

The beginning of this extended conversation took place August 8, 2011, in upstate New York as Cynthia Schira and Ann Hamilton were in the first stages of developing the concept for their 2013 Spencer Museum of Art exhibition at the University of Kansas (KU), Lawrence. The word “errant” appears early in the conversation, specifically in reference to a weaving technique called a “supplementary weft,” which is critical to each in practice and as metaphor.

¶ In exploring the Spencer’s collections and thinking about how these works might bring forward new ideas for each artist’s individual works and their collaborative concept for the exhibition, the two floated many ideas. Some were rejected while others transformed in surprising ways as they brought the show to fruition. Evidenced here are their respect and fondness for each other and their enthusiasm for the Spencer collaboration—heard in their often finishing each other’s sentences—and most of all their shared literacy in the language of textile-making.¹

¶ This interview is a condensed and edited version of conversations at three different moments in the exhibition’s formation: August 2011, August 2012, and March 2013—the last in a public forum (photos below) immediately preceding the opening of *An Errant Line: Ann Hamilton / Cynthia Schira*.



Ann Hamilton

Joan Simon



Cynthia Schira

INTERVIEW: AUGUST 8, 2011

Ann Hamilton, Cynthia Schira, and Joan Simon

Joan Simon: Why are you doing this show together and how did it come about?

Cynthia Schira: Happenstance.

Ann Hamilton: It came about because curator Susan Earle was interested in inviting us both to respond to the Spencer space, to the collection, to each other, but the possibility might not have begun were we not both on campus for an alumni award.

CS: I was the honored alumna for KU's School of Fine Arts. The University then did away with the School of Fine Arts that year. There is now a School of Music, and Art is within the College of Liberal Arts. Ann was invited to be the honored alumna for the whole university the next year. They asked me to introduce her. I spoke of her coming out of the School of Fine Arts, how the validity and integrity of her work was important to me, and that her work still carried the traces of her history at KU. That was, what year, Ann, because you were an undergraduate.

AH: I graduated in '79 from the University of Kansas.

JS: Ann, you told me you deliberately chose the school because—

AH: — Cynthia was teaching there.

JS: What was it about you and your work and what was it about her and her work that attracted you there?

AH: I was in upstate New York at St. Lawrence University and I had begun to study weaving in my geology classes, which is a whole story itself. My teacher, Bill Romey, was very loose with what you could do within his classes. Both his wife and his daughter were weavers, and as a geologist understanding processes of time and the values of self-directed research, he was open when I proposed an independent study in which I would set up a loom and teach myself to weave. I found a local weaving teacher to help but it was through conversation with Bill and his family that I was exposed to a larger world of weaving and textiles. I decided to leave that university, returned home to Ohio and took classes part time at the local university, and I researched where I might study and take this interest. I don't remember exactly where I came across Cynthia's work, but it propelled me to visit Lawrence and a faculty exhibition of her work, up during my visit, sealed the deal. I loved what I saw; I was excited to come and have the chance to study with her.

JS: Was there something about studying geology that connected to your interest in weaving and textiles?

AH: Perhaps they share an accretive process. The history of the earth is the reg-

ister of time, heat, and water in materials; earth like cloth tends to sediment horizontally.

JS: At the time, Cynthia, you were making your own work and teaching.

CS: Yes, at the University of Kansas in the textile department, and Ann just showed up as another student. I don't think that we really had enormous amounts of interactions other than through the classroom except that every time Ann did something it was more interesting than anybody else's, and I couldn't quite figure it out. Everyone would stay more within the parameters of the problem, some were a little better, and then Ann always went, *joooom* [laughs]—it was, you saw some of the slides, it—Ann's was quite different.

JS: Can you describe her work at the time?

CS: I have a very specific memory of our being in the new building and doing a critique on the floor in the hallway. We were dealing with the idea of supplementary wefts.² And everybody else was holding that a supplementary weft is secondary to the base cloth. But what's wonderful about "the supplementary weft" is that once you have the base cloth, it allows a freedom for the supplementary because you don't have to make the structure—but it's still related to the structure (fig. 104, 105, 110). Anyhow, everybody else's works were quite tightly held, and Ann had done something that stuck out (fig. 108).

AH: That was because of your influence. The first works I saw of yours were rectangular fields with lines that emerged from the ground of the cloth and its grid. There was always order being disrupted by disorder, an element that was controlled and then an element that was allowed to be errant. It made a strong impression on me.

JS: That supplementary weft—and the action of it—could have led both of you to sculpture.

CS: It could have. It did, for Ann (fig. 113). I always, you know, stayed really, really flat.

AH: I think the central word is the word errant. The supplementary weft technique made me think about the relationship between the line that makes a structure and the line that is allowed by and emerges from a structure: the line that deviates is an errant line, because it's escaped from, even if it's dependent on, the structure.

JS: Your concept of time is also a structuring principle for the exhibition.

AH: We considered structuring the layout of the show by how elements might demonstrate different accretions and expressions of time. Time is transparently

held in a cloth's structure. Each thread crossing another is visible even in the finest textile. Working with a small moving video camera was a way for me to think about returning time to objects in the collection, which are fixed in time. I was trying to understand how the acts of looking and of material accumulation might both spatialize an event in time, become a field, make a surround.

CS: I invest enormous amounts of time in the work but I'm not sure I actually think about time particularly. You know, consciously.

JS: Cynthia, I think you made the change from working with a handloom using computer programming and very big mills to execute your ideas—

CS: —like the video, you're saying.

JS: Yes, a different technology. The different sense of time. I see it as using different sorts of technology to achieve different structural intentions and incorporating time in different ways—

AH: —the amplification—

JS: —amplification of means.

CS: In a sense that's why I could sell my looms without worrying about them, because that was representative of a different kind of time.

JS: Your very different processes make for an exhibition that is not the typical two-person show. I am thinking about your discussion of the supplementary weft not only as a weaving technique but also in a larger sense as an animator.

