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A Conversation with Ann Hamilton in Ohio

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Ann Hamilton, *corpus*, December 13, 2003–October 17, 2004, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts. Accumulated paper from ceiling-mounted air-operated paper droppers, bell-shaped speakers in a descended position, recorded sound, silk cloth filtering window light. Photo, Thibault Jeanson / courtesy of the artist

Ann Hamilton makes work at the slippery, overlapping edges between disciplines, sensations, and meaning. She is and is not heir to Richard Serra's minimalism, Robert Irwin's site-specificity, or Allan Kaprow's happenings. She makes installations that slide into performance, sculpture that is more setting than object (frontispiece). Her work instigates Bruce Nauman's species of psychological unease in any viewer who dares to enter, but tempers it with lyricism. She calls herself a sculptor but is probably closest in intent to Meredith Monk and Robert Wilson, for whom performance is a rite of inquiry into the ways in which audacious interrogations into movement, light, and sound can slow the pulse of contemporary time so that audiences more fully experience the present tense.

Hamilton was born in Lima, Ohio, in 1956 and emerged as an artist in the early 1980s, just as the conceptual art of the 1970s was being elbowed aside by the big paintings of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Eric Fischl. She has never fit neatly into any school or definition but has exerted her own emphatic pressure on the art of the moment through her painstaking inquiry into the experience of the body in space and time and her insistence on engaging all five senses in moments of aesthetic revelation. Since she came to the attention of a wider public with such early works as *the earth never gets flat* (in the exhibition *Elements: Five Installations* at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York, in 1987) or *the capacity of absorption* (at the Temporary Contemporary, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1988), she has wielded beauty as a means and adopted a poetic form of surrealist juxtapositions as a tool. For all its pageantry, however, there has always been a kind of moral rectitude in the work, a spareness out of the Puritan American past, and a steely judgment of American history.

Hamilton received a Bessie Award (presented annually in New York for the performing arts) in 1988, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 1989, and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award in 1990. She represented the United States at the twenty-first International Bienal de São Paulo in Brazil in 1991, received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1993, and represented the United States at the forty-eighth Venice Biennale in 1999. She has been experimenting with a mouth-held pinhole camera to make portraits and self-portraits since 1998 and collaborating with Meredith Monk since 2000. Increasingly, she is focusing on the word as sung or spoken in communal situations.

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Hamilton lives in Columbus, Ohio, with her husband, the sculptor Michael Mercil, their twelve-year-old son, Emmett Moore Mercil, and an assortment of animals. I visited her there for a lengthy conversation last year about her art and her life in the middle of America and the art world.

AW: How did you come to understand that your subject—and it has consistently been your subject—is the word and the body?

AH: We are all in different ways living out the relationship between being bodies and inheriting a language. That's what we are. When I understood that, I had to move out of my own experience in whatever way I could find to manifest that materially. What is the relationship between how our bodies know things and how we embody our knowledge through our actions and touch? What is the relationship between that and language? The many relationships between these primary experiences are what form my work. I think it's really interesting that as a culture we spend so much time in language—in reading, writing, speaking, and in print culture—whether it's on the screen or paper. We are communicating all the time with words, trying to find the words in which we can recognize our experience. Can we think of something if there is no language for it? How do we understand experiences we can't name?

I don't know the Bible very well, but this makes me think about "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was made flesh."

I don't know the Bible very well, either. Isn't that in John? We can Google it.

In the beginning was the word, and you are always erasing words. In *indigo blue* at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston [South Carolina, 1991], you erased the words with saliva. In *tropos* (fig. 1), which was at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York [1993–94], someone sat at a table burning words in a book with a burin.

The way I understood the erasure, say in the Dia project, is that the act of burning is like reading at the pace of the hand. In that piece the word becomes smoke, and the smoke is absorbed by the horsehair on the floor as smell. So over the nine months [of the installation in New York] there was a literal material transformation of the word: to smoke, to smell, to hair. Hair is a material that holds memory. The word becomes material. The way it unfolds has a very individual signature to it. Everyone's hand is different, and the books as they now exist carry the history of that individual reader. Part of what is here is the trace of individual experience across this printed history. So how do I lift to the surface of the work that intimacy, that act of making, that is in my practice?

And yet you must be aware of the history of book burnings. Savonarola has to be in there somewhere, not to mention more recent examples.

How I name the process has a lot to do with how I think about it; perhaps I don't fully acknowledge parts of the history you mention. I was much influenced by the vocabulary that was worked out in Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* [1985]. I began thinking, does unmaking something make a clearing for the presence of something else?

Explain that.

