

Ann Hamilton's Oral Fix and the Naked Eye

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The *camera obscura* was arguably the first instrument to mediate perception and alter capabilities for representation.¹ Its evolution into photography has had an immeasurable effect on the constructed arts and on human sight.² Following development of the chemical process for fixing the image produced by the *camera obscura*, scientists were provided with a device for measuring time, capturing light, stopping movement, and representing truth through the documentation of reality. Modernity witnessed the artistic appropriation of the looking machine for making generalized specific images. Each image is a trace to which the referent adheres. (Barthes)³ The modern photograph, therefore, shaped a revised relationship between artist and subject. For the odalisque, but even for the landscape and the still life, photography activated the pose of the subject, while the photographer was disembodied, and the resultant representation became transparent. Eventually modern photography developed in complementary directions with the creation of both surrealist solarization and the perfect print. The latter has dominated 20th century representation, as the camera

redefined sight-seeing, and the human eye was privileged and instrumentalized to make silent impressions from life.

Mechanization of the image-making process neutralized the body of the photographer in carrying out the photographic act. With modernity, vision predominated over all the senses. The camera filters and fragments what the human eye does naturally through the metrics of the lens, f-stop, shutter and aperture.⁴ The erasure of the body gets completed when the trip-pod and shutter release cable are appended to the process. Initially, it seemed, photography gave nature the power to reproduce itself unaided by man. Yet as the culture surrounding the medium has evolved, so too has the will of the photographer to construct the photographic image.

Variables of control allow for manipulation of possible views of the subject's space, light and time. The act of mechanical reproduction replaced the aura of the work of art to in turn make way for new means of communication, commodification,



face to face: monnett by Ann Hamilton



face to face: tree

and visualization in the forms of cinema, spectacle, and abstraction (Benjamin).⁵ From the perfect print of straight photography has arisen the explicative works of Alfred Stieglitz, Eugene Atget, Berenice Abbot, and Ansel Adams. As Benjamin has famously named Atget's Paris portraits for capturing "the scene of a crime," we might see them in relation to LeCorbusier's Villa Savoy photos, since Le Corbusier, as we know, staged many of the scenes in his published house interiors.⁶ In architectural photography, principles illustrated by Florence Henri, Margaret Burke-White, Ezra Stoller, and Julius Schulman have provided clear paradigms. Henri produced provocative constructions of abstract space that are latent in Peter Eisenman's experimental houses. The works of Andreas Feininger, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa and the Magnams, have focused the close up view.⁷ While different in genre, these artists' approaches to technology are all remarkably similar. What they share in common with Krzysztof Wodiczko's monumental projections, David Hockney's joiners, Abelardo Morell's pin-hole environments, Thomas Struth's witness to public experience, and Hiroshi Sugimoto's repetitive reductive landscapes lies in the mediating instrument of the camera and the erasure of the body from their representational processes. Distinct content notwithstanding, each of the artists captures space and form in real time with a common tool, a seeing machine, an ocular prosthesis. Prosthetic sight, like that of the microscope and binoculars, calls for related interstitial technologies to create a sense of distance no matter how close the photographer is to his or her subject. Truth through science is implicated. Enhanced visual capabilities empower the photographer to in turn control reality.

Technological processes here intermingle with narrative and other content-driven strategies in the creation of meaning through form. Architectural criticism is called to task where representations of scale, metaphors of space, the incorporation of the body, and perception and cognition impact the meaning of the artifact. The term *'camera'* is the Latin word for 'room',

so in Italian the device for making images shifts from the place to the machine by naming the device *'una macchina fotografica.'* If we can agree that the architecture of photography has been less theorized than the photography of architecture in recent years, then reversing the lens may prove fruitful to engage the method and mechanics of this representation as process in tandem with product. We can then ask how that symbiosis of tool, process, unconscious desire or conscious intent are central to the content of the image.

