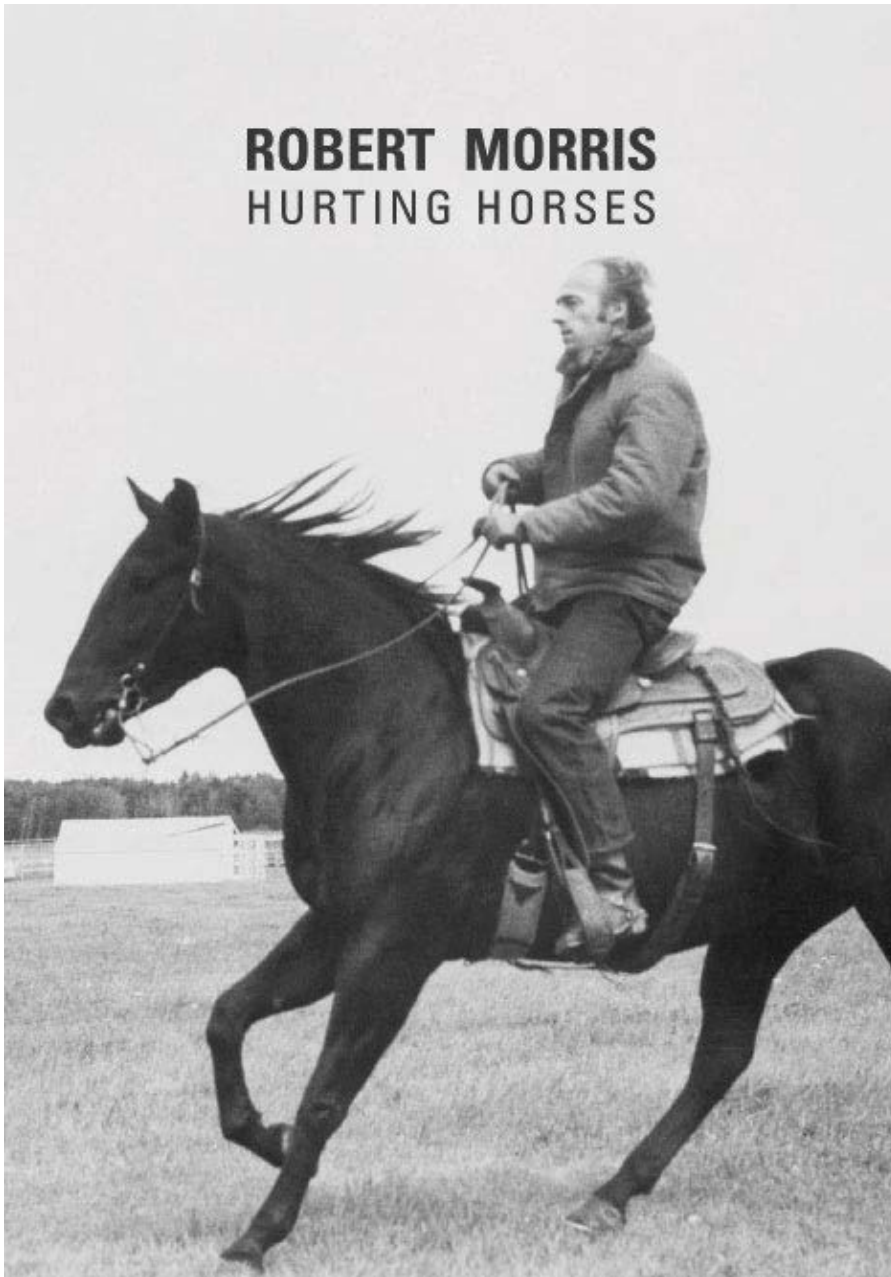


**ROBERT MORRIS**  
**HURTING HORSES**



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# Robert Morris

## *Hurting Horses*

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\*Obligatory mention : © Vera Kotaji pp. Michèle Didier

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### About *Hurting Horses* by Robert Morris

In *Hurting Horses*, Robert Morris uses the medium of writing to pay tribute to horses. His particular attraction to this animal was already obvious in 1969, with the performance *Pace and Process*, in which he rode one horse after another until he became exhausted, thus reversing the principle of the horse-race.