Well, if you're literally unmaking the book, if you're clearing the field, it's like processes of agriculture. You clear it or burn it of one thing [in order] for

1 Ann Hamilton, *tropos*, October 7, 1993–June 19, 1994, Dia Center for the Arts, New York. Undulating floor of horsehair, translucent window glass, voice, table, book, seated figure, lines of the book singed with a tool as it is read. Photo, Thibault Jeanson / courtesy of the artist

something else to be told. It's another kind of telling, and it's a material kind of telling. That's how I thought about it: as clearings. Especially in the earlier, what I will call more materially laden, work, there was—and there continues to be—an interest in the ways we privilege those kinds of perceptions and experiences that we can explain with words. We have a hard time assigning value to experiences that can't be worded. Smell may have an enormous effect on our experience, but we have a hard time expressing it. As much as I love to read, I think the privileging of our ability to say and explain and write is very frustrating in terms of the hierarchies of the values we inherit. So that's a big part of this. It's not actually effacing language: it's about the balance, about how experience is made and perceived.

You are one of the few artists who has found a way to engage all the senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, even taste—though taste only for the artist. That

2 Ann Hamilton, *malediction*, December 7, 1991–January 4, 1992, Louver Gallery, New York. Bed linens, the sound of a voice, a refectory table, a bowl of raw dough, a wicker casket, a gesture, filling the hollow of the mouth with dough, removing the mold. Photo, D. James Dee / courtesy of the artist

was true for you in *malediction* (fig. 2), when you put bread in your mouth and made the imprint of your mouth on it. And in your recent work with the pinhole camera in your mouth (fig. 3), and your erasure of words with saliva. For you there is some taste, but never for the viewer.

Unless you think of how smell is experienced as taste. It's the felt relationship between all these parts that actually makes the work. That's what's hard about looking at images of the work, because you're so much outside the whole experience, and the image has a weight that is burdensome. In fact, when you experience it [the complete installation], you don't experience it as an image; you experience it as all these multiple, physical sequences of movements. You're walking through, the lights change, the sound is turning you. So, for instance, *corpus* (fig. 4) has a churchlike atmosphere, made by the voices rising and lowering in the bell speakers.

Describe *corpus*.

Corpus was the piece at MASS MoCA [in North Adams, Massachusetts, 2003–4]. It consisted of forty air-powered mechanisms that dropped individual pieces of blank paper to the ground. The rhythm of each one falling, animating the air, unfolded in a room filled with the light from long walls of double-story windows. Each of the windowpanes was covered in red silk. The silk acted like a scrim, and the color of the silk, depending on your relationship to the structure of the weave, was either very transparent or highly chromic. As you walked through, your view out [the windows] kept shifting depending on your relationship to the weave. In the middle, there were twenty-four bell-shaped speakers on a cable system, which raised and lowered in unison. When they came down they formed an aisle, literally, in the space, and when they rose the space opened up. It's a huge volume of space, several hundred

3 Ann Hamilton facing another person with pinhole camera in her mouth, 2000. Photo, courtesy of the artist

questions was how we might work with a visual material that could function to produce or interact with sound. One section used a thin membrane of liquid that was formed when the singers and the ensemble pulled apart two strings carrying a soapy film. Standing on either side of the membrane, singing back and forth to each other, the singers' breath visibly distended the material. The structure of the piece was made visible through this material membrane. And that became a recording used in this project.

Upstairs, there is a room full of benches, like in a public meetinghouse, a public square, or a church, but no speaker's podium, no pulpit (fig. 5). There's nothing that makes it central except that there is a spinning video, and the video spinning is going back and forth, as if reading at the pace of a word being typed letter by letter: In . . . the . . . beginning . . . was . . . the. You see only one or two letters at a time, but it was different combinations of those words: In the beginning was the beginning was the beginning was the. And it goes back and forth, so it never completed itself, it never incorporated the word "word" into it. For me what happens in that piece is that you get up there, and you become the center. You are that speaker, in your movement. It's like your body is the word. You become the figure and the word. Does anybody get that? Would anybody do that? Probably not.

feet long. It's double height, with a wood ceiling—a gorgeous nineteenth-century former factory space. And there's an enormous flooding of natural light. But there's no mass in the project; everything goes to the edges. Physically walking through, you're turned by the phenomenon of what's happening at the edges, whether it's the paper falling in the light and catching you and turning you, what you see out the window, or the voices coming down in unison but shifting around the different speakers.

So one narrative in my head about that piece is how one moves toward and away from all these things. There is also a back room, which is quite dark. Overhead are four spinning speakers tethered to the ends of wire arms, and they actually spin quite close over your head. On them is a five-part vocal piece, with one voice on each speaker and a fifth voice that's on all of them. It's a piece called "Liquid Air" from a collaboration with Meredith Monk. In this collaboration one of our

Does it matter?

I don't think so. But that's how I get to it. Or that's how I see it once it's made. What you're doing all the time [is] trying to cultivate a space for yourself where not knowing is a really active, productive, intelligent space to work from. And that's why it's an act of attention. What you [the artist] hope is that you're making a similar

situation for someone else, so that instead of trying to tie it up and say what does all this mean and making a story out of your experience, you're actually having an experience. And that experience is so compelling and overwhelming and engaging

4 Ann Hamilton, *corpus*, December 13, 2003–October 17, 2004, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts. Accumulated paper from ceiling-mounted air-operated paper droppers, 24 bell-shaped speakers in a descended position, silk cloth filtering window light. Photo, Arthur Evans/courtesy of the artist

that where the multiple associations take you is enough.