Here Martin Jay's interrogation of vision as the master sense of the modern era deserves a look. He unpacks for us the writings of so many brilliant but difficult French guys.⁸ Those who have theorized visuality and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality provide evident links between critiques of modern photography and modern architecture. A chorus of voices have called out the natural experience of sight, aided by science, as the dominant sense used in gaining modern knowledge and awareness. Vision's predominance for more than a century guided perceptions of abstract, quantitative, conceptualized space. Jay assembles his cadre of French theorists to argue that the rationalized and dispassionate eye of the neutral observer has had the effect of de-eroticizing and de-textualizing our world. Rendering the scene became an end in itself. Aiming for objectivity resulted in the repetition of ordering tools including the grid, the stationary viewpoint, and the perfect print.

Understanding the symbiosis of process and cultural consciousness can benefit from reading works of art that relax or rebut modernity's scopic regimes. Perhaps teasing modernisms' demonstrated ways of seeing could open a fresh relationship between architectural space and photographic representations of that space. My interest in new portraits of space brought me to the black and white photography of installation artist Ann Hamilton, which I investigate in this paper.⁹ Her recent work reverses the decorporealized model of frozen time capture by eliminating the machine and reintroducing the body into the

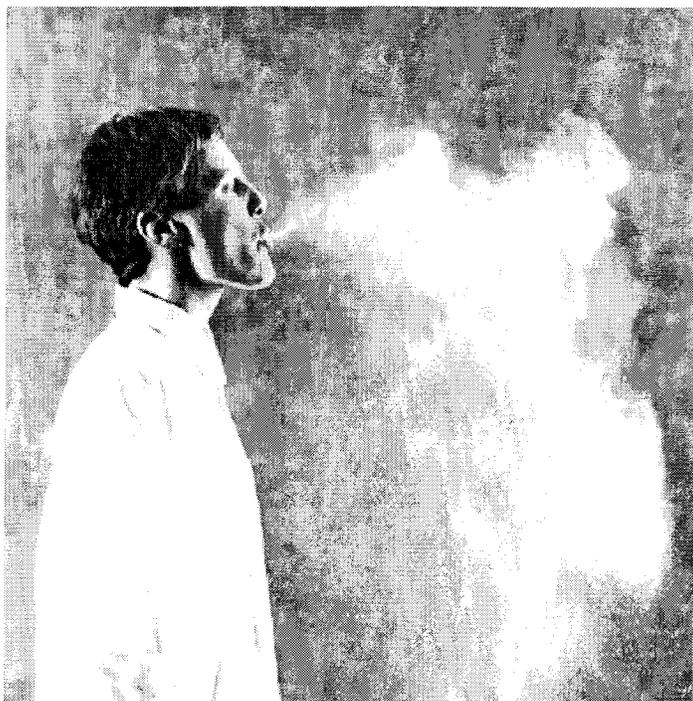
act of image reproduction. Both the clock and the camera are constructs, fifteenth century man-made devices, which measure change. Hamilton replaces the instrument with an organ. Change then becomes a cyclical, variable quality of the subject, a condition beyond precise calculation. Her prints deviate from photography's representational principles by tracing a less manageable subject. By displacing the mask of technology, she inhabits the process using more of her senses to reconstruct her relationship to her subject. As a result, she draws attention to human occupancy and character phenomena in dynamic, rather than static, time. The organ she uses to produce her photographs is her mouth. It is no wonder, then, that her images breathe with life and her voice is present in her photos as she speaks.

HAMILTON'S NAKED MOUTH:

When interviewed about her installation in the 1999 Venice Biennale entitled, *Myein*:

*"The word installation is not a useful term at this point . . . though I'm still interested in working in that form. I am very interested in making a response to the architectural and social context of whatever space I am working in. I am not denying the space in any way. A lot of gestures occur literally in the membrane of the building."*¹⁰

