This essay presents descriptions of varied involvements with installations by the artist Ann Hamilton, interspersed by analyses on how each of them was viewed, moved within, and then finally recalled, reconstructed. In conjunction, the author examines—as theoretical and formal prototypes—the work of Samuel Beckett, especially his prescient, early study of Proust.

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Theatre as Installation: Ann Hamilton and the Accretions of Gesture

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Degraded. The leaf torn from
the calendar. All forgot. Give
it over to the woman, let her
begin again—with insects
and decay, decay and then insects:
the leaves—that were varnished
with sediment, fallen, the clutter
made piecemeal by decay, a
digestion takes place—
of this, make it of this, this
this, this, this, this.
—William Carlos Williams, Paterson

Entering a large gallery space in what was once an old warehouse, we see near the centre of the room a young woman sitting alone at a small metal table, a book open before her. The floor of the gallery is covered in thick bundles of dark horsehair that have been scattered evenly throughout the entire room and a muted sunlight comes in through large, translucent windows. From various directions at once, we hear the recorded voice of a man struggling to speak, his voice softly, awkwardly, murmuring the words as if he were
learning the language all over again. "What—ha... ppended—
what met that—o... pen—
and—what has—been—clo... 
se—the door..." The echoing
room smells faintly of smoke,
and approaching the seated wo-
man from across the open space
—walking upon the matted
hair, our feet entangled in the
long strands—we see her hold-
ing a small electrical instrument
in her hand, gripped like a pen,
as she burns lines of language
from out of the book. Patiently
and with a kind of single-minded
concentration, she lays the
hot wire across three or four words at a time and they instantly burn to black, an acrid
smoke rising off the paper, leaving a series of charred, parallel lines to fill the pages.
Writing in reverse, unread ing the book; beyond erasure, language’s incineration.

Finishing one page, she turns to
the next, starting again at the
top and slowly moving down.

We walk around her, wat-
ching and listening, as she (with-
out lifting her eyes) goes on
about her business, working her
way through the book, one page
after the next, the words going
up in smoke.

As we leave the large room,
the voice of the man can still be
heard in the distance struggling
to say the words, extracting
them, as if caught in his throat.
While the woman continues her
deliberate work, moving from
page to page, burning, uninterrupted by our brief presence. The installation, by the artist Ann Hamilton, was entitled tropos, taking place at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York from October 1993 to June 1994.

What was it that was just encountered in that room full of horsehair and burning words, a space echoing with broken voices, muffled footsteps? Walking about the remarkable installation by Ann Hamilton, what was seen at that quiet site, and what remained to be seen once it was left behind? Remembered, what was happening there, as those of us present (and accounted for) wandered through the room, listening to the sounds, looking at the objects, seeing the woman sitting there burning the pages of the book? And how, retrospectively, to describe and think about this installation, elaborating upon ideas and impressions perhaps only fleetingly engaged, peripherally seen? For, like the secondary revisions of a nearly forgotten dream, thoughts and insights about such a room may arrive after we have departed from it. The words arrange themselves after the fact, as if to somehow recreate the vanished event, supplementing it with language, shaping an experience that happened so quickly that it may not have happened. Were we there? Did we see it? Did we see?

In this essay I describe my varied involvements with several installations by Ann Hamilton. Assembling my remembered impressions, I hope to expand linguistically upon what were otherwise the silent encounters that I had in those rooms, to meditate upon the ways in which these installations engaged my own perceptions of them; the subtle manner in which site, time, matter, and memory were to merge into worded recollection. For my experiences with Hamilton's installations were not, I now realize, limited simply to my real time within them. But rather, these carefully arranged spaces were often discretely carried with me after leaving them behind, covertly transported and transformed. Memories of my having visited them were often then later developed, like the printing of a photograph from the stored negatives of a camera. Such retrospective seeing and awareness was no doubt intended and designed by Hamilton as a vital aspect of her otherwise ephemeral installations, with the rooms presented—indeed constructed—as staging grounds for the perceptual remembrances of those moving within them, for a sight beyond site. But a sight onto what?

