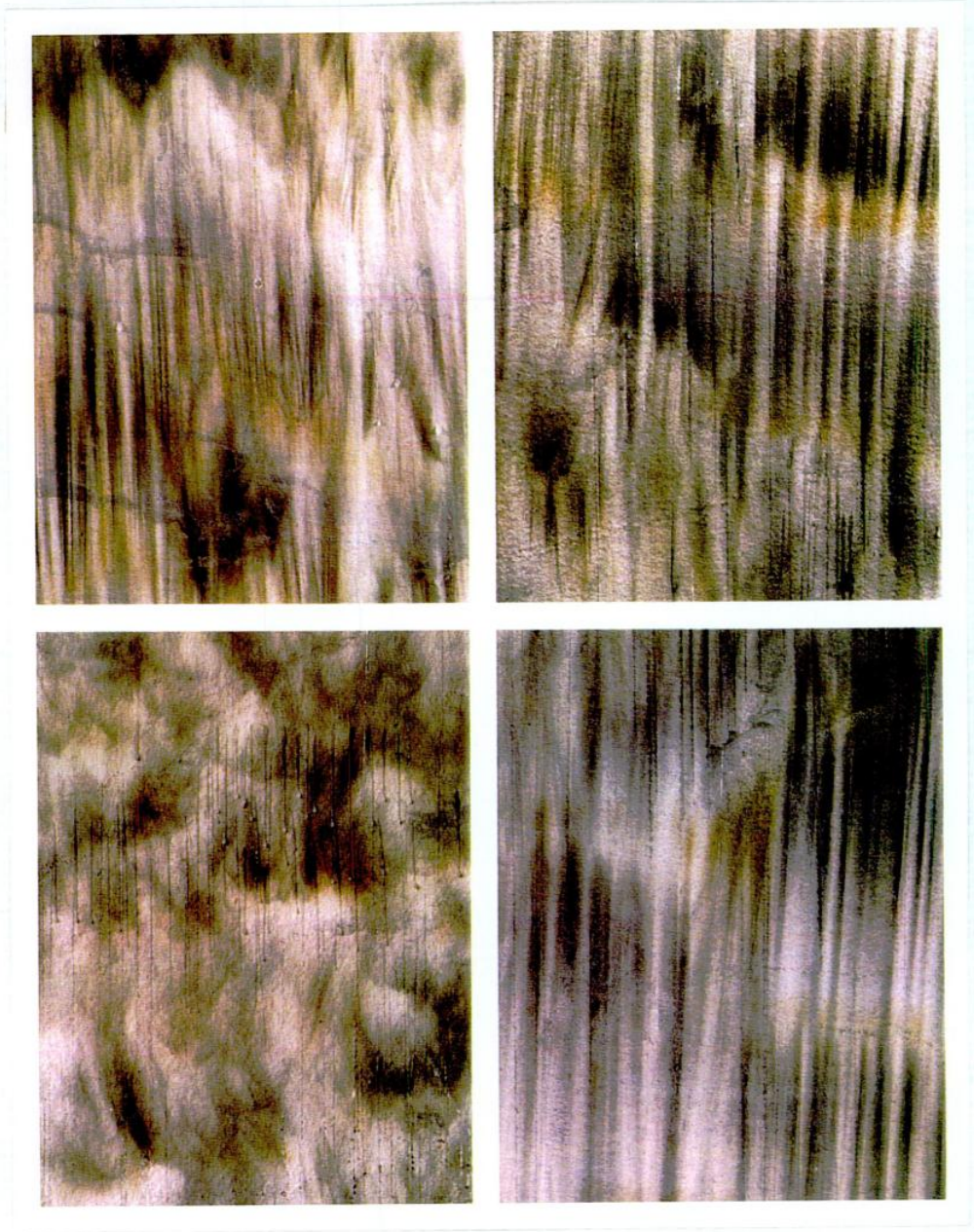

Figure 5

detail, *Parallel Lines* (1991)

rhythm to their movements, a different feel for pattern. The piece evidenced the accumulation of that process,"[Hamilton in Saunders, 1993, p.78].