Ann Hamilton



(body object series) #16-flourbreath, 1993

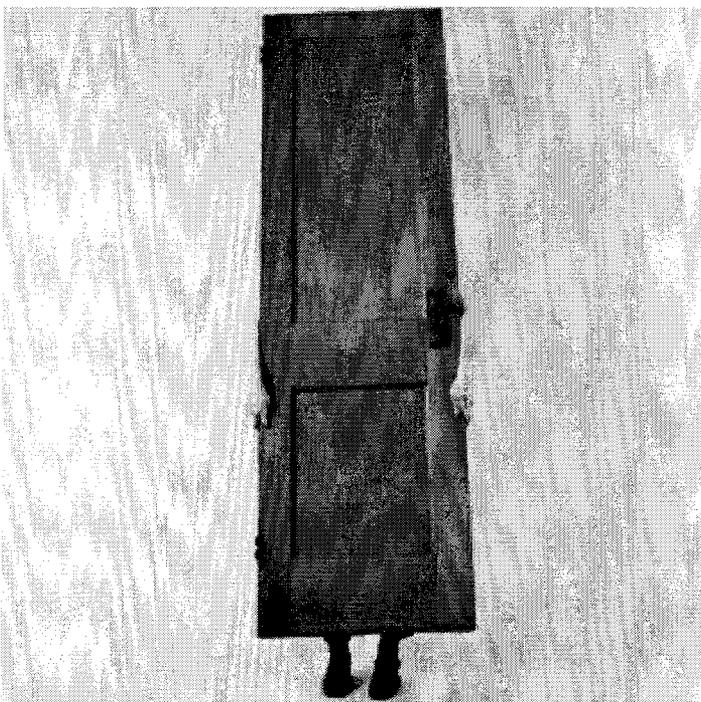
Hamilton's work is characterized by treading the taut line between nature and culture, and by engaging the body so fully into her spaces that boundaries of intimacy are routinely transgressed. Architectural space and inhabitation figure into her sensibilities, and she traces the sublime through haptic cognition. In many of her past constructions, interior cavities of the body commingle with the room and vice versa. Any one of Hamilton's complex spaces require inhabitation and each lies beyond description, yet most serve to illustrate the bodily presence as thematic in her work. In *malediction*, she repeatedly stuffed a piece of bread dough into her mouth until it took the form of the mouth's hollow cavity.¹¹ These oral impressions were then collected in a basket casket for the duration of the show. During *indigo blue*, saliva applied by the artist's tongue to the end of a Pink Pearl eraser was used to scratch out lines of text along the pages of thin blue naval books. Shadowy figures, moist indecipherable body parts, wringing or working hands, leaky, dripping fluids are repeated motifs in her work. Visitors to *aleph* heard and witnessed video projection of stones hitting teeth and rolling in the hollow cavity of the mouth's interior. Similar moving images with associated sounds in *salic* revealed a profile view of a head and open mouth with endless lengths of string being continuously drawn from inside.¹²

As media-absorbed consumers, we are all too aware of the role photography has played in the commodification of architectural images. Repeat performances of buildings we know about but have never experienced are ubiquitous at conferences like this one. The impact of Hamilton's photography is to implicate the experience of the body, orifices, the tactile grasp, and human movement into the realm of architecture, and establish links directly from the visceral to verbal language. Viewers are reminded of the recorded experience as an inhabited one. Traced sensation and open interpretation displace quantifiable analysis in the subjective processes of scrutiny.

Coincident with her earliest performance installations, Hamilton produced straight photographs in her body/object series that provoke playful tension between words and images. In the context of her recent pinhole photographs they offer a hindsight critique of the traditional photo shoot. Since its inception, photography has distanced the maker from the subject of exposure by inserting an instrument between them. Mechanical reproduction can result in a work of art generated more by mediation than by meditation. For still photography, the camera is employed to "shoot" the subject and thereby record primarily static qualities, fixed placement, textures, and frozen gestures. The photographer doesn't kill the subject, in spite of the metaphor. He ideally vitalizes it. Artists of straight photography perfected the print to capture beauty in black and white. But metaphors of power and control haunt the language of photographic acts, characterizing its methods of production, and further characterizing Jay's modern scopic regimes. While the technologies and sophistication of the photographic process have changed little in more than a century, the way we envision



#10-baskethead, 1981



#12-doorbody, 1981

and mechanically represent the subject continues to evolve. Ann Hamilton's latest photographs rediscover the uniqueness of the work of art embedded in the fabric of tradition while challenging relations between perception and meaning.