CS: Definitely.

AH: The thing that can't be contained—

CS: —and it's not predetermined much of the time—

AH: —but emerges, a process that allows a form to emerge.

JS: Before we look into what you've done so far for the show—the outline and the model and all the photos, references, and sources—perhaps you each could talk about process, about making your ideas come to form?

AH: My own habits and interests are shaped by a process of response to the conditions of a situation. Primarily I begin with pushing against the architecture. So the architecture, for me, is like maybe the loom is, Cynthia, for you. I am like a dog circling to find a place to sit, pressing against the space to find a form. How I describe my experience, how I name and understand a situation's descriptive and felt qualities will allow me to orient my thinking and work toward a response. It is a volley between particularity and abstraction. I look for a metaphor or a resistance—

a tension or a contradiction that I can rub in my fingers. I try to keep things as open as possible and to circle as long as possible before settling on form [laughs]. That's where Cynthia and I are very different. I resist settling until I feel really sure in my body that I have circled long enough—found perhaps the right thing to rub between my fingers.

CS: I think some of it is because you are working architecturally and more three-dimensionally, and in more of an environment, and I'm restricting myself, somehow, to the flat plane, the pliable plane. That, actually, I don't want to circle as long as you do, as we have found [laughs].

AH: I heard, "Ann, we need to make a decision!" Cynthia, how do you develop a piece?

CS: It usually happens from an idea, and the idea is quite general, like notations, and then research, oftentimes online since I live up here in upstate New York. Then playing and allowing within the parameters of the idea for the fact that it's going to be weaving. My language has always been weaving, and I'm always conscious that that's my language.

JS: Cynthia, can you say what you mean by notations?

CS: Codes. Notations are codes. Some kind of a marking that relates to something else and is often determined by what that other thing is. Such as the staff of music. Or the graph paper of weaving. Or even mathematical markings.

JS: How do you translate these for your weavings?

CS: It always goes back to the visual. I get many visual ideas, or thoughts, without really doing the proper kind of academic background research for them. And then I do a lot of collaging.

AH: You fragment them?

CS: Right, but I'm not thinking of fragmenting them, I'm thinking of trying to make them come together in some kind of a way that would be interesting.

JS: Research is important for both of you—in individual works and in the construction of an exhibition.

AH: Yes, an important part of our research has been the two trips to the Spencer, this past spring and then the spring before: So, spring of 2011 and spring of 2010.

CS: There was the idea of a show in general, and then we started looking in storage rooms, mainly, and liking that part more than the more formal galleries.

AH: I think that we were first trying to understand the circumstance. It's a museum inside a university. The university is a research institution that has different archives and collections, some of which are housed in the Museum of Art. Across the street is a building that I remembered from being a student there, which was the—

CS: —Spooner Anthropology—

AH: —Anthropology Museum. The anthropology collection (now the global indigenous art collection) is now part of the Spencer's collection and I think the Museum is at a point of transitioning how those collections integrate. So the joint between us occurs at this time when the collections are joining.

CS: Also influencing us to a certain extent was the Spencer staff's desire for us to amplify or bring out some of the different collections.

AH: There was an openness and flexibility about working with both material histories. Both of us have a lot of attraction to those objects that have been categorically—

CS: —dismissed, in a sense, from the art.

AH: They've been stored within a different kind of academic and historical frame, and I think for us going over and seeing the baskets, seeing the textiles, tools, and toys, and then back at the Spencer seeing some of the—

CS: —*presepio* figures.³

AH: All of that was very rich. Going back to my personal history at KU, I remember one of the first papers I wrote was on one of the Pomo baskets in the Spooner collection (fig. 103). My process of carefully examining the object, of understanding how its form is created by the intersection of design with material was perhaps more seminal in retrospect than I realized at the time. It all started there. I look at those baskets and now see a digital structure: a body, an empty volume like—

CS: —like the kind of space that you talk about.

AH: YES, exactly, like the kind of spaces I like to work in. Which have all the vessel-ness of that object. The Spooner has a huge collection but it is largely out of view. When we went to visit the question was, "Through what lens might we draw from and use and work with this?" And "How might these materials be the materials that will inspire, but also constitute some aspect of the project?"

JS: Both of you talk about the Spencer's *crèche* figures.

CS: The *presepio* figures. We discovered those more or less by chance. I think we were just opening boxes.

AH: We had been focused on photographing the hand gestures we found in the Museum's painting and sculpture collection when we saw the *presepio* tableau in a corner of the storage area during our first visit. We were drawn to the quality of their gestures. Susan [Earle, curator] mentioned that in addition to the tableau there were many additional figures.

JS: You both came back to look at these figures again. Ann videotaped them and you began to—

CS: —Ann videotaped them (fig. 1) and I did still photographs (fig. 2, 4). I was mainly doing the fabric (fig. 4) and she was doing mainly the bodies.

JS: There was another idea you developed that related to the drapery of a sculpture.

CS: We were talking about fabric and drapery in a general sort of way and how it is expressed in both painting and sculpture.

AH: We looked for a commonality through which we might respond individually, to the expressions or the representations of cloth. In our more extended second visit, we spent more time looking at the textile collection—the quilts, the cashmere shawls, the Coptic textiles. We were both delighted with the Japanese sample books—a part of the extensive Asian collection—and it became very apparent that the encyclopedic collection might not be evident to the Museum's visitors since so much of it is not on display. The breadth of the collection is not one you would expect from a museum on a university campus.

CS: Except that if you know anything about the history of the Museum, how it started with one woman, Mrs. Thayer—

JS: —what is that history?

CS: Upon the death of her husband in 1907, Sallie Casey Thayer began to travel extensively in Europe and Asia and to indulge her passion for collecting. Her collection of decorative arts included furniture, rugs, antique textiles, metalwork, ceramics, glass from a variety of eras, a variety of Asian and Native American objects, and samplers and quilts from the U.S. The collection that she bequeathed to the University in 1917 also included paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings by artists such as Winslow Homer, Robert Henri, John La Farge, Theodore Robinson, and Emil Carlsen. She bought things that appealed to her, so they are cross-linked.