I think of your installations as being "total installations" in the sense of artist Ilya Kabakov's theory and practice. I, the viewer, enter this world of the artist's imagination and am immersed in it. But while Kabakov has said he is interested in theatrically manipulating a situation in which the viewer falls back on her own memories and associations, you don't want the viewer to put it into words in that way. You don't want it to be associations so much as an in-the-moment experience.

In some ways it is both, the moment and the memory. I am very interested in the associations. But I'm interested in your trusting them, and not thinking that there's some right or wrong narrative you're supposed to be getting from this. A piece of paper falling can be described as being blank, or empty of words, or you could say it is full of space and by extension full of possibility. I'm interested in people having those kinds of associations. I'm not interested in it being a purely sensory experience, because it's not. You're always naming everything to yourself. When we experience it, we are trying to figure out how to name it. And I am interested in that process. We are born into bodies, and as bodies we inherit the ability to language our experiences. How that happens is in part the subject of my work.

You have a love/hate relationship with the word.

Maybe. But I'm a reader, and it's, wow, often the way two words sit together—it's so beautiful—that might generate my process. I more often read for the language than for the argument.

Writing about you in *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art* [2001], Rebecca Solnit says that the world itself is a language, and it's become a man-made language in which

5 Ann Hamilton, *corpus*. Upper room with benches. Photo, Thibault Jeanson / courtesy of the artist

the supermarket loaf, for example, might speak to us of factories. She writes that art making "is in some ways a gesture against the speed and fragmentation of production." Works of art require labor, waiting, paying attention. "They push the bodily act of consumption into a mental act of contemplation." Is that what you are trying to do?

That's beautiful. Yes, definitely. That is what I'm talking about: the intimacy, the contingency, the live time. We're living in media-saturated times—instant e-mails, five hundred e-mails a day. We're technologically extended in ways that speed up our life. But we still need to eat. And we haven't figured out how to provide for some of the most basic human needs. I wonder why the act of taking time and paying attention can't be something one just does in one's life. Why does it have to exist in this form, as art making? When I make my work I try to cultivate a space to have this sense of time. But the irony is that my own life is really crazy in terms of juggling a lot of balls all the time in order to make this space. So how do you become conscious? It's a question everybody has.

What is the process through which your work evolves from that question?

One of the things I thought about after we talked yesterday was the word "presence"—how to understand and create a vocabulary for the many meanings of that word. What is the book Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, *The Birth to Presence* [1993]? How do we establish a way to talk about presence? It isn't like you're going to take it apart formally. How do we identify and come to recognize presence? What is it that imbues things with felt presence? I don't know what other word to use.

But that's something you want in your work.

Very much. And it's something I'm responding to when I do a site visit [to begin conceiving a project]. Partly I'm responding to something that's there, but maybe not visible. What I make tries to draw it out into something you can experience. It's a little vague.

It is vague. Since that's something you're mindful of, how do you work toward that?

Consciously? It goes back to these same words: to try to pay attention to what I am feeling; to try to be in some sense listening—listening without expectation. I try to restrain myself from projecting any predetermined expectation onto the situation. Obviously I'm a fairly willful person or I couldn't work in this way or on this scale. But a large part of the process is trying to create a space or attitude of response. I don't try to fill it in

6 Ann Hamilton, *mattering*, November 27, 1997–February 5, 1998, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France. Undulating silk, peacocks, voice, wood pole, seated figure winding typewriter ribbon from the floor below. Photo, B. Adilon

too fast. Some things come very quickly, but it is important to allow things to incubate for a long time and in the process to pay attention to everything that arises. This is hard, because not knowing what you're doing is a very nervous, uncomfortable state to be in. In the beginning, I might know a little bit; I might have the first articulation of a question or a sense of what I want to look into. That's enough of an anchor to allow me to *not* know a lot of other things for a long time. And the more open the process can be to not being set allows me time to trust my intuition about certain things. The need to know, or the need for work to be something, has to be suspended, because your head is wanting to say "That's it" and your gut is going "That's not really it yet." The brain of the stomach and the brain of the head are constantly in conversation. And for me the more successful pieces are probably the ones where my stomach wins out more than my head.

Give me an example.