Assisting me in my reflections, I look at some of the work of Samuel Beckett: several of his plays, but also, especially, his prescient, early study of Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. Here, Beckett focusses upon several specific episodes in Proust's vast novel where the narrator, Marcel (often in relation to carefully arranged rooms), abruptly sees before him time's corrosive invasion. In one of the more poignant scenes described by Beckett, the young Marcel returns rapidly to Paris from
his travels in order to be with his ailing grandmother. The day before, in Doncières, he had spoken with her on the telephone, hearing a voice almost unrecognizable, so different, Beckett writes, from the one “that he had been accustomed to follow on the open score of her face that he does not recognise it as hers” (Proust 26–27). Marcel arrives at his grandmother’s home and quietly, unannounced and unseen, enters the drawing-room, where she is sitting alone, resting and reading. But, as Beckett states, the narrator suddenly feels that “he is not there because she does not know that he is there. He is present at his own absence” (27). The domestic scene disrupted, the familiar sentiments disturbed, “his eye functions with the cruel precision of a camera. […] And he realises with horror that his grandmother is dead, long since and many times. […] This mad old woman, drowsing over her book, overburdened with years, flushed and coarse and vulgar, is a stranger whom he has never seen” (28).

Something of this harrowing moment, as described by Beckett, recalls a theatrical enactment of vanishing and loss within the walls of the grandmother’s room. But it also recalls to me now something of the installation by Ann Hamilton described above: the woman at the table, burning the pages from the book. For the episode with Proust’s grandmother appears like the vivid installation of a site of time, a space of lucid awareness. Indeed, it reads like a scene that the young Beckett might have found instructive for some of his own future stagings in which, so often, to be is to be seen—Esse est percipi—and to not be seen is to be rendered abruptly absent; the alienated eyes suddenly see that they have never seen, raising the unsettling question as to whether they, staring dumbly at their own blindness, are now seeing that, the movement of disappearance that will not reveal itself. The grandson, the grandmother together, but separately, the one watching the other, and us, separately, strangers, watching them both watching. If Marcel, in that mournful moment of trying to see his frail grandmother, found himself unexpectedly “present at his own absence,” then we, in seeing the scene ourselves, are similarly absent, absent in the dislocating play of deflected perceptions.

What remains is a metal chair. Upon the seat has been evenly draped a piece of white fabric, and placed upon that is a large, up-turned felt hat. Approaching, we see that the hat has been entirely filled with some thick, translucent substance: honey. Contained, the unmoving fluid reflects the light of the room. The honey in the hat, the hat on the fabric, the fabric on the chair, the chair in the room. Nothing more. This is all that is now found in the carefully arranged space. Another room, another installation by Ann Hamilton, this one entitled privation and excesses (1989). In the gallery, we walk around this simple arrangement of ordinary objects, keeping a careful distance, just as the objects appear to keep their distance from us.
On the adjacent wall label, we read that before, someone had been seated in the chair, the fabric over the lap, holding the hat, hands moving in and out of the honey, dipping and wringing, rubbing the hands over and over in the thick sticky substance. Obsessively, for hours and hours, the repeated movements, what Hamilton herself described of this scene as "the greed and denial of that gesture" (qtd. in Hickey 129); without a word, immersing the hands, lifting them, wringing, wringing. Going through the motions, slowly repeating a gesture that seems never to be completed, but only abruptly stopped.

Remaining in the room are the vestiges of that earlier event. Something was happening before we arrived, someone was there, seated and engaged. But the person has now gone, as if having walked away from a halted performance, an arrested action drawn to a close. For it appears that we arrived too late to see what had been there to be seen.