AH: So she was an accumulator.

CS: She was. And then various people gave works. So I think, relatively speaking—

AH: —we have permission to use the collection with the same spirit of her accumulation.

CS: Perfect. I didn't think about that, Ann, that's good.

AH: I hadn't thought about it either, until you said that. [Laughter]

CS: No, that's nice, that's nice.

AH: In many ways we are bouncing off each other to figure out how the resources of and depths of the collection allow us to pull forward the conversation between the two of us and within our practices.

JS: In developing the show, Cynthia, you've worked with a foam-core model (fig. 7) and lots of photographs and—

CS: — floor plans. And sketches. I think that what we've been trying to do is to balance both our processes and our ideas.

AH: YES! And the challenges of the architecture. Each return to the Museum was a confrontation with its realities—a chance to listen to what it asks for, what it demands, what it allows, what we might work with or not. I think meeting its conditions helped practically ground our many responses to meeting its heavy hand and presence.

JS: That you think you need to take a heavy hand or that it has a heavy hand?

AH: It has a heavy hand.

CS: It definitely has a heavy hand.

JS: So you have the choices of accepting it or changing it or masking it?

AH: I think the only way to approach it is to work with it and to accept its structure and conditions.

CS: We did go through many iterations of trying to change it.

AH: We did think about a tent.

CS: Ann was talking about circling the space with videos.

JS: I thought at one point you were thinking of mechanically circling a cloth within one of the galleries, the Central Court.

AH: Yes. We started out with that.

CS: Also covering it, doing a salon style hang of all the walls—

AH: —a salon hanging of the collection.

CS: Yes, and then covering it, and then uncovering it.

JS: What are the ideas that you think you're working with— what have you included in your outline so far?

AH: We are thinking of using the columns in the Central Court as the center of two large platforms upon which we will display objects from the collection. At this evolution in our process the filter for selecting the objects will focus on figurative sculptures, from fourteenth-century wood-carved pieces to traditional small Japanese carving.

CS: Not only selected from Western culture.

AH: We would also select from figurative works in the Spooner collection. We are thinking they might be arranged by size.

[Laughter]

CS: But there would be quite a few of them, I mean, it wouldn't be just a few of them.

AH: Including the *presepio* figures. The history of Western art is largely one of representing narrative with the figure. We are imagining an accumulation of figures around the central columns. We might also clothe the perimeter of the Central

Court. The height of the doorways, which is 10 feet, is also the width of the Jacquard loom that Cynthia has been working with in North Carolina.

CS: We would then actually make a continuum around the whole perimeter, 10 feet tall. It would be a black-and-white weaving, and would reflect, in some way or other—I'm just thinking as I'm talking—would reflect the collection or parts of it.

AH: It would be inspired by or derived from the way that you have looked at a lot of the objects. But not necessarily picture the figures.

CS: It would be similar to the piece that I had done before but not so heavy.

JS: Similar to what piece?

CS: The piece—my monster piece, the 10 by 30 foot piece, *Etymon*.

AH: Why did you give it that title?

CS: Like etymology. From which a later word is derived.

AH: Cynthia had *Etymon* with her when we made our visit in the spring. It was important for us to see it in the space.

CS: Yes, and we put it, and we dropped it down—

AH: —from the balcony—

CS: —from the balcony overlooking the Central Court. And decided we didn't want that.

JS: At one point you were playing with the idea of definitions of cloth?

CS: I think that's gone by the board, at this point.

AH: It might come back in the Renaissance Gallery. Let me finish describing the Central Court. From the second level, you can look down into the Central Court from two side balconies. We are planning to ask to have those balcony spaces be part of the project, perhaps mounting spinning video mechanisms on the parapet walls to spin light and image across the galleries of the Central Court and the upper balconies. Working with a miniature video camera I might animate the *presepio* figures, in a video collage, similar in process to Cynthia's fragmentation and collage work for the loom. They would circle—

CS: —in a random way above the cloth.

AH: Yes. I'm also thinking about those upper two spaces as choir lofts [laughter] that face each other across the space and might address the Central Court below.

CS: Then we'd have the chance of call-and-response, so we're back to some of the things that Ann's been really involved with.

AH: There might be some aspect of the collection that comes forward. Or working with the music department or figuring out a performance aspect, but it's where the light would come from and then it's where the sound would—

CS: —I like the idea that the light and the sound would be coming from up there.

AH: So the conversation Cynthia and I had this morning was followed by: "You know, maybe we don't want to use only the galleries they've given us; maybe we want to include these two upper galleries."

JS: It sounds like you've got the structure if you integrate the spaces.

AH: And we're thinking about using the space that's straight through the Central Court.

CS: Essentially that space, the Renaissance Gallery, is the same size as this, the Central Court, so it's a continuum, in a sense, but it's separated by a gate, a big heavy gate (fig. 59, 60).

AH: Buried in thinking of the balconies as choir lofts is a notion of cloth—perhaps the multiple voices that structure a choir are like the multiple threads in a cloth... different but working together toward a harmonic whole. The Renaissance Gallery may be where we bring forward the rolled textiles from the collection; we might line it with shelves and a structure to hold the rolls and folded cloth from Cynthia's history—

CS: —and from Ann's history. Opposite could be those wonderful rolled rugs that they have covered with the Tyvek.

AH: So we bring forward the collection but we don't necessarily expose it. For the two spaces we are less inclined to use, which are to the side of the Central Court, we would work with Mary Anne Jordan, who is the chair of the art department and a faculty member of the textile department.

CS: She's the woman I taught with for twenty years. She would work with the students in a special-problems class within our concept.

AH: The seminar might focus on museum practices—the social production and function of cloth contained in the collection.

JS: Your next steps are to work on the Renaissance Gallery and to secure permission to use those upper choir lofts.