The physical relationship between the photographer and the subject has relied historically on a prescribed distance and barrier between them. Features of the subject are selectively revealed in such photographs, while the maker remains invisible, and the separation caused by the intervening camera transcends their actual measure. The potential for powerful lens magnification means that the viewer has no knowledge of the actual amount of space between photographer and subject. That gap has become embedded yet unquestioned in the act of photographic capture.

The machine-mediated process that chemically fixes the record of the *camera obscura* holds authority in its inherent capacity for truth. Roland Barthes' reflections on photography underscored the importance of the subject's basis in reality for the *punctum* to be felt. Barthes' *punctum* is that affective characteristic that penetrates to prick the viewer and distinguish a work of art from an otherwise merely interesting, instructive, or useful photo. In his terms, mechanical reproduction depends upon its relationship to reality for that capacity, yet the fact that the "referent adheres," he wrote, makes it "difficult to focus on photography."¹³ Walter Benjamin's adoration for the loss of aura with mechanical reproduction begins with a notion of photography as technologically enhanced vision that is infinitely reproducible. The authenticity of the original, that is, the authority of its content, is the essence of that which can be transmitted. While uniqueness of the original diminishes, the transmissibility of the work of art to the public becomes possible.¹⁴ Technology and the act of producing an image surpass all questions about the relation between the visible subject and the invisible artist. When Robert Capa and Henri Cartier-Bresson recommended getting closer and closer to take the perfect shot, they ignored the fact that the instrument disguised the photographer. They covertly affirmed the mask, the built-in artifice that hides the identity of the photographer from his subject. Therein, the subject, willing or not, can best be seen when laid bare and essential detail or relationships are manipulated by the photographer. To accomplish this ideal, the maker is decorporalized and becomes the framing brain behind-or within-the instrument. Self-portraits by Fred Archer and Andreas Feininger provide apt images for the disembodied artist wherein the photographer and camera become one. Each instrument and pair of hands mask the features of the face to transform the artists' own image.

Ann Hamilton's recent work speaks about photography by uttering images that say something else about the relation between man and machine, artist and her subjects. By more overtly personalizing her point of view, she tacitly rebuts assumptions about photographic truth and authority. She has entered the picture in a different way, and as photographer she is immanently present. She is also viscerally present. Her tongue-in-cheek pinhole prints leave her mouth's trace as she holds her portraits and landscapes between her lips. These photo shoots are sublime experiences. She records not only



face to face: michael

what her eyes see, but also what her body feels. Both model and photographer hold firm, unarmed, at arms length for up to 20 seconds grasping the tension of the distance between the shared gaze of their naked eyes. Both participants inhabit suspended time. Not only does the artist reveal her own identity, she maintains eye contact while breathing in her subject. To be captured in this way is to experience the aura of the original,

defined by Benjamin as a unique phenomenon of distance however close one may be. The naked eye appears to “bring things closer, spatially and humanly, while overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction (Benjamin).”¹⁵



Archer



Feininger



face to face: Meredith

In Hamilton's work, her mouth replaces the eye as the aperture — her trace is concerned neither with focus nor proof. The mouth becomes a room that subject and viewer are invited to enter. From deep inside that room, the voice of the artist is heard. As with all of Hamilton's rooms, there is something taboo and uncanny about the experience within. The photographer deviates from her typical protected position because in this process she is not invisible. The artist is a direct witness while accepting a vulnerable stand. With mouth hanging open and exposed, Hamilton reverses the pose, and as part of the act reveals what is not socially acceptable to see: tongue, teeth, tonsils. Beyond anatomy, what has no visual form is the human breath and its expression of anxiety or calm. By choosing so intimate a stance, the power usually assumed by the photographer is exchanged for compliance with the subject. The photograph is then a joint study between two complices. Frontally poised, artist and subject engage and exchange glances in a silent conversation.