Once more, it seems, we find ourselves present at an absence. But this time, there is no one seated there to remind us of the vacancy; instead, the assorted objects—the chair, the hat, the honey—effectively mark an even more indeterminate form of absence, sounding an unechoing silence within the room. For there is something about this scene that now recalls a kind of three-dimensional still life (or nature morte), one that has been meticulously arranged for us to observe; yet of its stillness, what life (or death) is there to be seen? Now, like the abandoned props of a play, these memoried objects remain like time’s particled shadow cast into material dimension. “So far so good,” Beckett writes in his late novel Ill Seen Ill Said, in a scene that again recalls the one now encountered in the gallery. “But before she can proceed she fades and disappears. Nothing now for the staring eye but the chair in its solitude” (36).

While the young Beckett may have found in the depicted episode of Proust and his grandmother a prefiguring of some of his own future stagings of silence and absence, sight and being seen, various of his plays might now—retrospectively—be
understood as prototypes for the later installation art of someone like Ann Hamilton. For there is, between these two figures, a similarly crafted concentration upon repetitive gestures, isolated individuals and objects suspended in time, and the indeterminacies of the eye and mind taking the measure of a moment, sounding an uncertain site. Recalling the mounds of earth in Beckett's *Happy Days*, the moving mouths of "Not I," or the spools of tape recording in *Krapp's Last Tape*, it often seems as if recognizable aspects of the playwright's work have been taken and transformed, adapted toward more singular, storyless assertions staged outside of conventional theatre. And thus, as a kind of *Beckettian* condensation of a theatrical event, what emerges with Hamilton’s installations is an image, a mood, an arrested moment: Beckett’s own name now as adjective, signifying a form of thought that, interrupted, abruptly feels itself thinking, sees itself, *seizes itself*, staged as an installation.

We might recall as well the opening scene of *Endgame: A Play in One Act*, Hamm and Clov in place (one watched, the other watching), the props positioned, the lights rising, the moment held—as Beckett instructs in the stage direction—as a "brief tableau" (1). A fixed image in suspended animation, this moment, and others like it, brings to mind an isolated installation not unlike those by Hamilton described above—the stuttering voices, floors of horsehair, hats filled with honey. For in Hamilton's laboriously installed rooms, visitors enter as if upon an open stage, move inside the dimensional image, witnessing at close range the events of an intersecting moment and what Hamilton refers to as "the accretions of small gesture" (qtd. in Hickey 129). A "brief tableau" extended in time, like the scene with Marcel and his ageing grandmother: the one looking at the other, the other looking away.

If an earlier generation of modern artists and dramatists had hoped to destabilize the defining parameters of the "white-cubed" art gallery or the proscenium-divided theatre, an installation artist such as Hamilton would appear to have willfully returned to those contested sites, embracing and absorbing their limitations while grafting upon them essential elements of theatre, such as temporality and, frequently, the presence (or traced absence) of the performer inscribed within the site itself. For, in Hamilton's carefully crafted rooms, some of the broken, extracted images of that earlier era have reconfigured themselves, taking on a life of their own, compliant to their own confining. Like a *tableau vivant* set in slow motion, Hamilton's installations are both held in place and repeated, the time taken for a different kind of drama, where the performers perform themselves, acting out dimensions of their own absence. Enlisting objects toward purposeful gesture, they then walk away, leaving these things behind as evidence of the disappearing event, bringing to mind, with the loss of the storytelling, what Walter Benjamin described as "a new beauty in what is vanishing" (87).
Hamilton’s installations, so often built around repetitive movements, might at first glance appear as a kind of endless theatrical rehearsal (the French répétition), a preparation for something about to begin. For it always seems that what is seen is more of the same—again and again the burning words, the rubbing and wringing of hands—completions or conclusions unfulfilled, unseen. The accretions of repetitive gesture appear to attach themselves to the eyes of the viewer, the scene envisioned like a taken photograph. Both the artist and the observer, through a kind of repetition compulsion, are perhaps driven by a desire to keep the pictures present by reproducing them. Though seeming virtually static, Hamilton’s installations—as-image are nonetheless exposed to the increments of time through the discrete repetitions themselves (as though, repeated enough, the scenes might finally fix themselves onto the eyes of the one trying to see them). And, by thus engaging the repetitions of theatre, the installations then obliquely represent (or confirm) what Derrida described as “theater as repetition of that which does not repeat itself, […] because it has always already begun” (Writing 250). Concealed or congested into a circular limit of apparently infinite repetitions, the rooms enact a resistance to repetition, while simultaneously embracing and playing with it, repeating the repetitions, rehearsing them, doubling the doubling in order to cancel it out, rub it away (like honey from hands), consuming a kind of pure repetition with pleasure.