For a project in [the Musée d'Art Contemporain,] Lyon called *mattering* (fig. 6), we took down all of the walls so that it was one huge, volumetric room. The ceiling was an edge-to-edge skylight; you could open or close it from overhead. It's a beautiful Renzo Piano building. We made a huge piece of orange silk, stitched together to almost meet the perimeter of the space. At one end the cloth was tethered to the wall halfway up, and at the other end it was held by a cable system that very slowly raised and lowered the width of the cloth. It would pull the cloth out a few feet at one end, and then just drop it. That caused this horizon of orange silk to catch the air in the room and become an animate, undulating surface. Below it, five peacocks were living in the space. A small porcelain inkpot sat in a hole drilled in the floor, and through that hole, from the floor below, ink blue typewriter ribbon was pulled up by a person who was sitting on a telephone pole above the silk in a kind of clear, naturally lighted space. These attendants would use their hands in such a way that their fingers were like warp and the typewriter ribbon was like weft. They wove a shape around the hand, and when it became fist-sized, they took it off. So the inked material, more traditionally used to transmit letters to paper, now carried the negative shape of the hand. It was passed down to the floor and accumulated around the bottom of the pole where the peacocks tended to gather. In the distance above the cloth, from above the person sitting way up on the telephone pole, you could hear the sound of calling between a voice teacher and a student. And below you could often hear the sounds of the birds calling. When I did the site visit, I remember going up to the third floor and feeling as if I were coming up from underneath water, like when you break the surface of water. I had a strong visual impression; I kept seeing orange and reds, really luxurious, strong colors. I ended up doing a lot of research about the luxury and silk industries, and silkworms and how silk is produced. But all of that was just my trying to have a handle to hold onto.

Is silk an industry in Lyon?

A huge industry. But this is not a piece that I feel I can talk a lot about. It has a lot of themes that come forward from other pieces, like the relationship of the animal and human; the typewriter ribbon is a carrier of language and also marking. The hand as an agent of making. I was really working on impulse. I think a contrast to that way of working would be Venice [Hamilton represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1999], which was a much more consciously made, much more public, labored piece. I was really feeling the complicated honor of that situation, feeling the responsibility of asking or finding the right question for the situation. It was a project done in 1999: The fact of the millennium, the bombing in Bosnia, the form of the building itself all had a tremendous influence. I decided to take on the building as both the subject and the object of the work (figs. 7, 8). As a form, the U.S. pavilion in Venice is representative of a democratic political structure, and so I turned to writings that have the same iconic identity. I ended up with a Lincoln text, translated and spoken in phonetic code.

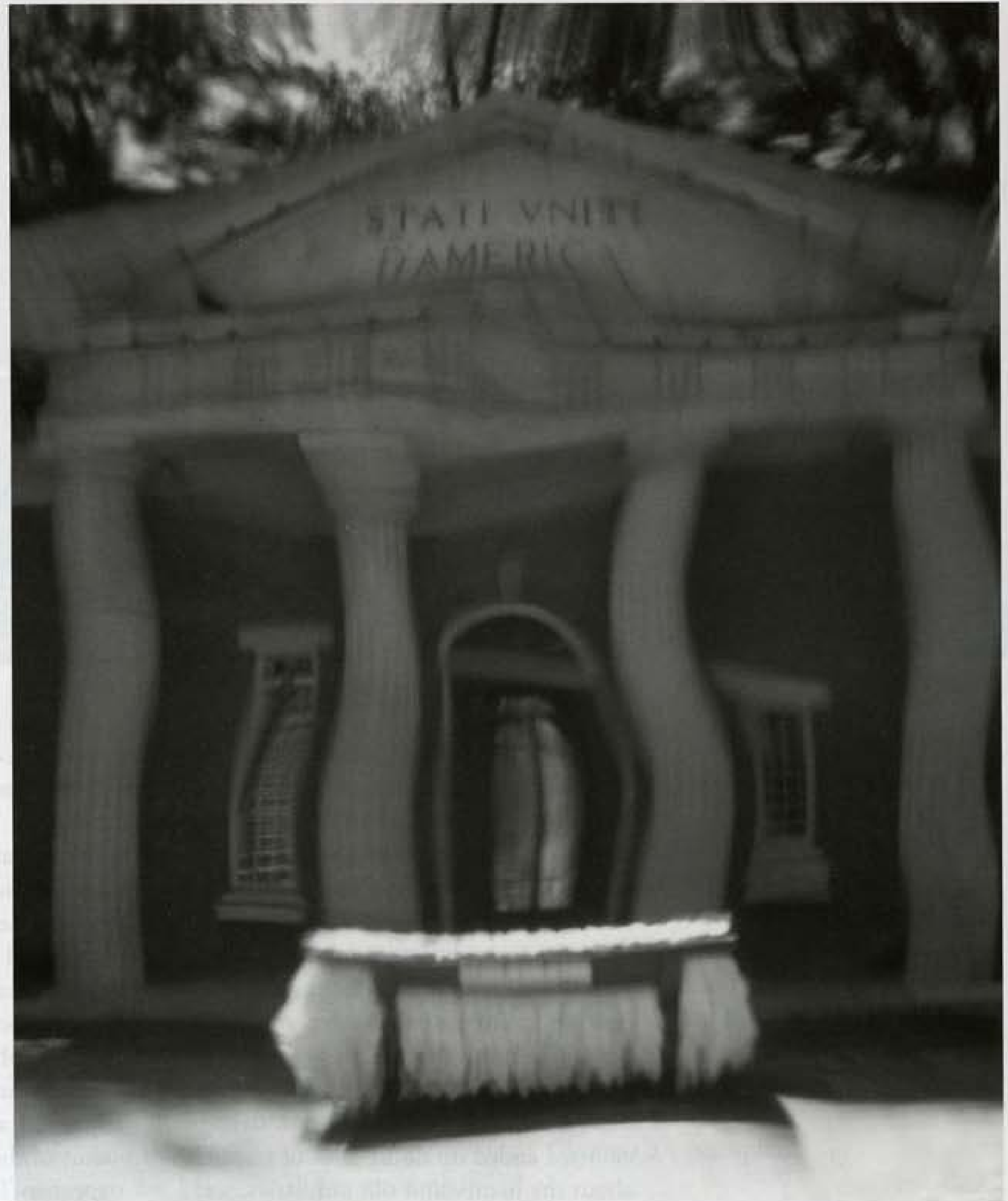
This was the second inaugural address in which President Lincoln talked about "malice towards none."

