

Exhausting the end of the road: Michelle Hamer, one stitch at a time

Hélène Frichot, May 2011

There is a scene near the beginning of Atom Egoyan's film, *The Adjuster*, where the protagonist deftly pulls back the string of his bow and lets fly his arrow, which is propelled through his open bedroom window into the world beyond. Having just stumbled into the room after his morning shower, he is naked to the waist and his eyes are firmly and inexplicably closed. Noah is his name, and he has recently moved his family, his wife and son, and his wife's sister, into a failed housing estate. Their lonely house stands prominently amidst fallow plots of dirt at the end of the road of an otherwise abandoned suburban development. Several scenes in Egoyan's 1991 film, *The Adjuster* depict what appear to be desert landscapes, waste plains, or simply the dust of posthuman landscapes. Randomly propped up in the midst of this desolate landscape are billboards advertising the stalled housing development in which Noah and his family are the sole, lonely inhabitants. On release, Noah's arrow traces a sky arc full of potential. It is this figure of the archer in a state of semi-undress that was used to advertise Egoyan's Canadian film. The arrow, before it escapes the taut bow strings, suggests such promise, and the flexed muscles of the archer's arms exude purpose. The arrow is his missile ready to claim new lands at a distance, to territorialise the outer reaches of suburbia through the portal of his bedroom window. And yet, Noah is a dissolute family man, an insurance adjuster who becomes sexually intimate with his clients. He lives in a display home where the books in the bookshelves fall away as a false veneer when you nudge them. His arrow lands only to discover it has acquired no property, it has landed beyond the end of the road, where few men care to go.

What desperate visions emerge beyond the end of the road? On the periphery quiet lives eek out their meagre existences. The sub-prime mortgage crisis proves that even the small and tentatively claimed plot of earth on which you have set up home is not, after all, your own. The dry earth falls crumbling through your fingers as life is evacuated from beneath your feet. In the case of Noah the insurance adjuster, it is mostly fire that consumes the houses of his clients, but it could be flood or earthquake, and it could even be the effects of global warming. Despite such global insecurity great swathes of the hinterland continue to be optimistically opened up in response to the compulsive acquisitiveness that attends the demand for property ownership, conceived as the most sacred right. A place to call home, or rather, a place to selfishly call your own. Rural regions, wetlands, the bush all fall away as the grasping residential market pushes in. The advance of unfettered suburban sprawl demarcates the tenacious extension of a frontier mentality, colonizing, territorialising, consuming. Sometimes the frontier also retreats, contracts, falls to waste, even returning to the wilderness from which it emerged, threatened by the unruly forces of the outside. Threatened by ineffable forces that exceed the imperative of cultivation. The end of the road can bear witness to a return to that which is uncultivated, or else a troubling progression toward posthuman landscapes and things.

Enter Michelle Hamer. She arrives from the direction of some non-descript freeway exit with her exhaustive series of tapestry works that map the peri-urban fringe where dwellings advance, retreat, and stall. Her creations are uncomfortable pieces, both in terms of their subject matter and their material composition. The plastic gridded mats onto which she weaves her strands of wool are off-the-shelf products, manufactured for the home craft, DIY market. The nastiness of the plastic against the flock of wool makes for a viscerally squeamish feeling, stimulating a hyper-sensitivity in one's sense of touch. Like dry hands asked to handle felt. Her tapestries are constructed in exhaustive series; she explores variations on a theme until it seems there is really nothing more to say. There is no definitive moment in which it is possible to proclaim that enough is enough, for reality can be endlessly prospected. Hamer documents the extenuation of suburban space through the depiction of freeway and road signage, and also housing development and home loan advertisements on billboards, much like those depicted in *The Adjuster*. Through her vehicular rambles along far reaching freeways, and off exit ramps, she arrives at the edge of the cultivated world, where it is always dusk. She listens in to the drying up of voices that live this life at the periphery.

In order to analyse Hamer's uncomfortable tapestry pieces, as well as to interrogate the uncertain condition that confronts us at the end of the road, I will present here a methodology of exhaustion. Exhaustion, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze argues, is not simply about being too tired. I will scavenge my methodology of exhaustion from Deleuze's essay *The Exhausted* where he discusses the work of the playwright Samuel Beckett, master of exhaustion.<sup>1</sup> I can't go on, I must go on, I will go on. Now, even though exhaustion is not about being tired, it is a condition that can beset a body, as well as a body of work. This is the case with Hamer. Her work commenced from a supine position, laid out flat on a couch, her tapestry mats held aloft before her as she stitched her way through her fatigue, one stitch at a time. To pass the time she began to weave. She commenced close to home, in order to depict the casing of her own corporeal condition and reflect on the necessity of instituting a care for the self. Once she could raise herself to a seated position she took to the car, projected her exhaustion beyond herself, extended her sympathy to the world outside. Her next fascination was the ubiquitous LED freeway sign, warning of poor traffic, road closures, accidents and speed limits. Eventually, leaving behind the arterial logic of freeways, she entered fringe suburbia where she discovered the dead end of the 'no road' sign, alongside the empty hope of billboards advertising new home loans and housing developments. The tapestry works can be collected into a number of suites, each of which remain open series or open works. That is to say, Hamer could return to any of the suites and add further images to the series she has created, and yet, there is also a sense in which she has succeeded in exhausting the series she has constructed.