Only then, as a kind of framed aporia, the temporal scene suddenly opens like an eye onto the passing image that it appears to be. The fleeting glimpse is gathered into provisional arrangement, gestures concealed into accreted form. As such, Hamilton’s installations present themselves as a projected picture, upon this reconfigured theatrical stage, where time is the principal medium, but a time that, seemingly stilled, is still moving.

And upon this stage we move as well, walking and looking about the room, no longer left to the stationary, single view of a seated spectator in a theatre. However, with our seeing now seen in motion, what is this unfolding event within which we abruptly find ourselves so movingly engaged?

Built into the wall of the museum, flush with its white surface, is a video monitor of no more than four or five inches. There, we see the picture of a wide-open mouth, larger than life, and filling entirely the tiny screen of the miniature monitor. The lips are constantly moving, and inside the mouth are many round stones about the size of large marbles. Recalling Molloy and his sucking stones in Beckett’s The Unnamable, these smooth stones are wet and shiny with saliva, the tongue—occasionally appearing—is constantly shifting and sliding them about. Leaning in more closely to scrutinize the image on the
screen, we hear the gentle knocking of the stones hitting and rubbing against one another. Because of the type of video monitor used, the image is perhaps best looked at straight on, for, seen at an angle, the screen's picture instantly solarizes into a diffuse pattern, with only the sounds of the striking stones remaining.

This quiet image, discretely placed all alone and at eye-level on the wall, is both sensual and strange. In the familiar place of a painting hanging within the gallery, we see instead a carefully cut hole through which we now look and listen. And indeed, there is something quite mesmerizing in the tape-looped movements of this image, an alienated attraction to the isolated motions of the mouth. The round stones glisten and gleam, rolling delicately between the shifting lips. But there is also something about these stones that seem to threaten and intrude, and perhaps—upon seeing them—to cause us to nearly choke or gag, to feel reflexively the objects filling the mouth, blocking the breathing, tangling the tongue.

And once again, like the old chair seen earlier in the gallery with the hat and the honey, we later read that this video was also part of one of Ann Hamilton's larger installations, entitled aleph (1993). Now, detached from that earlier event, the images continue on separately like a trace, a vestige of the earlier installation. Repeating uninterruptedly, the picture is now constantly changing and always the same.

Before Hamilton's room empties, before the visitors depart from the installation, there is often present and performing either the artist herself or what she has referred to as a guardian who is engaged in some intricate, ambiguous activity: sewing seams on fabric, wrapping typewriter ribbons around hands, sanding away the silvered backs of mirrors, or, in tropos, the burning of words from the open book. Within the room, and alongside this guardian, we encounter a rendering of absence in relation to specific objects: piles of wilting flowers, a wall of deteriorating books, a turkey carcass being devoured by swarms of beetles. For here are visible, tangible manifestations of ongoing decomposition and decay, time manifested in matter. Meanwhile, the person performing sits serenely amidst it all, like a minimalist sculpture, gracefully present and alive, participating theatrically in the obscure spectacle, the hermetic ritual.
And, because of the uncertain dynamic between the guardians, the objects, and us, we may indeed vaguely feel as if we have intruded upon the solitude of the space, crossed some proscenium-like division onto someone else's stage. For, after all, walking into the room and seeing the guardians already present, it is their room that we have entered, their privacy that we have violated. They were there when we arrived, and they will presumably remain after we have departed. And, if the repetitive gestures of this person may have initially seemed peculiar or uncertain, our presence there, and our purpose, may suddenly seem even stranger still. Though the guardians may appear to ignore us, it is unlikely that we can ignore them, for something of their persistent, mortal presence demands our attention, draws us toward them (while simultaneously enforcing a subtle limit to any proximity).