This book is divided into twelve chapters. In the first chapter entitled *Fathers and Sons*, Robert Morris goes back to his own genealogy. The paternal branch of the family, attached to the rural world, puts the young boy in contact with the world of animals and more specifically with the world of horses. The evocation of the family's past is reinforced by the presence of two photographs of his great-grandparents which frame the text in a sort of duality: the opposition between urban and country life, youth and old age, and between the middle-class and another more modest and rustic class. In the first chapters, horses are recalled as precious actors of the past. They are described as taciturn and humble characters – like the milkman's horse which does not escape a child's careful and well-intentioned attention. As the author says, «children notice such things».

A few pages further on, we find ourselves in a pure western film. It is not a well-known fact but when very young, Robert Morris has been working as a cow-boy in a ranch, tracking escaped horses across the big open spaces of Wyoming. Chapter III *Wrangling* is a short story, and its lines of dialogue and short scenes have a cinematographic character seen through the prism of Keatonian comedy. Although the story is full of violence, it is transfigured by a typically American approach: the burlesque style.

The history of the horse - because there is one - is closely related to the history of civilization. Domesticated 6000 years ago in Eurasia, the horse becomes, after the bow, the second most significant «tool» of progress, as initially used for warfare. This animal is then going to play a dominant part in the division of territory. More symbolically, the standard which the horse carries prefigures the flag, the representation by excellence of nationalist spirit. Moreover, the «driving force» of the horse partakes in the emergence of capitalism, but at the same time the animal is replaced by the machine. In Chapter VI, *History Lessons*, Robert Morris elaborates with great erudition a typology of the equine race through the ages and across the continents, but concluding in a surprising way: with a quiz!

*Hurting Horses* keeps on surprising us. On top of a display of scholarship about an unusual subject in the world of art, the book takes the reader by surprise with a number of hilarious passages, such as the exquisite Chapter IV entitled *The Large and the Small*, a subtly dialogued parodic variation of the novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, a political satire in itself. This special kind of humor hits home and allows us to guess who is hidden behind the nicknames *Porker Hush* and *El Laddie*...

On the other hand, the writing of Robert Morris expresses deep melancholy in Chapter V *The Jury*, a dreamlike fiction where the artist is confronted by a court composed of five carved stone horse heads. These figures are part of a building that really exists: the San Domenico Monastery, which dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was converted by Napoleon into a stable. The majestic heads call out to the artist one by one and take the opportunity to ask the human race for an explanation. «The only species your kind has mistreated more than us has been your own.» This very dark note takes us to an important character that exerted a major influence on the work of Robert Morris: Francesco Goya, whose etchings, *Los Disparates*, are mentioned in the introduction. Some of them again depict horses, but above all, they lead to a capital encounter with art, in all its darkness and its roughness. So here the horses put Man on trial and criticize him very bitterly for his secular taste for destruction, which is going sooner or later to throw him into the void.

There is also the question of emptiness in the admirable *Letter to a Childhood Pony*, in Chapter VIII, a letter meant for his daughter. The lines of this letter result in quivering praise for the past and for memory resurfacing. The chapter is illustrated by a photograph of the Temple of Segeste, in the center of which we can distinguish two tiny walking silhouettes, the father and the little girl, captured in a mimetic pose. In this letter, the artist explains both his relationship with the past and his new found lucidity related however to a loss of belief:

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*«Perhaps that is why memory floods in : just to take up the empty space of the mind».*

In *Hurting Horses* the artist uses a distinct literary style from one chapter to another, from autobiography to historical essay, from satirical parody to the fantastic, from letter to fiction, from detailed report to visionary daydream. These masterly pieces of literature are haunted by the great American foundation myths and establish a series of crucial links between myth and history, history and art, and art and nature.

*Hurting Horses* enables us to understand with new acuteness the whole work of this artist and, in the end, reveals an important fact: more than ever, Robert Morris proves to be a writer.

Vera Kotaji pp. Michèle Didier

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**Specifications**

- 23,5 cm x 16,5cm
  - 64 pages
  - The signatures are double-stitched with cotton thread
  - Paper: Silken White 16 g
  - Quadri and laminated cover: Carta Integra 300 g
  - Graphics by Delight and Michèle Didier, Brussels
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- Printed and bound by Arte-Print, Brussels

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**Production**

- Limited edition of 1500 copies

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