AH: It feels like we have a structure now within which both of us can do our supplementary weft thing. That it's manageable. That we have something that is appropriately scaled to the situation.

JS: So the task next for Cynthia is to do what?

CS: To work on the fabric.

JS: The surround.

CS: Or to think of it—you know, it will take a long time.

JS: And what's ahead for you, Ann?

AH: I think my job is to look through the collection—catalogue the many figurative pieces, explore further the holdings that are not available online. This will

involve working with the collections manager at both the Spencer and the Spooner to help identify works. Then I would return to Lawrence to videotape the selected objects directly. But there's another component that I'm interested in making. Both of us share this "wanting to make" impulse.

JS: Making together, you mean? Or apart?

CS: More apart.

AH: I think the show is together and the making is maybe more solitary.

JS: So there's something you want to make but you don't know yet what that will be?

AH: I have a sense of what it is, but I think the urgency was to get to, to have a structure, so that you, Cynthia, can start making the cloth.

CS: Yes. Because of our different lives and our different ways of working, I like a long, slow evolution of the thinking of the thing, and Ann comes to form in a different kind of a way.

AH: I'm thinking of taking the still images from the video of the *presepio* figures and, as an analogue to Cynthia's folded cloth [*Etymon*] and the thickness of time her cloth contains, making pads of paper in which each layer of paper has a different image and moment from the video sequences. The exposed image would change as the top sheet is torn from the pad and so the exhibition would change as visitors remove and expose layers. Cynthia was the first one to describe them as flip books, big flip books. The production of this would be investigated by the class with Mary Anne.

JS: The show is scheduled for 2013?

CS: They're saying February or March at this point because Ann's doing the show at the Park Avenue Armory in New York [Dec. 6, 2012–Jan. 6, 2013] and we would need the month of January to do some of this.

JS: Do you have an idea for the title of the show?

CS: I came up with a working title of *The Collection*, but that is a pretty uninteresting working title.

AH: It could be *The Collection* or *A Collection* with a subtitle. And I think it could be a working title for a while.

CS: I think it should be *The* because it's *The*, this particular collection, not just one in general.

AH: The event of two threads crossing constructs a cloth, a vertical and a horizontal intersect. Yesterday we made a list of all the intersections that make cloth and of the many dichotomies that follow from the zero/one structure that programs the pattern in the Jacquard loom, a precursor to the computer. We talked about cloth condensing and unfolding, as mass and as plane, weaving and unweaving, making

and unmaking, back and forth, opening and closing, covering and uncovering, revealing and concealing, empty and full. It immediately led to a dichotomous way of thinking, which was helpful in thinking about the different spaces in the Museum.

Technology Shifts

Handlooms to computerized Jacquard; analogue to digital image-making

AH: I'm curious, Cynthia, about how you first made that step from working on a handloom to the computerized loom. You did this so early on in the development of computer programming for a Jacquard loom. I think so many of us actually came to the computer much later, really.

CS: I think some of it was because I was really interested in making more complex fabrics and in order to do that on a handloom it meant that I had to spend hours underneath the loom changing the tie ups, so it was just thinking about a way that I could do it in a sensible way and play more.

AH: It's almost like drawing, in some places. You can be more fluid.

CS: I wanted it to be more like drawing. I'm very much influenced by Dick [Schira], my husband. At the same time I was thinking this way, I was going down to Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York and working with Milton Sunday and diagramming some of the damask fabrics and playing and talking about those potentials and then applied for an NEA and got one of the big NEA's—

AH: —big NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grants. And the grant was focused on being able to have access to this technology?

CS: No, no. The grant was just an artist grant. Remember? You got \$25,000 for yourself. Then, that was a lot of money. And at the same time—it's a sort of synchronicity of everything happening at similar times—Rick Hart was developing the computerized handloom. It was one of the first computerized looms and I went up there and bought one.

AH: Where was that?

CS: In York, Maine. I talked to him about it and I wanted a really large one, and Dick and I drove up and got the loom.

AH: It was your whole living room, right? Or your whole studio?

CS: It was a whole studio, upstairs. We had to use a forklift to lift it up [laughs]. Thirty-two harnesses, but it was computerized, and so it allowed me to play with three different layers.

JS: What year did you get the computerized handloom?

CS: '83, maybe?

JS: In 1981, you worked at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) as part of a Jacquard project?

CS: Well, actually, I'm trying to remember. In 1954 when I was a student at RISD it was partially commercial, the textile area—

AH: —was more oriented toward industry.

CS: —toward going into industry. We learned how to do things specifically and technically and on power looms and we also got to use the mechanized Jacquard loom. Actually, I think I did a Christmas tree, a real 1950s kind of thing, on the loom. So I had a little bit of knowledge about the Jacquard loom.

AH: Before that had you had a multiple harness loom? Did you go from, like, a four harness loom to a...

CS: Yes—I had a four harness.

AH: To a...

CS: 32.

AH: 32-harness loom.

CS: Why not? Same principle.

AH: Right. So it was this huge amplification of possibility.

CS: The reason I did the RISD project that began in 1981 was because the teacher at RISD loved the Jacquard loom and wanted to do more with it. She developed the project and there were 12 of us and we came to RISD over a period of, say, two years.

AH: And you were there to really explore the possibilities that she was setting up?

CS: Those looms were not computerized but they were Jacquard—a Jacquard is different from a harness loom. The difference between the Jacquard and a harness loom is with a Jacquard you're controlling each individual warp thread, while with a harness loom, it's groups of threads.

JS: Maybe I'm confusing this with another project you worked on with computerized Jacquard looms. Was this working the Jacquard without the computer element?

CS: It was the Jacquard. During that project it was not computerized but mechanized. For the Jacquard we plotted the design on graph paper, punched the cards that translated the graph paper into loom language, strung the cards together and attached them to the Jacquard head, which was attached to the loom.

AH: With cards.