Indeed, Hamilton's installations, described by her as "interiors which are also exteriors," invite admission while also restricting it, offering an enterable image, yet withholding that which one may have thought was to be encountered. For, as Hamilton states, "one can never be far enough away to visually 'consume' the whole. Our eyes have become voracious like mouths" (qtd. in Simon 29). (Incidentally, Hamilton's comment brings to mind her more recent photographic work, in which, with a tiny pinhole camera placed in her mouth, she takes photographs from between her teeth and lips.) There and not there, "never [...] far enough away" but still perhaps desiring to be more fully present, those of us now visiting the room move, in "real time," upon this de facto theatrical stage. As if cast as characters in an unscheduled play, what is now to be done, what are we suddenly to do? And what remains to be seen, when those of us, initially intended to see, find ourselves similarly seen? How can we ever possibly position ourselves to consume that which we now find ourselves within (and thus to "consume" something of ourselves)? As if mirrored, we await the delayed reflection that will tell us where we are, show us—already vanished—what we are seeing.

Yet, in spite of the proximities within these rooms, the distances and detachments from the objects and the self-absorbed guardian would appear to be as great as ever, bringing to mind once more Proust and his grandmother, the estranged voice on the telephone: "a real presence" as Proust described it, "in actual separation" (135). (Coincidentally, in telephoning his grandmother, Proust refers to the telephone operators needed to make the long-distance connection also as "Guardians," those invisible figures/forces "by whose intervention the absent rise up at our side" [134].) Within Hamilton's rooms, who is this person before us? What are those objects? What is the action being performed? Toward what end? And what, finally, is this guardian guarding? Other walls appear to remain imperceptibly present and dividing us from them, revealing what Herbert Blau describes as "the one undeniable presence, [...] the continuity
of our proscenium minds" (Blooded 116), that most unbreachable of barriers between us and the other. For, in spite of our voracious desire to see, the blindfoldings remain unlifted, guarded, like the handkerchief and black glasses over the eyes of Endgame's Hamm, or the curtain hastily closing on Breath, and the visitor is abruptly enveloped by a more gnawing form of vacancy, a more inscrutable silence. Fold upon fold, a separation from the scene (while within it).

Two layers of thin white drapery made of organza hang closely together in the middle of the large room. The fabric, about twenty feet in length, is suspended from ceiling to floor by a motorized, circular metal frame six feet in diameter. The drapery is split from top to bottom, leaving a narrow opening into its circular interior. At regular intervals of fifteen seconds, the whirring motor spins the fabric, causing the material to billow out and send a light current of air into the room. As the curtain gracefully turns, we see briefly through its seam into the vacant space at its centre. The motor then abruptly stops, pausing silently for ten seconds, before spinning once again in the opposite direction. Carefully, in the brief interval when the curtain is unmoving, we can part the delicate material and enter into the veiled space. Stepping through the seam, we stand surrounded, looking from within its folds of fabric, as the translucent drapery once more twirls about us, rising slightly in the air. These regular, mechanical movements, from Ann Hamilton's installation filament (1996), continue uninterrupted, the material spinning first one way and then the next.

