

Ann Hamilton
the event of a thread, 2012-2013
Artist Statement

I can remember the feeling of swinging—how hard we would work for those split seconds, flung at furthest extension, just before the inevitable downward and backward pull, when we felt momentarily free of gravity, a little hiccup of suspension when our hands loosened on the chain and our torsos raised off the seat. We were sailing, so inside the motion—time stopped—and then suddenly rushed again toward us. We would line up on the playground and try to touch the sky, alone together.

Suspended in the liquidity of words, reading also sets us in motion. We fall between a book's open covers, into the texture of the paper and the regularity of the line. The rhythm and breath of someone reading out loud takes us to a world far away. As a child, I could spend hours pressed against the warmth of my grandmother's body listening to her read, the rustling of her hand turning the page, watching the birds and the weather outside, transported by the intimacy of a shared side by side.

the event of a thread is made of many crossings of the near at hand and the far away: it is a body crossing space, is a writer's hand crossing a sheet of paper, is a voice crossing a room in a paper bag, is a reader crossing with a page and with another reader, is listening crossing with speaking, is an inscription crossing a transmission, is a stylus crossing a groove, is a song crossing species, is the weightlessness of suspension crossing the calling of bell or bellows, is touch being touched in return. It is a flock of birds and a field of swings in motion. It is a particular point in space at an instant of time.

Anni Albers, in writing for Encyclopedia Britannica, reflected that all weaving traces back to "*the event of a thread*." The crossings of thread make a cloth. Cloth is the body's first architecture; it protects, conceals and reveals; it carries our weight, swaddles us at birth and covers us in sleep and in death. A patterned cloth symbolizes state or organization; a red cross stitched onto a white field is the universal sign of aid. A white cloth can be a ghost, a monster or a truce. John Constable described the sky in his paintings as a "white sheet drawn behind the objects." When we speak of its qualities we speak of the cloth's hand; we know it through touch. Like skin, its membrane is responsive to contact, to the movement of air, to gravity's pull.

Suspended via ropes and pulleys by a field of swings hung 70 feet from arched iron trusses, a white cloth more than twice the hall's width and nearly as tall is the central figure in the space. Whether a tug of war or a unison effort, individualized or coordinated, the responsive liquidity of the silk registers the combined velocities and accelerations of the field of swings. The shifting weather of the white cloth is generated through collective action. A common activity perhaps reveals our kinship with bees, ants, and cranes; all united as Aristotle's "social animals," undertaking the same action for the elevation of the whole.

At the threshold of the Drill Hall and facing a flock of caged pigeons, two readers, seated at a wood table, read out loud from scrolls. Their address is to the birds, one species bound by gravity to another whose capacity for flight provokes irreconcilable longings in the other; part explanation, part impossible communication. The scroll they read from is a concordance, which is by definition an alphabetical arrangement of the principal words of a book with reference to the passage in which each word occurs. A concordance is also an agreement, a harmony. Here, more truly a melding of mesostic and concordance forms, the vertical spine of words intersects with horizontal lines drawn from disparate inventories that categorize and organize the observable world.

Moving back and forth across the scroll, the pair read in intervals of listening and speaking, in unison or counterpoint, improvising a composition as each draws his or her own line from the paper's column of text. In weaving, the thread that floats free from the structure of the main body of cloth is called the supplementary weft, a line introducing another pattern—often decorative—over a ground cloth. If its line is irregular, it is referred to as an errant line. Each scroll contains the possibility of multiple readings, and each reading becomes an act of writing. If the scroll is warp and the reader is weft, then the voice, transmitted to hand-carried paper bags, is a shuttle, whose reach is further extended as the script streams silently on the web. Both radio and online transmissions offer the intimacy of a private voice in a public arena. Words allow us to travel while the tactile keeps us present; a rhythmic exchange of reeling out and pulling in that is also the swing's pendulum.

At the eastern end of the hall and facing away from the white cloth, a writer, also seated at a wood table, responds to the condition and weather of the room, the radio transmissions, the reading voices, and the space as seen in a mirror reflection. The blank of the paper filled in time by letters addressed to qualities, emotions and places far away—Dear Far, Dear Near, Dear Sadness, Dear Weight, Dear Time, Dear Here—accumulate on the table in the reverse tracings of a carbon copy. The letters themselves, sealed, await their journey. While the words written remain silent, the contact between the stylus and the paper is one of three live broadcast channels. The sound of a letter forming, the point of a period, the pause, the unfurled line register as the contact between two surfaces and the hesitations of the thinking body.

As the field of swings is bracketed by reading and writing, the interval of the day is bracketed by live song and its recording. The maximum angle of a pendulum swinging away from its vertical point is called its amplitude. Amplitude also refers to sound waves in air; sound is the second “cloth” of the work. At day's end, a vocalist on the Juliet balcony serenades the pigeons when released to flight. The plainsong, cut live to vinyl lathe—from center to outside edge, a motion repeated when played each morning after—returns the recent past to the current moment. A different singer on each successive day accretes, in turn, an additional record, and in time, a “chorus.” Song enchants the civic, and the community of voices are archived by mechanisms and artifacts that have pragmatically and symbolically served as connection points for communications technologies. The simple interlacing of human song and animal song—the cooing of the pigeons and the singer's vocalizations—perhaps remembers that at one time, animals lived in the imagination as messengers, sometimes with oracular or sacrificial functions.

No two voices are alike. No event is ever the same. Each intersection in this project is both made and found. All making is an act of attention and attention is an act of recognition and recognition is the something happening that is thought itself. As a bird whose outstretched wings momentarily catch the light and change thought's course, we attend the presence of the tactile and perhaps most importantly—we attend to each other. If on a swing, we are alone, we are together in a field. This condition of the social is *the event of a thread*. Our crossings with its motions, sounds, and textures is its weaving; is a social act.

— Ann Hamilton