

ANN HAMILTON

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Ann Hamilton's
installation *the
event of a thread*, at
the Park Avenue
Armory, New York,
Dec. 5, 2012-
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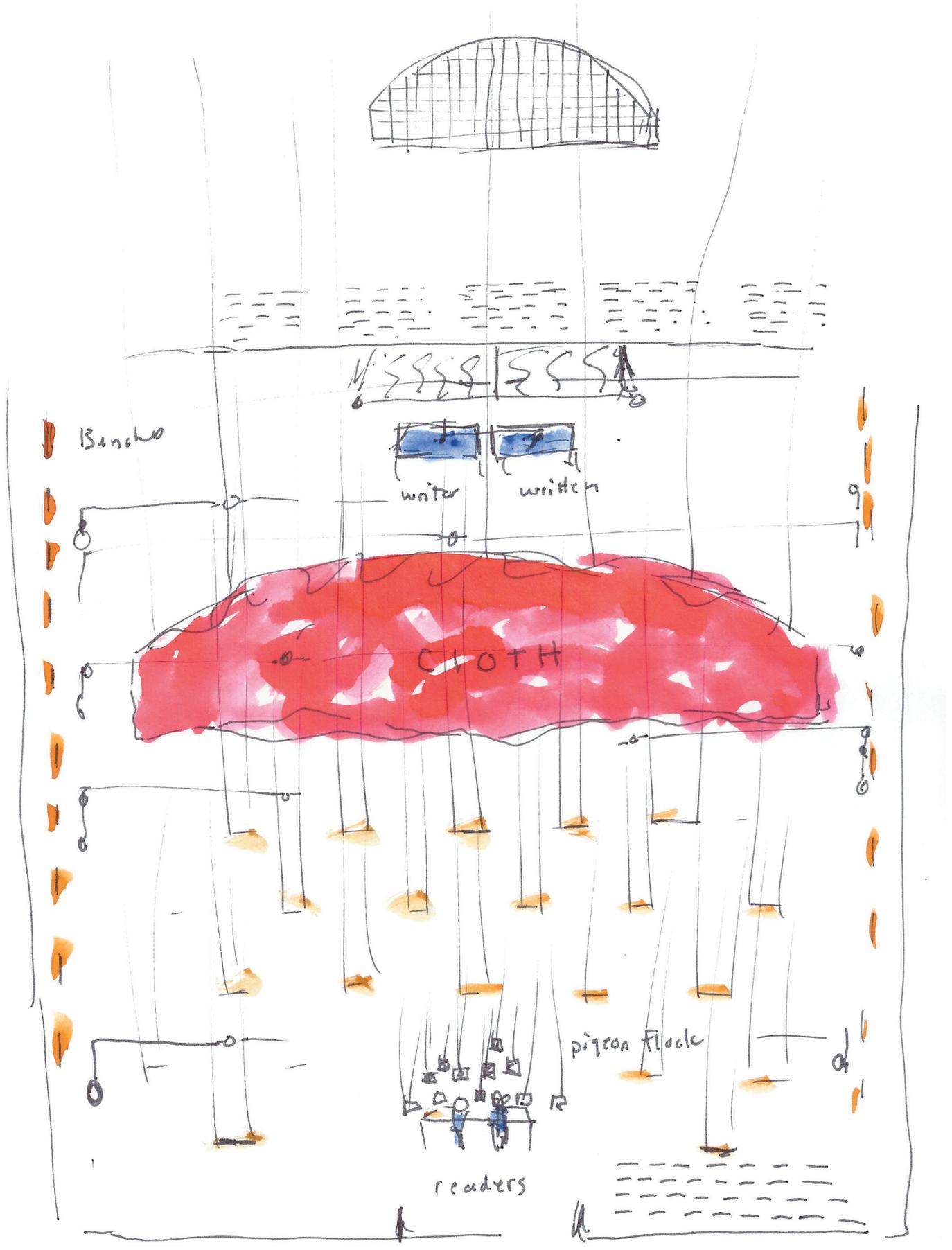
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IN THE STUDIO



A sketch of Ann Hamilton's installation *the event of a thread*, 2012, at the Park Avenue Armory, New York. All images courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.



FOR THREE DECADES, Ann Hamilton has produced enigmatic sculptural installations that seem to straddle the material and dream worlds. In these installations, which tend to be immersive, visitors have found themselves facing walls that “weep” droplets of water; commingling with peacocks underneath a room-size orange canopy; or trudging through a snow-like expanse of onionskin paper. Sound and language are often integral components of a Hamilton environment. A case in point is the artist’s 2005 project at La Maison Rouge in Paris. In this work, titled *phora* (from Greek, “to bear”), loudspeakers filled one gallery space with multi-vocal incantatory sound, which shifted between dissonance and consonance; in a nearby room, language was presented as a semiotic patchwork, with recorded voices delivering a disjointed text in English, French and Arabic.