CS: Yes, we learned how to make the cards, which were used before they developed the paper, like the long sheets of paper that are used with the player piano. And so my little design was a repeat of—I think it was only 12 inches or something. Later projects included layers and all were on a single big graph called Point paper. It took me 100 hours.

AH: To graph it.

CS: Yes, because you have to do each—

AH: —because you have to account for every thread at every moment.

CS: Exactly.

AH: So Cynthia, here's an idea: wouldn't there be a way to take the graph that the computer works off of and work with the music department to sound or sonify the pattern that you are developing?

CS: Yes, there could be.

AH: Is that interesting, maybe?

CS: Sort of, in a John Cage-ian sense. Actually, the written staff of some of the music is very, very similar to some of the historic diagrams or weaving drafts. I mean, without the sound, you can hardly tell the difference, between the two notational forms. I'm just saying how close the two are.

AH: Right, because they both are structuring time.

CS: In actuality, I've done several pieces that have both sorts of notation, though very abstracted (fig. 113, 115).

AH: It would be interesting to work with the structure as it is notated for the loom, for the Oriole mill, and bring that to the composition program or the performing arts program to respond to and interpret with sound. Then what might happen in the choir loft is a—

CS: —a more evolved pulling together.

AH: Right. It isn't from "over there," it's from within.

CS: Within the thing. Well, that's interesting. I had not thought about that.

JS: Ann, when you were studying textiles, did you use a loom? If so, what kind?

AH: Yes. I had a loom, actually, before I ever ended up in Kansas. In high school I had a Leclerc loom, probably eight harness, and I learned some of the basics. What was very funny showing you the pictures of the Woolgrowers Association—was that I had been there as a high-school student to get fleece, because I was learning how to spin. And my Dad had taken me there. The mid-states Woolgrowers Cooperative is in Winchester, Ohio, and it is one of two places in the U.S. that grades and processes raw wool—it has an amazing overhead conveyor system. At one point we looked at this picture and some photographs I had of a long spinning structure in the street in India as a system that might circle through the galleries. All these years later to end up back there was really something. And after Kansas—

CS: —you went to Banff [The Banff Centre, in Banff, Alberta, Canada]—

AH: —I obviously learned a lot about how to use that loom but I was always trying to do something else with it.

CS: Right. That's why you had the base cloth and you started with the supplementary weft.

AH: Right, the structural relationship meant something to me. It can be difficult for people to understand "how." What something is physically has consequences and is what it means. Our cultural habit of grafting meaning onto something and to not see or understand how meaning is emergent. Something comes to be what it is.

JS: It was at Banff, for one of your first room-sized installations, that the "supplementary weft," that errant line, was animated in three-dimensions. Could you talk about what material you used for this line and how it was used in your installation *ground*, 1981 (fig. 115)?

AH: I took the large, rectangular, low-ceiling gallery space as a ground cloth, which it literally was. The floor was fully carpeted and the walls were covered in fabric wall panels of the same beige. The textures of both coverings made attachment easy. I prepared one-foot lengths of fine, colored telephone wire, then hooked the bent ends into the pile of the carpet or the grid of the cloth at each one-foot measure, until the entire floor and four walls were covered in protruding, animate lines of wire. It was a simple accretion, but entering the gallery was, I suppose, like walking *into* the middle of a cloth.

JS: Cynthia, when you are in the process of preparing the computer programs for the Jacquard loom, you're negotiating joins of individual lines constantly—

CS: —not constantly but continually knowing your specific parameters. You can form your image and work with your image knowing that it will be going to a specific loom.

AH: How many threads per inch and how you could control each one of those threads.

CS: Right. But you also have to control the tension. And you can't have some of the threads slack and some too tight. So there's an overall warp tension that has to be dealt with the whole time. For example, if you were doing a great big area that was a solid black, you couldn't have—especially on the tapestry loom—you couldn't have that area without using several structures to make that black. You're always having to do the structures so that they will weave. The loom will tell you, it will go "bang" and it won't weave.

AH: Right—if you don't have the tension for it.

CS: You have to always be talking to it.

JS: Are you limited to a type of fiber with the Jacquard?

CS: No, you aren't in that sense, but you are in the sense of how most of the mills work. Mills such as Oriole put on really, really long warps as it's so expensive to dress a loom. You'll have something like 20 looms in a factory and they'll all have different warps or the mill will be known for certain warps. You can't just go in, like with the handloom, and have a different kind of warp made for a particular project. You have to work within the parameters of the mill as well as those of the looms.

AH: Right.

JS: Will a mill always use the same material for the warp?

CS: Mainly.

AH: They can change it for every color—

CS: —within.

AH: But is it always cotton?

CS: No, no, it isn't.

AH: Can it be silk?

CS: There's just a range. You can't go beyond a certain range.

JS: What's the range?

CS: Well, it depends on the loom. And it depends on the set-up. If you have a very fine set of the verticals, like 168 per inch, then you have a smaller range of what can be the horizontal. And if they're set farther apart, say they're 50 ends per inch, or EPI, then you're going to have more ability—

AH: —then you're going to have more in your weft.

CS: Right.

AH: There's more weft control.

JS: What do you choose now?

CS: Right now? The 10-foot-wide loom I used for *Etymon* had 168 ends-per-inch and it was a cotton, 40s/2 cotton, I think. Was it 40s/2? Yes. Cotton. The verticals, the warps. But when I did that big piece *Nocturnal Mirage*, I used the Japanese paper for some of the weft along with a linen and with a raffia, and that was done on a hand Jacquard at a school in Montreal because the industrial Jacquards can't do something as careful, as it throws the wefts too fast and they would break. So you're always working in conjunction with the loom. It's a marriage between you and the process.

AH: Your description reminds me of the back and forth and listening process I feel with an architectural space. Cynthia, have you ever done any large-production commercial cloth?

CS: Jack Larsen and I tried to do that, and it didn't go—and with Michael Koch, do you know him?

AH: I know the name but I don't know him. Who is he?