Deleuze remarks that there are at least four ways of exhausting the possible, and I would add that this list should not be taken as exhaustive. I will argue that the four approaches describe a methodology of exhaustion that can be usefully applied to a critical

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted' in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael Greco, London: Verso, 1998.

creative practice such as Hamer's. These approaches include: 1) the formation of exhaustive series; 2) the drying up or exhausting of the flow of voices; 3) the extenuation of the potentialities of space; 4) the dissipation of the power of the image; a list to which I would add a further item, and that is the breakdown of the organic body.<sup>2</sup> [To Deleuze, the exhausted person renounces all need, preference, goal or signification and is therefore "sufficiently disinterested"](#)<sup>3</sup> and even suffers a kind of boredom. [Exhaustion presents a comportment that is wordless, indeterminate and generic. Exhaustion may stupefy us, but it is precisely in the](#) quiet void of exhaustion, when it seems that all has been said and done, that there might emerge new modes of expression. It follows that the methodology of exhaustion is generally attended by an ethics, or a comportment in the world, that is likewise qualified through exhaustion.

In a straightforward way Hamer can be seen to follow this methodology of exhaustion. First, she constructs exhaustive series through each of her suites, which feature distinct yet related subject matter. Her tapestries compose 'combinatorials'<sup>4</sup> that proceed from her own body, to the freeway, to the outer reaches of suburbia and her series of billboards and 'no road' signs. Although there is a sense in which she may add further tapestry works to any one of these suites, and further extend the series she has constructed, there is not an infinite number of permutations that can be allowed. She must grapple with the finitude of the situation, which may allow for a large number of combinations of factors, yet it is not possible to go all the way to infinity, so to speak. She must recognize the inherent limits of the material, her stamina, and how many variations on a theme are really possible. Deleuze argues that "the aporia [of where to locate the limit of a series] will be solved if one considers that the limit of the series does not lie at the infinity of the terms but can be anywhere in the flow...a point that is already reached well before one knows that the series is exhausted."<sup>5</sup> Second, Hamer succeeds in drying up the flow of voices through the repetition of imagery, achieved each time with just enough difference to distinguish one tapestry from the next. Voices here relate to the possible worlds that are generated through other subject positions, other points of view. Each tapestry can be said to offer up another image of a possible world that is quietly located at the periphery; worlds murmuring with quiet and anxious voices. A further way in which Hamer succeeds in the drying up of voices is through a form of infection, so that family, friends and colleagues feel compelled to send her fresh images to feed her series, to offer their voices. Each tapestry is drawn from a photographic image, which Hamer then stitches into her plastic gridded mats, copying the source image through the exacting coordination of her hand and eye. This means she has collected volumes of digital photographs to feed her series, which are further supplemented by the photographs that are sent to her. Now everyone sees what she has seen, and some have even been coopted into her makeshift weavers' guild to assist her in her labour. Further below I will also touch on the role that

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze uses the term 'combinatorial' to discuss the exhaustion of the possible through series. Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', pp. 157-158.

new technologies, such as digital photography and projection play in relation to her craft explorations.

Third, Hamer's suites and series of tapestries extenuate the outer limits of suburban space. The extenuation of space, the third of Deleuze's methodologies of exhaustion, is what the philosopher names the 'any-space-whatever' and he quotes Beckett to get at what he means: "neither here nor there where all the footsteps ever fell can never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further away."<sup>6</sup> Such spaces are well trodden and populated, covered in the dusty tracks of weary wandering feet. There are always mitigating circumstances in reference to suburban space, excuses that can be made, claims ventured about a place to call home. After all, in the new world we are intimately familiar with suburban sprawl, it has been so thoroughly integrated into our existences we barely see it. Hamer draws our attention back to its weary, exhausted spaces offering a lament of sorts, which at the same time allows us to revisit the question of home sweet home. It is no coincidence that the tapestry technique she uses is much like the little tapestry primers and samples located in pride of place above the mantelpiece proclaiming platitudes about the home. Fourth, she dissipates the power of the image, again through repetition and the distinction of minor differentiations. More importantly, the image is exhausted in that it can no longer wield its former power over us. Instead we find ourselves asking questions about advertising billboards, and road signage, the ephemera of daily commuting existence that had once only been background noise. Perhaps we even pause to ask questions about the seemingly unstoppable consumption and development of land at the urban periphery. The age-old question of property is raised, and also the question of who can claim the right to secure what property as their own. An appropriated parable concerning property rights may help to address such questions in what follows.

