

myein

The word *myein* is an ancient Greek verb meaning to close the eyes or mouth. Linked to the initiation rites enacted in medieval mystery cults, the closing of the eyes or mouth refers to the secret status surrounding their rites. Across time, *myein* has come to stand for that thing which has not been, or cannot be, explained.

I created the installation *myein* as a meditation and lamentation on those aspects of American social history that, like weather, are present and pervasive in effect but which remain invisible or unspoken. My self-given task was to make a place in which this absence could be palpably felt and to create a space simultaneously empty and full. *Myein* is my response to the neo-classical architecture of the American pavilion and its associations with Jeffersonian principles of democratic space. My early focus on the temple form as an idealized image projected onto civic space led me to engage the building as both subject and object, and to work in relation to its interior structure and its exterior image. Hence *myein* becomes literally imbedded in both the physical structure and symbolic form of the building.

The dominant movements of the project are the downward pull of time and gravity and the incessant horizontality of landscape and writing. Outside a steel grid of rippled glass panes was built eight feet from the pavilion's front, stretching ninety feet across its width, and reaching sixteen feet up to its entablature. Like the horizon of Venice shifting constantly from solid to liquid, from land to water, so the optical distortions of the glass wall blurred the solidity of the building and the edges of the surrounding garden. In liquefying the view, the glass screen also created a sense of movement, slowed and slightly suspended, in time.

As enclosed by the glass wall, the pavilion courtyard became an open fifth room or commons for the building. There, centered within the brick faced patio was the only singular object in the installation; a wood table with a dense surface of knotted cloth. Fist sized knots (one of the earliest forms of record keeping) were pulled tightly against the table's surface with their tails pulled through to fill the space between the four legs and slightly brush the ground beneath. Across the courtyard and over the threshold one entered the central rotunda of the pavilion where a previously covered "blind" window was mirrored to capture and reflect the image of the outside wall and the outline of approaching visitors. From the rotunda, one could turn right or left into either of two symmetrical wings. There, contrary to the Cartesian grid that describes and maps the exterior im-

age of the pavilion, a chaos of fuchsia powder fell from the perimeter walls of the four interior galleries. The powder sifted slowly, turbulently, formless and incessant in its movement. This slowly seeping, leaking, continually falling descent of toxic colored powder eluded any easy or familiar association. Save this dusting and accumulation of bleeding powder, the interior rooms seemed empty. But, with the removal of existing ceilings, sunlight again flooded the interior and the recording of a whispering voice circled round to haunt and fill the space with sound.

By insinuating inclusion or exclusion the whispering voice subverted the public character of the space, and like the powder, was both pervasively present yet out of reach. For these recorded excerpts from Abraham Lincoln's second Inaugural Address were spoken in phonetic code wherein each letter is spelled out as name or thing: Alpha for A, Indigo for I, Bravo for B and so on. The text could be deciphered only by notating in writing each coded letter. Originally delivered near the close of the American Civil War, Lincoln's address extended a healing hand toward that primary schism in American democracy - the institution of slavery. In Venice, this coded speech became as opaque and difficult to know as a reading of the white on white plaster dots, which lined the interior walls with the replication of an enlarged Braille text. While the original uses of Braille and the phonetic alphabet are both military in origin, here they account for a historical record of racial and property violence. The Braille rendition of Charles Reznikoff's project: *Testimony: The United States 1885-1915* transferred to the walls of the pavilion the testimony of witnesses in court cases involving property disputes, accidents and acts of violence. These acts of description bear witness to things not easily seen or held within an idealized projection of democratic space. Although impossible to read as text, the constellations of plaster dots were marked over the 6-month exhibition by the descending fuchsia powder collecting to stain, ring and make it more visible. Normally the act of writing replaces speech, but here speech and text are concealed by codes of sound and touch, and rendered opaque to evoke the unnamable legacy of grief in my accounting of the short history of The United States.

—Ann Hamilton