Hamilton was born in Lima, Ohio, in 1956. She received a BFA in textile design from the University of Kansas, Lawrence, in 1979 and an MFA in sculpture from Yale six years later. She moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 1992 and has lived there ever since. Her projects have been featured in venues around the world, including the Dia Center for the Arts, New York (1993); the Musée d’art contemporain de Lyon (1997-98); the Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan (2006); and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis (2010-11). She represented the United States at the 1991 São Paulo Biennial and the 1999 Venice Biennale, and received a MacArthur “genius” grant in 1993. This month, her installation *the event of a thread* will open in New York at the former Seventh Regiment Armory, now known as the Park Avenue Armory. It will be her first large-scale project in the city in over a decade.

The Armory’s cavernous, 55,000-square-foot drill hall seems the ideal venue for Hamilton, a self-proclaimed “volume junkie.” For the installation, dozens of swings and a vast silk cloth, connected to one another via a system of ropes, will be suspended from the ceiling trusses. When visitors use the swings—as they are welcome to do—they will pull the cloth with them while also feeling the pull of other moving swings, resulting in a kinetic, relational performance. A series of hired performers will read aloud, in pairs, from two texts at a table near the entrance, their voices carried throughout the space by way of portable radio receivers. Additionally, homing pigeons (one for each swing) will be housed in cages near the readers, singers will carry out solo performances from a balcony, and a writer will generate a live response to the various goings-on.

I met with Hamilton in September, at the studio she shares with her husband, artist Michael Mercil, on the south side of Columbus. The studio is a frequent site of seminars, after-events and other functions for the local art community. The week before, a dinner was held there for sculptor Jessica Stockholder, following a talk Stockholder gave at the Wexner Center for the Arts. (The Wexner is part of the Ohio State University in Columbus, where Hamilton has taught since 2001.) Long wooden dining tables had occupied the center of the space that night, with models, tools and prototypes

for the Armory project pushed to the sides. Hamilton and Mercil, however, are always willing to make room for others in their studio, as Hamilton did the day I visited for tea and a conversation about the upcoming installation.

LISA DENT Your pieces often include multilayered references in their titles. Can you tell me about the title of this new work, *the event of a thread*?

ANN HAMILTON It’s a phrase from Anni Albers’s book *On Designing*. My background in textiles underlies the way I think about my work and make relationships between the various components of a piece. Albers offers a definition of weaving that ends, “All weaving is the event of a thread.” This refers to the crossing of threads when making a larger cloth, but also, for me, it’s about touch in a broader sense. Whenever two things cross, whether physically, conceptually or spatially—that is when something happens.

DENT How did the history of the Armory inform the work?

HAMILTON There have been so many kinds of events held in the drill hall, from state funerals to a ball for Queen Elizabeth to tennis championships to concerts. I spent some time in the archives, looking into the history of the space. One thing that struck me is the camaraderie you see in the less formal photographs of the Seventh Regiment. The sociability turned me toward thinking about the drill hall as a civic space in general terms, not so much tied to any particular historical narrative.

My research touched on questions like, what does the term “civic” mean? Also, what kind of gathering is allowed in such a space? There’s always a long process where the particular stories and histories that influence you have to take form in a work. Then things get a little more abstract. I wanted to engage the space and the regularity and regimentation of the drill, but something else emerged from that. The swings and the cloth have a reciprocity that arises from the people who are sitting there at any one moment. You



View of the installation *tropos*, 1993, horsehair, table, chair, books and mixed mediums, at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York. Photo Thibault Jeanson.

have a sense of being weightless, but you also feel the weight of another person. The cloth responds to the interactions among the 42 swings. It's deeply social.

DENT A number of performers will read texts aloud as part of the piece. What will the texts be?

HAMILTON There are many texts right now—too many! I'm looking at both contemporary and very old texts, including Aristotle's works on animals, on qualities and on politics and government. For the second text, I think we'll use concordances of newspapers, focusing on pronouns—we, he, she, they. I suspect there will be very few instances of "we" in the news. I'm interested in the agency that is attached to the pronoun and the civic implications that come through that vocabulary, in contrast to Aristotle's more descriptive method. We're also reading ancient Roman natural-history treatises.

As with the people on the swings—who are propelling themselves and allowing themselves to be propelled—the readers will improvise how they read together, in unison or in counterpoint. It's not a single coherent text that's being written; it's an amalgam.

DENT You said it's not a text that's being written. Did you mean "read"?