Yes. It was a speech he made before the end of the Civil War, when the question of whether there would be a union or a divided country was still open. The speech was very short. And it was a healing act. A section of that address was read in phonetic code. The visitor could follow the voices reading it from sixteen speakers and circle the room as the location of the voices shifted from speaker to speaker. Then another text in the form

of Braille was on the interior walls of the pavilion. Actually, I have the Charles Reznikoff—the Braille text—here–

It's from volume one of *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915)*. It's a recitative—"found poetry" by Reznikoff, whose prose poems used records of American history.

Two copies of this text were available at the entrance to the pavilion. It is a piece that narrates property violence and racial violence based on court records from the turn of the century—an indictment of the culture at the time. What is beautiful to me about this writing is how it unfolds as an accounting; it just lists things—the language of how it lists and what it lists carries its own moral imperative. As language it witnesses. It doesn't tell you what to think about any of it; it just lays out facts, and to read it is a visceral experience. In some ways I thought this



7 Ann Hamilton, *myein*, June 13–November 7, 1999, United States Pavilion, 48th Venice Biennale, Italy. Front of pavilion as viewed through grated glass. Photo, Thibault Jeanson / courtesy of the artist

8 Ann Hamilton, *myein*. Pink powder, braille rendition of Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915)* on the interior walls of the United States Pavilion in Venice, sound recording of the phonetic code rendition of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. Photo, Thibault Jeanson / courtesy of the artist

writing should just be there as itself, but I translated it into Braille and attached it to the walls, because it is the history absent from the symbolic, classical structure of that building. It's not what's on the pediment. How does any historical building carry forward the trauma rather than just the representation of the ideal?

What was on the pediment?

The United States, just "The U.S. Pavilion" [Stati Uniti d'America]. After I made the first site visit to Venice, as a way of approaching the project, I went to Monticello and looked at a lot of [Thomas] Jefferson material. I thought a lot about the contradiction of this country's democratic roots forming in a slave economy and how that inheritance haunts us in ways that are spoken and unspoken. Looking at the architectural ideal, the projection and authority of that ideal, I was thinking, How does any country—all of them have traumatic pasts—make room for these stories within the classical ideal? And parallel to that I was doing research about the form of the architecture itself. I was very influenced by two texts I read during the research process. One was an essay by Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," from her first book [*Glass, Irony, and God*, 1995]. It is an essay that's still very current for me, and maybe is influencing where I'm going now. In it she talks about the place of a certain kind of calling practiced by women in Greek culture. The calling isn't words but sound that introduces chaos into the culture, and so it is relegated to occur outside the city walls. It was a ritualized occurrence. I began to think about the so-called social danger of this nonlinguistic calling, of calling forth something that the order of the Greek city had no place or structure for, and the metaphoric parallels between this act and other historic repressions.

Another text arrived in the middle of my research. It had to do with a gridded glass wall we erected in front of the pavilion, to some degree obscuring what was behind it (see fig. 7). I was looking into the glassworks on the islands surrounding Venice, and I found reference to an early book by Robert Pogue Harrison in a listing about Murano. I couldn't find this book anywhere, and I liked his writing a lot. His book *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* [1992] continues to be a large influence. So I wrote to him at Stanford University—I didn't know him—to ask, Can I get this book? It was an early poetry book and he said it was the one in which he discovered he was not a poet; he didn't really want to share it. But he sent me the particular poem from the book's name and included in the package an essay from a new book he was writing titled *The Dominion of the Dead* [2003]. That book talks about how all culture occurs and is built upon the presence of the dead—how the dead inhabit and haunt and make culture possible. His discussion was very evocative for me and linked to my exploration of the presence of something you can't touch. I was researching different powders, and trying to figure out what material I could use. And then this essay from this man I didn't know arrived in the middle of it—all about absence and the presence of absence. It gave me permission to keep going forward with what was a difficult project and to trust it. Because I was trying to ask, Can I *not* fill this space? Can I open the skylights, which hadn't been opened in years, fill these spaces with light and this phenomenon, but leave them empty? And can this emptiness be part of evoking this absence in a historical narrative?