Hanging there in the room, this white fabric looks very much like a stage curtain, one that has been taken from a theatre and transferred to a gallery, where it now opens
and closes upon itself. But circular and spinning, unstaged, the fabric both veils and
defines an empty space, turns about an absence. And, though the material clearly suggests
something theatrical, the curtain in this room is nearly all that appears, all of which this
(non)performance is made. Or rather—the curtain moving—what is veiled and unveiled
is us, the visitors walking within and without the installed space, made self-conscious by
the room’s very emptiness, performing ourselves watching. Standing, looking, we await
(as for Godot) some further emergence that never occurs, a lifting onto a dramatic event
(what curtains on stages have conventionally promised and preserved): something other
than ourselves. With no guardians present, the drapery alone has become virtually all the
action, the only object, the curtain a fabricated fetish of its own uninhabited divisions, a
denial of discreet concealings. Indeed, the spinning drapery, like a whirling dervish,
appears as a staged ritual of such division and denial, an elegant offering and withdrawal
of the scene’s own secrecy. Like a willful playing of hide and seek, nothing is hidden, noth-
ing is sought. “At the intersection of the secret and the non-secret, what is the secret?”
Derrida asks, then answering that the essence of a secret is divided so that it “cannot even
appear to one alone except in starting to be lost [. . .] a negation that denies itself”
(“How” 25). Or, elsewhere, Derrida again suggests that any such secret—perhaps even
the one encountered here with Hamilton’s installation—presents “the possibility that indeed it might have no secret, that it might only be pretending to be simulating some hidden truth within its folds” (Spurs 133).

The whirring motor spins, noisily announcing the drapery’s mechanization. The folds of this fabric billow and blow a self-generated wind, casting gusts of air like exhaled breath within the room, rippling invisibly through the space’s tranquil vacancy. Nothing but itself, over and over again, and us watching, feeling the faint breeze of that nothing blow upon us.

In one of Beckett’s briefest plays, we see a staged space that—like Hamilton’s veiled installation filament—appears utterly spare and evacuated. On the stage, there is no person physically present, and only assorted objects are seen. Simply entitled Breath, in this play (or anti-play, for it seems to barely possess the minimum requirements to be a play at all), not a word is spoken, and all that is heard in a performance that lasts less than a minute is a “faint brief cry” held for about five seconds, followed by amplified recordings of breathing. Integrated in precise timing with these sounds is the carefully determined lighting and the “miscellaneous rubbish” scattered about the stage, a kind of ruined landscape upon which next to nothing at all very quickly happens. The entire event is sharply delineated by the raising and lowering of the curtain that cuts the scene open and then, only moments later, sutures it before our eyes.

Beckett’s Breath, written some years after Endgame, would seem to somehow fulfill the closing lament of that earlier play when Hamm exclaims that the characters should “speak no more about it, […] speak no more” (84). For in this shortest of productions, the breath, the cry, appears to have become simply additional phenomena of the production, equivalent features alongside the faint light and the rubbish scattered about the room. The bodies and voices of the performers are no longer foregrounded, centre-staged (and, indeed, there are no bodies at all to be seen), but instead the sounds have been absorbed as integrated components into the broader dramatic event, the dimensions of absence made manifest. No story to tell, no events to be narrated, except perhaps the same old story forever and failingly told: “death in the center of the stage,” as Blau describes this most austere of Beckett productions and its audience, “that body of conventional absence—breathing death” (Sails 159, emph. Blau’s).

Beckett once wrote that “to restore silence is the role of objects” (Molloy 10), and, in this most astringent of plays, everything—lights, breath, rubbish, cries—seems somehow flatly, equally present as parts of an entropic object, carefully cast in time. The play itself exists for its brief unfolding as a kind of object, almost silent, with noth-
ing to say and saying it, then speaking no more; seen like a flash, heard like an echo, dispersing then and vanishing before our eyes.

Of myself [...]” Proust writes, recalling the scene where he, unannounced, sees his ailing grandmother alone in the drawing-room, “there was present only the witness, the observer, in travelling coat and hat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that automatically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph” (141). Seeing photographically, Marcel suddenly beholds the person before him as an isolated image, like the residue of a photographic event extracted from the narrative of the known life, a picture alienated and cast into cruel dimension. Unmemoried, unmoored, the old woman before him—“this phantom that I saw”—instantly falls into a more tender, tragic sign of herself, momentarily seen without the restorative aid of “our eyes, charged with thought” (142), a thought conspiring, empathetically, to blind us by its very resistance to seeing, shielding us from that which we may not finally wish to see, be prepared to see, the one dying before us.