While at first the structure in *Indigo Blue* appears to symbolise a mass workforce, on a closer look we see that each uniform contains the name of an individual. These were visible on laundry tags inside the shirt collars. We become aware that the each worker possesses a separate identity, a separate history, like fingerprints no two are the same. Hamilton encourages as much physical contact with the objects as they are nailed down, burnt, cleaned, folded, layered. She talks about the "importance of the information that comes through our skin". Chris Bruce tells us that this notion is central to how we experience her art and to the labour involved in making it. Hamilton visited a boat building workshop in Brazil where the workers build the boats without any drafts or plans: "a system that Hamilton trusts, as she says, "the kind of language that we know through our hands,"[Bruce, 1992, p.21].

In *Indigo Blue* the sitter used his/her saliva with the eraser to rub out the text. Hamilton describes this process as, "using the body to remake history,"[Bruce, 1992, p.21]. Therefore the erasing of the text is not so much seen to be destructive as reconstructive: changing it, making it into something else. The history the book now contains is a different type of historical document: a physical testimony to repeated contact between the human body and the object. The mark of the individual labourer now becomes the text [figure 6].

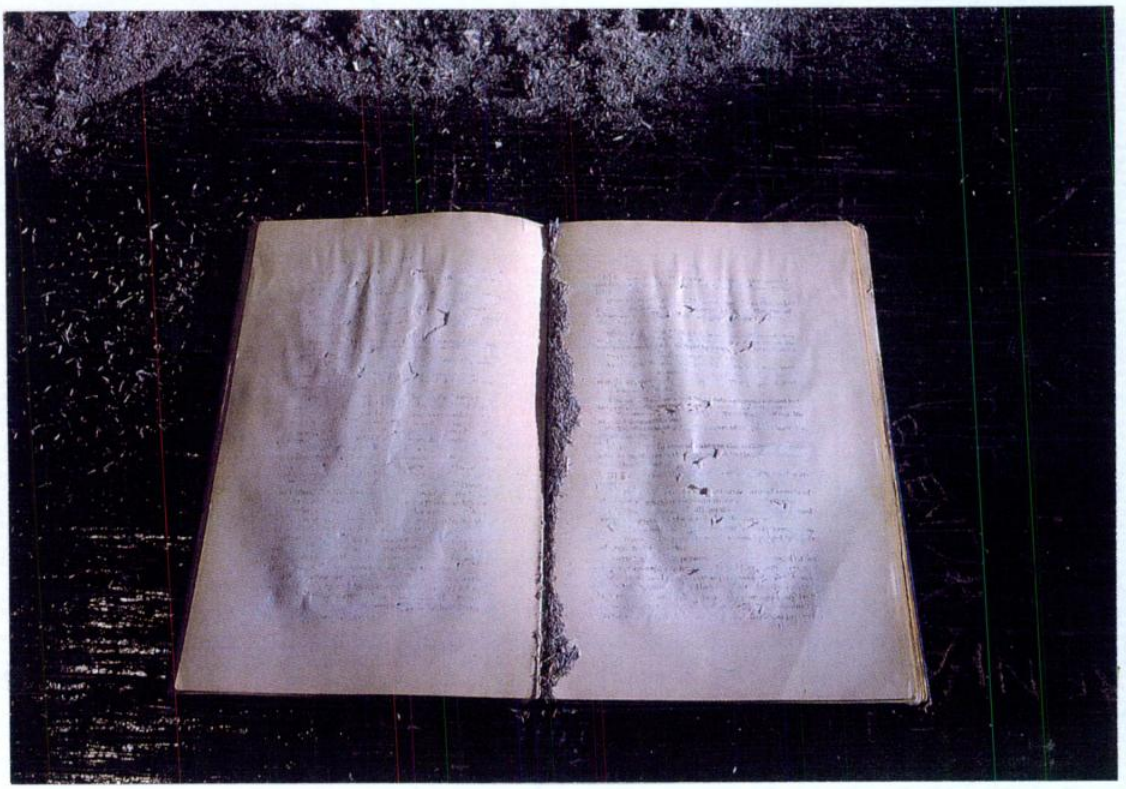

Figure 6

detail, *Indigo Blue* (1991)

Hamilton's work seems to be poised between the individual and the community. Together with the fruits of a collaborated labour, there is also present in the piece an isolated individual. The sitter in the work is usually totally occupied with performing a task. Cooke sees this absorption to be an isolating force, cutting the sitter off from his/her surroundings: "...they are performed with unwavering focus and diligence, thereby creating a cocoon or nimbus around each protagonist," [Cooke in Cooke and Kelly (eds.), 1993, p.69]. The labour the sitter is performing is always removed from the labour echoed in the vast array of objects or the constructed membrane covering the space. The sitter is never continuing this labour nor is he/she seen to be tending to the living organisms often present in the installations.[3] This task of tending is carried out by the attendants or porters of the gallery or museum.