Hamilton admits that she often feels uncomfortable in the act of making these photographs. This is understandable when recognizing that each print is a record of a relationship and a performative act. Seen here is Meredith Monk, with whom

Hamilton jointly produced and performed "Mercy" across the country last year. Monk is depicted as voice and texture, form and force, and motion. Her chants seem embodied in Hamilton's mouthpiece, an apt way to graphically represent the artists' collaboration.¹⁰ These prints hold traces of more complex, less clear truths. Standing face-to-face, human contact is restored. The photographer has nothing to mask her face or conceal her eyes. As when we squint to erase detail in order to see primary compositional form, Hamilton exchanges the scopic clarity capable of magnifying hair follicles for something more essential.

Hamilton's photographs are twice framed, blurred, distorted, and revitalized. The observer of these images is an accomplice, now inside her, as though she has swallowed an audience to whom she has then offered a glimpse. And the image is also an eye, with the subject positioned as the pupil staring back. This 'shot-reverse-shot' dynamic places the viewer in the hot box invited to participate in a game. Eye, mouth, and body are more than metaphors in a creative process that engages postures and senses beyond merely visual perception. Works are hung in a space at eye level with the image weighted in the frame as the mouth in a face replicating the physical distance between artist



face to face: Grace



face to face: Kris

and her subject. For this form of reproduction, Hamilton has eliminated the mechanical counterpart to become the aperture, the oracle, and she places the observer in her spot. The resultant sketch is no still life, but fluctuates and floats as the space of the image is elasticized and heartbeats are registered.

Hamilton has made the photographer corporeal, mind and body reunited. Viewers are invited in. Blurred images of her subjects express themselves more through gesture than feature. Where modern photography fetishized the captured detail and the perfect print, these oral pin-holes trace something more human. That which is wholly relational emerges. Hamilton's bi-ped tripod needs neither flash nor close-up lens. Binocular vision denied, the distance from the subject is measured in each image. Black space surrounds the elongated bio-morphic frame of the composition that also seems to slow the image in time.

The artist's mouth becomes an organic flexible metric. The amount of the subject held between the lips reveals the distance between the artist and her subject, and therein a relationship is inferred. The foreground holds within its V-shaped armature the compositional middle ground and background, which exist in illuminated space. In "Grace," the framed contents allow viewers to read the curtains being drawn back. Since movement is exaggerated at close range, faces blur and details are diminished. For Hamilton's portraiture, the body of the subject is removed, but may be present as the source of vibrations within the frame. Character is neither veiled nor magnified, but allowed to reveal itself slowly. The subject needn't bother to comb her hair. The aura of the original subject transcends particular detail, and the communicative, haptic gesture is conveyed poignantly in the reproducible form.



face to face: Emmett

Emmett is her best model, experienced through his brief life of play in the artist's studio. He is the 6 year-old son of Ann and Michael. When being photographed, Emmett stood on a chair to have equal advantage in the staring contest. By seeing through his cupped hands, he told his mother, he was doing what she was doing. That is, he instinctively understood that she had turned her mouth into her eyes. He showed unforeseen discipline and restraint, until at last he giggled. . . .

To summarize, modernity's scopic regimes have been perhaps the most prolific image makers in history. Martin Jay's theoretical investigation in French philosophy helps to establish a link between modern architecture and other modern forms of the arts that have privileged the visual. Yet we know from Jonathan Crary that these techniques of the observer are not determined by technology alone. Purpose, passion, and priorities are determined by the psyches that machines are sought to serve. ("Open the pod bay door, HAL." "I'm sorry, I can't do that, Dave.") The impassioned eyes of subjective observers are now called on to reengage the sensual in embodied acts of representation.

Allow me to speculate beyond the specular, as I draw my conclusion about a possible corollary between photography and architecture. What kind of architecture would Hamilton's oral pin-holes conjure up?¹⁷ I have presented her work in the context of this conference to pose that question. Rather than suggesting a "new architecture," I see her new way of seeing as opening fresh interpretations of and engagement with past, current and forthcoming architectures. Since her means of representation is neither fast, nor focused or final, it begs the limits of representation and invites personal, subjective experience in tracing our landscapes.