Two competing Grecian colonies send out messengers to secure the gate of a deserted city so as to claim ownership of its ramparts. One messenger, seeing that he is less fleet of foot than the other, takes his spear and sends it forth as his emissary. The spear or javelin arrives at the gate first, just prior to the physical touch delivered by the hand of the faster messenger. If it can be accepted that the slower messenger's missile provides a legitimate missive, then the message that is read determines the ownership of the property, delimited within the city walls. The parable above is a thought experiment constructed by the eighteenth-century British empiricist, David Hume, who asks about the nature of human and material relations, for instance, what is the relation between the messenger, his spear and the city gate, such that through this missive-cum-missile he can claim property ownership at a distance?<sup>7</sup> Much as we might ask what relation Noah is attempting to forge when he shoots his arrow into the man-made wilderness outside his window? A further question that might be framed is the question concerning technology. The spear or javelin has provided a convenient technology that augments the skill of the slower runner. Contrast this with the assumed authenticity of human touch and the claim

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<sup>6</sup> Deleuze quotes Samuel Beckett, 'For to End Yet' in *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980*, London: Calder, 1984, p. 181. See Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', p. 160, footnote 44.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, London: Penguin Books, 1969, p. 559.

it stakes: I was standing here first! Who can claim the greater right, which messenger? Central to this argument is the issue of rights and property, or property rights, and the specific network of relations that allows a given subject to claim these rights, in proximity, or at a distance. Deleuze, in an essay on Hume, asks the question like this: “Does the throw of the javelin against a door ensure the ownership of an abandoned city, or must a finger touch the door in order to establish a sufficient relation?”<sup>8</sup> A whole calculus of relations is involved, Deleuze argues. What we have by now globally established is that material adjacencies have been unsuccessful in staking the greater claim. It is a matter of who holds the bigger gun, the more advanced technology. Yet the parable of the javelin, and Noah’s arrow, both hold more pathos than that. The javelin arrives at the gates of what is a deserted and therefore lifeless city, and Noah’s arrow lands in rubble and dust.

The javelin is also like the shuttle that moves back and forth, or else like the needle that plunges through the cloth, trailing its line of coloured thread behind it, territorialising with colour the erstwhile blank backdrop, an empty, unoccupied terrain. Old and new technologies come to mingle. And it is worth remembering that the exemplary weaving machine, the Jacquard loom and its novel use of punched cards to determine complex patterns through neat algorithmic iterations, was a precursor to the early computer. Each stitch remarks upon the possible digitisation of the world. The weaver’s hand plunges straight into a world of bits. The personal computer has further extenuated our relation to space, as well as many if not all of our personal relations, which we increasingly claim at a distance, that is, remotely. We can excuse ourselves from the real world as the virtual one proves more and more compelling. Hamer likewise comments on the proximity between weaving and computation, remarking that each stitch operates as a pixel and that through the multiple adjacencies between her seemingly endless stiches an image emerges. In her recent exhibition, *Dangling Carrots*, at Craft Victoria, Melbourne,<sup>9</sup> she further extends this relation by projecting digital images onto tapestry screens woven out of white thread. The flicker of slides draws us back again to *The Adjuster*, where intimate slide shows and the projection of pornographic movies form part of the plot. Noah’s wife is a censor, and while she classifies films, she also secretly video-records them for her older sister. Another word for pixel is cell, and there is a sense in which each of the characters in *The Adjuster* is co-isolated, paradoxically held together in isolation, each with their secret preoccupations and desires.

When Noah stands there in his bedroom half dressed and directs his arrow through his window toward the no-man’s land of sub-prime mortgages gone bad, failed housing estates, bankrupt property developers and un-homed residents, and shoots his arrow, he brings us back to the simple idea of primitive technology and the way it establishes a

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<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, ‘Hume’, in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman, New York: Zone Books, pp. 50-51. See also Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://craftvic.org.au/whats-on/exhibitions/michelle-hamer-dangling-carrots>. Retrieved 02/05/2011.

relation at a distance. Toward the end of *The Adjuster*, it is also possible to make out the name of the failed housing development on one of the faded billboards, it is called Sherwood Forrest Estate, making Noah a Robin Hood of sorts. He redistributes wealth by assisting his displaced clients in making itemised lists of their destroyed valuables, and his redistribution of wealth includes his sympathy, which extends to sexual favours. As the film progresses we also realise that it is Noah's daily habit to shoot arrows through his bedroom window into the wastelands across the way from his display home. Either the arrows collect in pitiful piles in the dirt and dust, or else they pierce the surface of one of the faded billboards that stand lonely where domestic happiness had been promised. As Deleuze argues, following Becket, it is a matter of boring holes into language, here the mute language of billboard advertisements, in order to get at what lurks behind them.<sup>10</sup> In the closing scene of the movie we realise that Noah's sympathy has extended so far that it has enabled him to form a family. A retrospective scene communicates how Noah's wife and son, as well as his wife's sister, were in fact victims of a house fire some years before. Noah was designated to them as an insurance adjuster and has subsequently formed a relation with them that extends beyond his job description. He has bound them together as family. Through her handy stitch-work Hamer also aims to extend her sympathy toward the end of the road, which is to extend the self tentatively toward the other. The end of the road is a condition in which relations risk becoming entirely exhausted and all sympathy evacuated. It is where the quiver of arrows has run dry. In the end, not even technology will suffice to save us. The only small hope is that once we have managed to entirely exhaust the possible, some new mode of expression will emerge.

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<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', p. 172.