CS: He creates fabric that has a very similar aesthetic to what Jack did and he worked for Jack, originally. We tried to do something like that and it didn't work. It didn't work because he wanted me to do some of the designing and I didn't know how. I got all uptight and I lost the fun of it. Then when we went back and Michael did some of the design edits, we couldn't find a mill. He went to Europe and Asia, anywhere that could produce it at a good price-point. It would have been too expensive.

AH: Too complicated, what you had designed?

CS: Well, no, they didn't have the warp set up, and by the time you set up the warp the cost of producing it would have been too much.

JS: Ann, have you ever worked with an industrial loom?

AH: I had an opportunity a number of years ago and I was just really busy and I didn't pursue it—

CS: —to work at a mill in Italy?

AH: No, it was a possible commission for a large stage curtain.

CS: Oh, wow.

AH: I don't know what I was thinking. I think I was overwhelmed with whatever was on my plate in front of me. You know how you have those things. But where was I? I was not awake.

CS: But it's still possible, if the thought's still there and the possibility comes again.

AH: I am interested to learn how to program the Jacquard loom and work from the raw warp to the woven cloth. The textiles, central to so many of my projects, while specific, have always been industrially produced.

CS: You could work with somebody, too. There's no need for you to know the whole thing. I think there's a need for you to understand the basis of it—

AH: —the principles of it.

CS: Right. As I told you, it's my language, so I think of things like that, I think of it in those terms.

AH: Right. It's a literacy.

CS: People have always said to me, why don't I do other things? I don't know why I don't do them, but this is my language.

JS: Cynthia, have you worked in traditional tapestry?

CS: Traditional tapestry is handmade, by comparison to industrial tapestry. Traditional hand-loomed tapestry depends on the wefts covering the warps—

AH: —it's all made in the horizontal.

CS: It's totally in the horizontal and it's created with sectional wefts where the wefts or the horizontal don't go the total width of the fabric.

JS: Each colored yarn or weft is used within its pattern area.

And the warp is completely covered in the completed work.

CS: In the industrial Jacquard loom you're working with the vertical in opposition to the horizontal and it is active the whole time. You're bringing individual colored threads to the surface to form the color of an element within the image.

AH: They're up-down but it's like the design emerges from what you bring forward rather than—

CS: —rather than covering up the structure. When I was studying in Aubusson, it was during the Hungarian Revolution, actually. It was cold as hell. And we were staying in the top of this hotel there, so Patti Zoppetti and I got to know several people there. We were studying with the apprentices at school. Somebody knew Jean Lurçat so they took us to see him one day.⁴ The drive was quite long, and his house, or castle, was on top of a hill. An old woman who appeared to be out of a historic painting let us in and told us where to go.

JS: Jean Lurçat was a painter and ceramist but he was most of all known as a maker of tapestries and an innovator in tapestry, someone who brought new life to this long tradition.

CS: In this house he had on the wall the drawings for the tapestries. He was one of the first to make the cartoon with outlines, areas within the images of the tapestry, and then he would put the colors coded by numbers. And it was—

AH: —like a paint-by-numbers sort of thing.

CS: It was very much a paint-by-number sort of thing, and he had apprentices, a couple apprentices working there. He was a charming man. We had lunch, and he wanted to take us up to see something really special. He was a Communist, too. He took us upstairs and there was a bathroom and they had gold spigots in the bathroom that he just really loved, which is just such a funny thing.

AH: That he wanted to show you his gold spigots.

CS: Yes. And around the top of the room, it was maybe, this deep, two feet deep, there was one of his many spiky designs, and it was black and—

AH: —really graphic.

CS: Yes, very, very graphic. That's a memory from a long, long time ago. I don't think that we even knew then that he was as important as he was as far as opening up the field of tapestry. We didn't have any idea. I was 23, or 22, and I think at that time 22 and 23 is quite different than it is in this era.

AH: Well no, maybe not. It's extraordinary that you were off studying. Was that through an independent program?

CS: It was through Textron, I got a Textron fellowship.

AH: Through?

CS: Through RISD. I must have applied for it. I don't know for sure. I wish I had the words to be able to describe it all, because as I'm talking about it I'm seeing the whole thing with Lurçat, and the room, and what he looked like, which made me think of Picasso.

AH: And where was that really famous tapestry biennial he worked on?

CS: That was in Lausanne.

JS: He was a co-founder of the Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne (CITAM) in Lausanne, and an organizer of the Biennale de la Tapisserie de Lausanne.

AH: Does that Biennale still happen?

CS: No, it does not.

JS: The Biennales took place from 1962 to 1995.

AH: That was a tremendous influence.

CS: It was. And it's how we all got to know each other. Because if you got accepted, it was—

AH: —this international gathering there, right?

CS: Right. That was amazing. The first time I applied for the Lausanne Biennial, I thought it was a show, I had no idea it was anything more. I don't think I got in the first time. And then when I did get in I went two or three times.

AH: I think when we were students you told us this really funny story about going to what must have been the Lausanne Biennial—

CS: Oh, exchanging places?

AH: With Lia Cook? Was it with Lia Cook?

CS: No.

AH: Who was it?

CS: A Chinese or Japanese woman, because they said that my piece—it's when I was doing the supplementary wefts—looked Oriental and her piece looked Western, and we were both shy and we didn't know how to talk about it during the press conference, so we changed places and then it was very easy to talk about hers and she had no trouble talking ... about mine [laughs]. That was fun.

AH: That's a story that has stuck with me.

CS: [Laughs] It was fun.

AH: And so, Cynthia, did you ever do anything really traditional?

CS: I learned how to do it. I did it. Then when I came back from France, from Aubusson, and Dick and I were married and I had Marcy, I took my loom with us when Dick was getting his graduate degree up in Seattle.

AH: Where was he? At the University of Washington?

CS: At the University of Washington. We had really good friends up there then, artists Bob and Fay Jones. Anyhow, I made the cartoon from a drawing for a black and white piece of traditional tapestry and found that I really liked the drawing part and not the traditional weaving, and that was sort of the beginning of trying to do something other—

AH: —of trying to push the process.