But you'd already started thinking about the powder.

The powder. The color of it was intensely really, really pink, and not really red but more artificial—toxic looking. I was thinking about how weather affects us, how it changes everything about how we feel, our expectations. Our body rises to meet weather, but it's not an object we can point

to. And I watched all these videotapes on wind and weather and tornadoes. I did a ton of research and reading. This project had to happen very quickly, but it was one where I was anxious to be asking the right questions for the situation, so in some ways I didn't trust my intuition on a lot of levels the same way I did in Lyon. And that's why I'm contrasting the two projects. I wanted certain kinds of information in Venice, and then, of course, I obscured it, I veiled it. To get Lincoln's second inaugural address, you would have had to walk around the room spelling out the letters you hear. If people circled the room, the piece would have completed itself in the act of writing. I don't think this was most people's experience, but that piece did take me to the next question: I recognized how much my process had turned toward my reading and how my reading is a form of scavenging and collecting—how reading might become a form of making. It was also a piece where I could see that its presence appeared and disappeared depending on how many people were in it. And its presence was affected by weather. When it rained it didn't function as well; it was as if there was no presence. Then sometimes the presence would come back: you'd walk in and the rooms would be empty but very full. And sometimes there would be nothing in there—really nothing. The toxic color and thinking about weather and thinking about how our personal lives are invisible to us and acting at a distance that is far from the agency and action of our hands and our immediate lives—that was part of how I arrived at that color.

I remember reading that you didn't want it to look like blood. But in fact it did look as if the entire building was bleeding.

Leaching, definitely. It was leaching.

Because of the Bosnian War, that was how one responded to it. And in Italy there was such hostility to the American involvement in that war.

It's part of the same history, but that wasn't what I was actually responding to. I was responding to a longer history, not the immediate events.

When you approach your work, you first want to sense the place, but you also want the work to ask a question.

Yes, I think so. When I do a site visit, I think, What is it that I'm going to rub up against? I am not so much looking for an answer as I am looking for a question. You bring forward those things that you continue to think about. Obviously the relationship between language and body is hugely present and comes forward in different ways in different pieces. As does the nature of our experiences, which we perceive as dualistic, or dialectical. How these experiences come into relation in a work is partly tuned by my response to the situation. The other part of my process is finding the right books to be reading. Sometimes I am reading for the information or argument, but sometimes I need to suspend into or create an atmosphere of writing out of which a project will come to the surface. Reading helps me trust my intuition about how I'm responding to a place. It's an interesting contradiction. I need these words to anchor my inability to name what it is I'm doing. So my process is very much indebted to what I'm reading. On the other hand, it's not about what I'm reading. I think that's been a source of confusion for some people.

For you, deeply complex literary meanings often infuse the juxtaposition of imagery. Does it matter that this research is not available to the viewer?

No. I think that's how I arrive at the pieces, but I've always trusted that the works aren't dependent on that narrative.

It's just my process. Everybody gets there in different ways. It's interesting [for the visitor] to know some of it. It might influence how you think about your own experience, but I don't think it's important to have all that information.

But why do you so often translate it into a form in which it's unavailable? You're erasing half the letters so it's impossible to read the words, you're talking so quietly or in such disparate ways that you can't be understood, you translate texts into Braille.

The early development of Braille was for military purposes, as was the phonetic code in terms of transmitting messages. I found that in my research and thought, That's very interesting. Okay, so why is it always obscure? Why is it maddeningly not available? Partly, I can't really answer that. We talked about the piece at the Dia called *tropos* (see fig. 1) and how the words were being burned away as they're being read in terms of the transformation of materiality. But I'm also interested in putting forward the act of reading, or the act of speaking as some kind of field. Is it possible to put that forward without always putting forward a text? I think that's part of the answer. When I first started using myself [performing actions] in the work, and then working with other people, I was interested in how the presence of a live person could be no more important within the complex relationships of the piece than an inanimate object. Could they equally inhabit this field of relationships? In that piece I chose books that had no chapter or title headings, so if you came up and looked closely, there were no clues about the book's content; it wasn't about that particular book. That's part of the answer for me. I'm interested in the experience of language as a field. Maybe this word "atmosphere" is important in a way I hadn't thought of before. It's the atmosphere of the voice. It's like when you're a kid and you sit at the top of the steps and your parents are at a party

9 Ann Hamilton, *aleph*, October 9–November 22, 1992, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Books, wrestling dummies, library table, a person "erasing" mirrors, video, and steel floor. Photo, Charles Mayer / courtesy of the artist

downstairs—the comfort of the voices, but not really needing to know what anyone is actually saying.