The viewer is in a sense trespassing into the space; the sitter does not acknowledge his/her presence nor grant permission of entry. So the visitor is always aware of being an uninvited outsider. The sitter and the viewer are both then isolated individuals, occupying the same space separately. One is reminded of public spaces in the city through which masses of separate individuals move, rarely communicating with each other. Is the sitter one such individual, alone in the crowd, or does she/he represent a communal labourer isolated only by her/his concentration of the task at hand? We might then ask: what is the difference between an individual working in a commodity culture and one working in a community? Hamilton would maintain that communities allow for the development of the individual within social relations:

When you work intensely next to someone...a bond occurs. We all have longings to be alone but also simultaneously part of a community.
[Hamilton in Saunders, 1993, p.78]

While as McKay points out, total isolation of the individual is more likely to occur within a commodity society:

Commodities do not involve the construction of social relations. It is much easier to develop individual freedoms within commodity-based societies, but at the expense of the breakdown of social relations.
[MacKay, 1997, p.22]

One thinks again of Hamilton's comparison between the creation of her pieces and that of a piece of cloth. The cloth is created through the repetition accumulation of individual gestures which like her artworks, "retain an individual character while accreting to become something else",[Hamilton in Wakefield, 1994, p.16].

Footnotes

1. It is interesting to note (in relation to a discussion on excess) the similarities between Bahktin's observations on the suspension of 'official' social laws within carnivalesque time [Bahktin, 1984, p.258] and Berger's observation on how peasant societies appear to also suspend many 'official' laws [Berger, 1992, p.xii].

2. Although peasant labour may be seen to be a repetitious, Berger tells us that; "each day a peasant experiences more change more closely than any other class,...(their) lives change hourly, daily, yearly, from generation to generation. there is scarcely a constant given in their lives except the constant necessity of work". Any change in his environment concerns him and may have an effect on his labour or livelihood. Bad weather may lead to a destruction of crops, as may a hole in a fence. The nature of his labour although cyclical is that of constant change [Berger, 1992, pxxi].

3. Hamilton often includes 'live' animals of plants in her installations: 200 canaries flew freely about the rooms, and beetles devoured turkey carcasses in *Parallel Lines*, slugs feeding on heads of cabbage were contained in glass cases in *Palimpest* (1989), in *Privations and Excesses* (1989) penned sheep were positioned at the back of the space, facing the viewer.

Conclusion

In order for something to 'exceed', to be 'excessive' there must be a limit in place, a boundary for it to cross. Hamilton's art therefore, in its excessiveness crosses these boundaries, it steps over them, flows through them and at times dissolves them.

These massive installations are amazing if at times sublime spectacles, but they avoid the classification of theatre. The viewer is not simply a passive voyeur, but is at all times aware of his/her own presence in the piece. In this, a collaborated work of many hands, the viewer remains an isolated individual, aware of his/her own body's movement as it navigates its way through the work. The work itself is a border, a point that exists between the producer and receiver. To question the work is to try to pass this border.

> *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,*
>
> [Stewart, 1994, p.17]

The work in asking us how we know it, might also ask us how we 'know', how we acquire and recognise knowledge in our day to day existence.

The hysteric, the freak and the peasant to a great extent belong to a past time,

but while Hamilton's work echoes many characteristics of these, the immediate presence of the sitter and the reaction of the viewer to the excessiveness of the objects and labour avoids an art that is mere nostalgia. The work allows the ordinary and everyday to appear strange and unfamiliar in their excessive state. At first we only see the massive body, but on further examination of all these similar objects we realise it is in fact their 'sameness' that emphasises each ones difference to the other.

Hamilton's works facilitate a discussion on modern labour values, on social standards. They are removed from, but yet refer to the everyday, in their own avoidance of definition they ask us to reconsider how we define things.

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