CS: Yes, somehow, something. Because it was really boring. Because anybody could weave the image I had designed.

AH: When you go to the Oriole Mill, is there any part of that process that is improvisatory once you're there?

CS: Yes, you could stop the loom and you could change your program, but generally you would have done your improvisation with—

AH: —a series of tests, or—

CS: —you might do it with the final test, but you wouldn't do it during that process. Because it's fast—it's so fast. I mean, I think I wove that whole piece [*Etymon*], the 30 feet—in maybe three hours.

AH: It would be fun to come videotape it. You know, with the camera really inside the action of the loom

CS: Yes, you need to come, you need to come. You need to do that in between all your millions of other things.

Ann Hamilton, Cynthia Schira, and Joan Simon

JS: Ann Hamilton came to KU to study with Cynthia Schira, specifically because of a technique that Cynthia was well known for, something called a “supplementary weft.” Cynthia, could you explain this?

CS: When you weave something it’s an integration of the vertical and the horizontal. Generally there’s one horizontal. With a supplementary weft you have the base cloth that’s made of the vertical and horizontal and as well you have a second weft and that can play and do what it wants to do. And I really think Ann and I are good that way. [Laughs] That I’m sort of the base [low voice] and Ann’s the playing.

AH: Well, I think that it was true. I saw Cynthia’s work. I had dropped out of school, and her work and the textile program propelled me to move to Kansas—to study under her influence. We were both returned to a conversation about the supplementary weft as we sought a structure for responding to each other, for this project. ¶ It is a literal process and technique but it also suggests, by extension, a metaphor: for ways to think about the grid, a structure and something that floats free of structure, the singular in relationship to the group or part in relationship to whole. So for me it was a way to anchor something in a material but also to float free, I suppose, physically, metaphorically, and intellectually.

JS: We’ve seen this “supplementary weft,” this playful surprise in a structure, in each of your installations. This exhibition is unusual. While it is collaborative in spirit and research, in actuality there are two shows within the show. One is an installation by Ann Hamilton called *figura*.

AH: Yes, we just came up with it.

[Audience laughter]

Two hours ago we had a title.

JS: And the other instance and a parallel installation by Cynthia Schira called—

CS: *Etymon*.

JS: And then there’s a title overall for the show, *An Errant Line*. I think the artists should also explain that choice.

CS: In the beginning Ann and I were talking about collaborating literally and using the original room and we spent several meetings on that idea and it obviously wasn’t going to work. Because I’m one of these slow cookers, it takes me a long time to do everything, and Ann does everything at the last minute.

[Audience laughter]

AH: We cook in different ways.

JS: On different burners. What, finally, was the process of developing the show? I know you came, you looked in the storerooms and in the collections, and you made certain choices of works here that would inspire your own work and then works from the collection that you would exhibit at the same time.

CS: I think that actually what we did was very selfishly go through all the collections and really see the things that we thought were wonderful. And often times they were in storage or they were in the anthropology collection or they were hidden somewhere.

AH: Well, maybe to step back a little bit about the process is to say that we were invited in to respond not only to each other but to the possibilities of the collection and the resources and the unique position of a museum and art department in a research institution. I think during the first visit we started out talking about the history of radio at KU and the reading program for people who have visual disabilities and we spent a lot of time at the Spooner. It is through responding to the collections that we were able to then re-relate our practices together and find our shared interests and mutual draw to similar objects in the collection. ¶ I would like to say that the institution is very brave because when you invite such a process you have no idea what you're going to get. You are inviting artists in, you're committing to supporting their research practices and a conversation, a collaboration of sorts and you have no idea how or if it will turn out, you don't know if they're going to sneak coffee into the galleries [audience laughter]. I think there was an incredible trust and generosity in the invitation and the question of how two artistic practices might meet with the resources that are here. The trust and faith in that process over the several years that we've been in conversation hopefully opens the door to further projects like this. ¶ I would like to hope that will happen because it is wonderful to walk around the storerooms and say, "Well, I'd like that painting," or, "Could we have this whole drawer?" To have access to the materials and objects in the collection, to look at it not through the lens of a particular scholarship but to look at it first for its pure visual and material delight and then in response thread together the concepts and histories that connect it to each of our own practices.

CS: She said it incredibly well.

[Audience laughter] She did!

JS: I know!

[Audience laughter]

In both installations, the first pieces you see are related to a collection of sculptures in the Museum's collection called—

CS: *Presepio*.

JS: How each of you related to these and used them in your work is very different. First I'll ask one of you to say what these objects are and then how it translated into your work.

CS: I think Ann should go first. [Audience laughter]

Presepio figures are actually figures that were in Nativity Scenes. There's a beautiful Nativity Scene that you probably have seen here at the Spencer at Christmas-time with the whole setting—and there are also additional *presepio* figures in the collection apart from this tableau. What we did was take these figures out of their normal setting and look at them individually and photograph them. Then Ann did a lot of scanning of them. And when you look at the figures, do look at them really carefully when you look in the cases. Their faces and their clothing are—they're just amazing. They're just amazing. They're so detailed. We're not used to seeing something that detailed in a small figure like that, so beautifully done. I use the clothing in the big panels that you see—the front, maybe, of a vest, or the skirt or something, and Ann, obviously—

AH: —scanned them.

[Audience laughter]

JS: How did you scan them?

AH: There are a couple of different threads here. I think we talked a lot about how the act of looking at an object in a collection animates or re-animates it. How it is seen changes with cultural context and with shifts in technology. Each viewing and consideration brings the object forward in time—makes it alive in our experience. I think we were looking at these figures, which are alive with gesture—they have all the sense of animating and conveying a narrative. ¶ We talked about how the technologies for looking at and representing work determine how we see the thing in front of us. And so with several students who I think are here—Josh Meier, Rachel Cook, and Rena Detrixhe, and many students in Mary Anne's [Mary Anne Jordan's] class—we took the objects that we were interested in and placed them on a scanner, basically, to touch them, visually, because one of the things about—can I go on for a second?