"Field" is an interesting word for you to use, because I think of all your pieces as being embedded in fields.

Landscape.

The image comes out of the field, out of the ground. You do this with your post-minimal repetitions and accumulations. In *tropos*, how many tons of horsehair were sewn together to make this undulating floor? Or with books. For *aleph* at MIT's List Visual Art Center in 1992, you loaded a 90-foot-long floor-to-ceiling wall with 35,000 books (fig. 9). The viewers' experience begins when they enter this field.

These materials find their form in part because their field continues until it meets the architectural edge. But they imply, especially in the case of *tropos* with the oceanic floor of horsehair, that the field keeps going beyond the bounds of the architectural walls. I am interested in the experience of one's own scale and volume in relationship to a volume that's made by these materials. My approach to space is to try and make it as volumetric as I can. For instance, in the project at MIT one long wall has a strata and geologic-like structure of books. I remember that the room had an industrial gray ceiling with exposed duct work, and the walls were painted white and that it had a gray carpet. It was a big, long space, and I thought, This is really planar space, the way these colors are working, so I asked them to take the color of the ceiling and continue it down the walls. Then we laid a steel floor, which sounded your movement as you walked across it. Together the steel floor and gray wall made a volume that suspended and absorbed you. I was interested in how you feel your own volume in relationship to that volume, feel your own scale in this thing that's much larger than you. You're not entering an object relationship of you to a thing, but of you to a relational space.

You're in the midst of a moment of change just now. In a sense, the work is both dematerializing and becoming more permanent. For the permanent galleries at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, you've re-created *indigo blue*, which you originally installed in a warehouse in Charleston for the 1991 Spoleto Festival. And you've made a permanent structure, a tower, in the Sonoma Valley. But the point of the tower is to stage events centered on sound, particularly the communal voice of the chorus.

[In San Francisco,] I'm in the process of laying 18,000 pieces of indigo blue work clothes in a pile; each one stands in for the absent body (fig. 10). Each one has been worn and carries the material history of its use. A person sits at the front of the pile, where, using a Pink Pearl eraser and their saliva, they're removing mechanically printed texts. As they do, they create a different surface, which is the erased surface the hand has made. The text is collected in these erasures on the table, and that will go on. So there's this large history. And I started thinking, wow, 18,000, what cities are that size? Or, is this the lifetime clothing of how many people? I hadn't thought about it that way when I was making it in the early nineties. It's this condensed, collective, concentrated material pile that has a material bodily history. That history stands in the face of any action of the single person. Now, in [April] 2007, I'm in the middle of thinking about a chorus as a possible form to work in, and I'm recognizing the relation of a chorus made of actual bodies to this accreted, collective, material massing that was in the early work.

Describe that early work.

The 1991 *indigo blue* was installed in Charleston in a project with Mary Jane

Jacob. Artists were asked to work in Charleston in relationship to the city's history and to select sites. I worked in an old carriage garage. We built a platform that hovered maybe a foot off the floor and stacked it with layers of indigo blue work shirts and pants (fig. 11). I arrived at that image partly through my research of the history of Charleston, the fact that the first cash crop there was indigo. I became interested in the social history of blue, in terms of how it was used and represented in different class situations. I was living with the curator on one of the main streets, and was struck by the disjunction between the historical carriage tours that frequently passed by and my reading of Howard Zinn's book on labor history in the United States. I began to ask, How do you insert this narrative into the slice of Charleston's past that is marketed for tourists?

The plantation past.

I asked myself, Is there a way the untold stories can be evoked through a material presence? When this was first installed, the building leaked, and it was hot summer in Charleston, and the clothing carried a smell and had a sensory presence. The building had a second story with a small office, and in a corner of that office we put two windows so you could look down into the main space, and in that room we hung net sacks filled with soybeans, another of the area's staple agricultural crops. Because of the leaking of the building, they sprouted, and then of course they rotted, and the smell of rotting soybeans is really unlike anything else. Perhaps closer to rotting meat than to anything vegetable. I worked with Rebecca Demarais, who helped with every aspect of this project, from selecting a site to safeguarding the smell. Rebecca understood that the organic process needed to be allowed to happen, and it was a situation where it could. You cannot re-create that in a museum.

It may be unintentional, but these piles of metaphorical bodies remind me of the

10 Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue*, May 4–October 8, 2007, installed at San Francisco MoMA. 18,000 pieces of blue cotton work clothes folded on a platform behind a table and seated figure. Photo, Ian Reeves / courtesy of the artist

11 Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue*, May 24–August 4, 1991, Spoleto Festival, Charleston, South Carolina. A garage, a platform of used work clothing, a person erasing blue books, a Pink Pearl eraser, saliva, net bags of soybeans. Photo, John McWilliams / courtesy of the artist

Holocaust. The history of the body has to do with horrific things as well.