As if by conjoining aspects of the Proustian with the Beckettian, Ann Hamilton has created over the years installations (like the ones described above) intended to discretely circumvent the habits of our thinking eyes, to make us see—like Proust’s witness, observer, photographer—that which, withdrawing, is right in front of us. Through the imagined camera, its lens now immanent to the eye, the dislocated viewer is made to perhaps better see, thoughtfully see, a glimpse, a glance, images passing, coming into focus, and fading away. Or, as Blau describes such a sight of theatre, such a site of embodied time, what is perhaps to be most vividly seen is the “living indeterminacy” of a performer before us, “so vulnerably there [...] right there dying in front of [our] eyes” (Bloode 134).

Like pictures projected from a magic lantern, Hamilton’s scenes are set before us, fixed like photographs, as we enter the room. Indeed, photographically, the ambient light falls onto objects (and, likewise, onto us), framing and forming the sight to be seen, eyes dilating onto image, the room dilating into dimension. For it appears almost as if the space itself, being seen, were suddenly seeing those walking within it, like a darkroom developing its own pictures, the pictures now picturing us. But what, within this room, is finally, fleetingly revealed as we enter the eye of the image, the site of the sight? Eduardo Cadava writes: “Like the world, the image allows itself to be experienced only as what withdraws from experience. Its experience [...] is an experience of the impossibility of experience. The image tells us that it is with loss and ruin
that we have to live. Nevertheless, what makes the image an image is its capacity to bear the traces of what it cannot show, to go on, in the face of this loss and ruin, to suggest and gesture toward its potential for speaking” (37). And perhaps what now remains to be seen in Hamilton's rooms are the repeated gestures and suggestions withdrawing from us, the lost traces born upon the accretions of a ruined image, about to speak, to speak about those impossibly present.

With the room itself rendered as a kind of dimensional photograph, these installations might now also bring to mind Barthes's description of the photographic image as a form of “primitive theater, a tableau vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (32). But whose face is most revealingly seen in these rooms, whose death depicted? For, within such installations, there is occurring the extended time exposure, an open shutter, light seeping into seams. And, like the blurred figure of a nineteenth-century photograph, what is perhaps most vividly revealed in these spaces is the moving form of the temporary visitor dissolving into grains of graying shadow, the movement itself inciting the unseen, or perhaps even—might it be?—something of the unseeable. The room taking place, as a photographic event, finds a frame, a fluid emulsion; the camera clicks, captures. Yet, alongside the objects in the room, and the guardians engaged in their repetitive tasks, we—the visitors—are the ones who are unable to finally fix ourselves into the projected picture, the arranged space, offering only a vanishing point that includes us in its very vanishing. Barely there, and the room as estranged witness, we have briefly entered the image as observers, but something of the image refuses us, will not have us, hold us. The chemical fixatives of the photographic process cannot contain the too-insubstantial light of our restless presence, our own phantom form, where, as Kierkegaard describes a similarly disembodied scene, the “individual is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape, [. . .] invisibly present” (154).

At this place of passage, this threshold of theatre, we—as implicated performers—are made to think our own mortality, to see feelingly our own fugitive form; for in this picture, we are, like Barthes’s wounding punctum, glimpsingly revealed within what seems the otherwise motionless image, the “off-center detail” (27) that opens and animates a photograph. Here is a space within which we stage ourselves, or find ourselves staged, traces alongside the other (in)stalled, arrested elements—the woman burning the book, hats and honey, mouths with stones, the spinning curtain—a calculated ephemerality, a collaboration with entropy. And conjured thus, in the dimensionality of time, the transient spectator finally proves to be the most ephemeral, entropic element of all, the one that vanishes fastest. Unrepeatable among the repetitions, we move about the room, unbelonging, eventually leaving behind Hamilton's
guardians, her carefully placed objects, as they remain in place, persisting in our absence. The image endures as we move away from it, as we disappear from out of its fixed frame.

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