JS: Sure.

AH: One of the things is that we're not allowed to touch things in the Museum, right? So I kept thinking about how—but we were in the back room touching them, and so—

JS: —with gloves on.

AH: —with gloves—

CS: Mostly.

AH: —and when you put an object on the scanner it's not taking a photograph with a lens but it's a way of seeing that space that you actually can't otherwise see. When two things make contact, it is felt but invisible, you can't see the space of contact, the tactile surface of two things touching. I was interested in how placing these objects, which we cannot touch, on a flatbed scanner makes visible a tactility that we cannot experience, and how the figures gesture out from that contact. ¶ It was just an experiment in the beginning. There was a very old machine, one of low quality in terms of definition and accuracy, in the Spooner collection office and collections manager Angela Watts, who has been very generous to our process, offered it to us to use. It made a strange pink halo around the object and didn't render things very well. We didn't realize at the time what a real gift that was. Making a project is often a process of finding what you need, it isn't something you can direct but something you have to wait for—it arrives as a gift. This old scanner was one of those gifts. ¶ Once we saw the first figure scanned (at least for me), how this scanner rendered the objects placed on its surface, how it brought touch forward, I knew we were onto something and it then generated for me the structure of the project.

JS: Another question about that, so that people know what they're looking at when they go into the gallery. There are big sheets on the wall that look sort of like newspaper sheets tacked up or just parts of wholes or photographs. Ann, perhaps you should say what they're made of, especially because it is a new material for you.

AH: I have been working with these materials for a while but not quite in this combination or with this printing process. They are digitally printed on a beautiful, very thin Japanese paper that has a sheen on the surface. It's a very strong but a very delicate material. It's too thin to go through a printer so we mounted the paper to cheesecloth. It has the hand of cloth but the surface of paper.

JS: Cynthia's installation is organized in three clusters, or parts. One is called *MAKING*, one is called *SHOWING*, and the third is called *STORING*.

CS: Or *SAVING*. Same thing.

JS: The three words describe a continuum of process—the relationship of an artist to the mission of any museum. I was going to ask Cynthia why her installation is organized like this, to talk about the three different parts, and what's in the parts.

CS: I got really interested in the fact that much of the stuff that we responded to besides the figures was in storage and in the fact that you didn't see that much of it. So what I decided to do was to play with the idea that before something comes into the museum it has to be made by whatever culture, whatever person. I wanted to emphasize that the museum didn't just hold things; it was bringing things into the world by its acceptance or by putting background on it. Then there's a short time when it's being shown. And in actuality much of a museum is what's stored, and it's hidden, and kept. Is it ever thrown out?

[Audience laughter]

JS: It's called de-accessioning.

[Audience laughter]

AH: I should just say that I think it was Warhol who said, "It's just a storage problem until someone buys it."

JS: It's rare to see a relationship of teacher and student change to one of equals and I know that each of these artists has learned something from the other in doing this exhibition.

CS: I was going to say, I have become the student and Ann is the teacher.

JS: How?

CS: She's taught me a great deal as far as the timing and the coming to form, taking the time to come to form and not getting nervous about trying to get the thing to form way before it should. I always used to say to the students, "You know, don't take the first thing." Well, I don't take the first thing, but the fifth thing, you know, maybe it should really be the tenth. And so you taught me a lot in our talking with each other. So I like that idea.

AH: And I am reminded—how do artists give each other permission, in different phases of their work and practice? I was reminding Cynthia that when I was a student, I think in my senior year—and you had not been here that long, just a few years—in one of our last classes she started by saying, "I'm going to talk to you about the career and the life of an artist. A practice is something that happens over your lifetime, it's not just what you show and it's not just a particular project." And she said, "I'm not going to tell you who this artist is." And she showed a whole range of works, some of which were really successful and some of which were more questionable; the failures and, I think, the triumphs. Then, of course, over the course of the class it became clear that it was Cynthia sharing her work with us. But more than the work it was about telling us that you have to be able to fail, that you're not really taking the risks that you need to take unless you can actually make bad work.

CS: Thanks, Ann. [Audience laughter]

AH: That was such a backhanded compliment. I think when you're with a teacher they're showing you a way of having a life in the world, and having a practice. That's something that's always stayed with me. I do work up to the last minute, but I think it's also trusting that the things that happen along the way are the things that help you understand what something needs to be. And that you're directing it to a certain extent but you're also waiting for those things to happen, and that half of the practice of making work is waiting, and waiting until things themselves become clear. It is a live process. (I can give an example, in this project. A couple of weeks ago Susan [curator, Susan Earle] emailed me about the upcoming concerts on the very special Bechstein piano that is in the collection and asked me if it was OK to have it in the Central Court. And I wrote back and said, "Well, tell me more about this piano. I think it is fine." And now the piano is actually a central figure in the work. And I learned a lot about this piano and in learning about the piano I was able to connect the project. Should I tell that story?

JS: Yes, go ahead.

AH: Franz Liszt played this piano—Steven Spooner, if you're here you can correct me—on his last tour of Europe. It is famous for his playing. He is famous for his music and a style that is uniquely gestural and very animated, which is very much like the figures in the *presepio*, and I found in reading about him that during Liszt's life he joined the Franciscans. The Franciscans were started by Saint Francis of Assisi, whose father was a famous and successful cloth merchant. And when he decided to leave his life of excess and luxury and devote himself to a life of poverty, in a public act in front of the bishop he shed all his beautiful clothes and with them his family wealth, leaving them to pool on the floor, and he walked away to a very different life. If you know that Saint Francis of Assisi is the one who popularized the *presepio*, there is a found connection between the clothing on the *presepio* and the *presepio* figures and the life of this piano. 🍷

NOTES

5. <http://www.agnesscott.edu/lriddle/women/love.htm>C