NOTES

¹ For discussion of the history of the *camera obscura* and perception, which limits the likely role of the black box in favor of the more potent glass lens, see Svetlana Alpers *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) pp. 29-32.

² In *Techniques of the Observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c1990) Jonathan Crary gives rise to the dominance of cultural evolution over technological determinism in the development of practices in photography since 1820. Without disputing the significance of Crary's historical documentation and conclusions, this paper investigates the role of the machine as a mechanism of mediation to distance or erase human presence from the norm of photography as a craft.

³ Roland Barthes defines photography for the purpose of his subjective critical strategy by identifying the quintessential character of the graven image as it is tautologically linked to its subject in his text for *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. (New York: the Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

⁴ Walter Benjamin wrote in his canonic work on mechanical reproduction, "For example, in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will. And photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow

motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. 1968) translated by Hannah Arendt, p. 220.

⁵ Benjamin, "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art . . . if changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of aura, it is possible to show its social causes. . . . We define the aura . . . as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." pp. 221-222.

⁶ In *Privacy and Publicity modern architecture as mass media*, Beatriz Colomina developed her theory about the uses and abuses of photography by modern architects, Loos and Le Corbusier. She notes that Le Corbusier's open interiors suggest "the idea that we have just missed somebody." Noting the male personal object left on the Savoy terrace: "we are following somebody, the traces of his existence presented to us . . . is a forbidden look. The look of a detective. A voyeuristic look." P. 289. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996).

⁷ John Sarkowski, former curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, has defined "straight" and "synthetic" photography to distinguish between methods of representation that rely directly on mechanical reproduction of light on a surface, from those mediating techniques that employ postproduction methods in the darkroom or beyond to craft a photographic image.

⁸ Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in 20th century French thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) draws from the writings of Barthes, Foucault, Irigaray

⁹ Ann Hamilton, renowned American installation artist, represented the United States in the 1999 Venice Biennale and received a MacArthur genius grant in 1995.

¹⁰ Zuck, Barbara, "Talented Teams," Ann Hamilton in the *Columbus Dispatch* Sunday 7 October, 2001, Page F1.

¹¹ Rogers, Sarah J., *the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1996* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts: 1996) pp 30-31, 56.

¹² For illustration and further description of Hamilton's installations before 1996, see: *the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1996* produced by the Wexner Center for the Arts and written by Sarah J. Rogers. The interactive CD-Rom demonstrates 10 installations from before 1996.

¹³ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard. (New York: the Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 6.

¹⁴ Kenneth Frampton wrote "The famous aphoristic line, 'Ceci tuera cela' from Victor Hugo's book *Notre Dame*, has come home to roost in more ways than one, and while one may boldly claim that architecture is not yet dead, the triumph of the printing press, and of photography, has often had negative consequences for the so-called mistress art." Frampton has sought to sustain "a graphics of commitment and value, rather than the value-free graphics of aesthetic detachment." He used as his counter-example of a well-portrayed icon the exhaustive Hasselblad documentation of Giuseppe Terragni's *Casa del Fascio* in *Quadrante* published when the building was completed in the 1930s. "A Note on Photography and its influence on Architecture" *Perspecta* 22 (New York: Rizzoli International, 1986) pp. 40-41.

¹⁵ Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations, Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc. 1968) p. 240.

¹⁶ CD-jacket cover "Meredith Monk mercy" ECM New Series 1829 (ECM Productions, 2002)

¹⁷ At a recent regional meeting of ACSA scholars, I attended a presentation by a colleague who used Gerhard Richter's paintings to situate the contemporary fascination with blurring as he discussed Diller+Scofidio's "Blur Building" on Lake Neuchatel at Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. At that time I thought about how much more effectively Hamilton's work would illustrate his argument. Yet I do not intend this attempt to engage Hamilton's photographs to be taken as a simple formal proposition.

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