HAMILTON [*laughs*] I probably meant both. Here's the thing: I'm really interested in how the act of reading is also potentially an act of writing. With any given text, we all intersect it in different ways. So, in a sense, we're writing a text as we read it. It's another "event of a thread."

DENT You've performed in a number of previous pieces. Will you be present in this one?

HAMILTON I hope so. There will be a lot of readers. I'm talking to the theater and opera director Anne Bogart and her SITI Company, as well as the readers and actors who have been through her workshops, hoping to assemble a core group.

DENT This piece continues many motifs from your past works, such as the use of fabric, performance, audio recordings and texts.

HAMILTON Thinking about the way we know things, through phenomenological experience, from our senses, from material, from things in the world, bodily senses, embodied thinking, and the relationship between the ways we think through bodily experiences and the ways these experiences are structured by language—that has been in my work since the very beginning. Sometimes you think you're doing something new, but you find yourself back with the same old questions.

DENT This piece seems to relate to *tropos* [1993], which took place at New York's Dia Center. A performer sat amid a field of horsehair, eliminating words from a book with a heating element. There was also a recording of a person attempting to speak.

HAMILTON With *tropos*, my concern wasn't the particular book but the activity. The performer singed the page so that the printed word became smoke, which was reabsorbed by the hair, because hair absorbs smells. The word was transformed into matter. Now, however, I'm very con-

cerned with what the text is, with what needs saying today and what the forms for saying it are.

A concern with the material trace, however, does continue in the Armory piece. Every day a different vocalist will sing the same song. Using an old record lathe, we'll cut a record of the performance, which will be played in the space at the start of every day thereafter—an additional record and record player entering the mix each day. So a chorus of singers and a composition of echoes will accrue. For me this relates to the idea that such halls, on some level, contain all the voices that have ever spoken in them.

DENT Your piece for the 2003 Istanbul Biennial also used voices, didn't it?

HAMILTON That is a really closely related piece. There were six or seven blue curtains, very tall because the work was in the clerestory of an old customs house. There was an electromechanical system that opened and closed them in a very animated way—quickly, then slowly, and so on. They provided a space you could pass through, but they also enveloped you and kept you from seeing through.

Surrounding that space was a series of loudspeakers that played an audio piece based in transcripts from the end of the Bosnian War. I picked out phrases concerning really simple acts that are neutral in one context but very damaging in another: the opening of a door, for example, or the act of seeing something. So the opening and closing of the curtains was accompanied by a litany of physical actions, an inventory of gestures that speak of human agency.

DENT You've lived in Lawrence, Kansas; in Banff and Montreal in Canada; in New Haven, at Yale; and in Santa Barbara. You've been in Columbus now for many years. How has being here affected your work?

HAMILTON We're really lucky to have the Wexner. And my family is here, so that has been very stabilizing for me. In Columbus, I can have support and space that would be harder to come by elsewhere. But those are the obvious things. Basically, you're always just trying to follow where your work takes you. Each project, with the circumstances and conditions that it allows, nudges your work in this way or that.

DENT How does this studio play into the development of your work?

HAMILTON I think if you walked in here you wouldn't necessarily know what we do. It's not like there's a sculpture in process over here, a painting over there. There are lots of books, bits of material. It's a place where the work incubates and brews, a place for planning. My daily life in the studio is not very physical. I'm not an artist who goes in every day and pushes materials around. The reality is that I'm researching and reading. But it's through materials and their relations to each other that a work is ultimately made.

DENT How did you come to work in an installation/performance mode?

HAMILTON Like anyone else, I'm a product of my time. But my work also goes back to my training in textiles. Cloth is architecture for the body, so it was natural for me



View of the installation *mattering*, 1997-98, orange silk, live peacocks, typewriter ribbon and mixed mediums, at the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon, France. Photo Thibault Jeanson.

to go from textiles to the architectural space. In some ways I wanted to find a form that you couldn't stand outside of. It sounds simple, but it's not. I'm interested in embodied experiences, especially in an age of technological extension. To gather in a space is really different from being in a chat room. Those experiences amplify and extend us in different ways.

DENT Is there any one piece that is especially significant to you?

HAMILTON I always feel like it's the one I'm working on. But if not the current one, then I would say it's the

piece at the Wanås Foundation, in Sweden, called *lignum* [2002], Latin for wood. It has been installed for the past 10 years, in an old five-story stone barn. There's an electro-mechanical system that lifts and lowers five rotating Leslie speakers, emitting the sound of a voice [singing, humming and reading], through the five floors. So the installation is a weaving, with the sound as either warp or weft. That piece led me to consider the voice as a more central figure in my work. I don't know that it's the *best* piece, but it's a really important one to me. ○