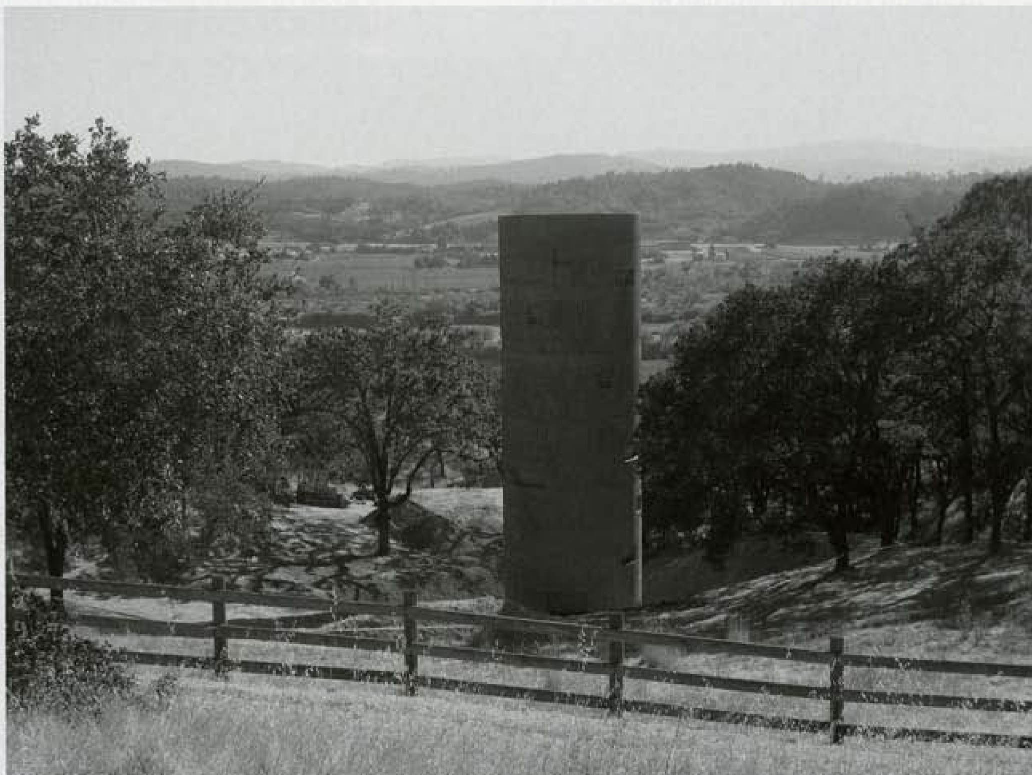
Yes, it's like a pyre. The Holocaust is not literally one of my references, but the history of the body is. And the Holocaust is a large part of that recent history.

These shirts and pants were carefully folded. It was all very neatly done.

That's because the meaning of the piece partly accretes for me in terms of how it is literally made. You smooth by hand a pair of pants, then a shirt—and with each layer the hand honors the absent body and it smooths the bodies' first architecture—as if you're touching a body.

But it's also a ritual. There seems to be a religious component here, and I say religious rather than spiritual, which a lot of artists prefer, and it seems to be connected to Christianity.

I don't know how to talk about Christian stories—the laying on of hands,



12 Ann Hamilton, *tower* (exterior view), 2007, Geyersville, California. Photo, Lynne Hayes / courtesy of the artist

immersion, redemption. I used to be really uncomfortable with the use of the word "ritual." It's not a word I necessarily use to describe the work and I wonder, Why does that make me nervous? I suppose my nervousness is not so much about the word but how it is used to designate something outside the immediate culture. I am interested in acts that reside within our immediate culture and so am more comfortable with the description of repetitive acts than with the word "ritual."

A lot of your iconography does seem Christian: fishes, ashes—

The table. The table is my landscape. The table is always there. How I describe it to myself: It's not the altar, but it always implies a social space. It's a place of work, a place of solitary study, or exchange; it's where you eat, where everything happens. To me it's like the icon of social exchange. But it's also—

The Last Supper.

The Last Supper, the altar, it's all of those things. I'm probably completely in denial [*laughs*] in terms of how to think about that sacrifice and its relation to my work. Maybe that's why you're here so we can have this conversation.

What is your religious background?

I was raised as a Presbyterian. I went to Sunday school as a kid, but ours wasn't an overtly religious family. Everybody stopped going, probably when I was in high school. I don't have that practice now. There was a point where Emmett [Hamilton's twelve-year-old son] really wanted to go to church, and we ended up going various places. He selected a Catholic church. I would go and find myself moved at those points where you speak together and you know your part or it's chosen for that service. Whenever that would happen, it would be very emotional for me. It wasn't

13 Ann Hamilton, *tower* (interior view) 2007, Geyersville, California. Photo, Lynne Hayes / courtesy of the artist

what was being said; it was something very emotional about the act of actually speaking together. I'm in the middle of that question: Why? What is that need? Even when I was remaking *indigo blue* in San Francisco, I saw that the relationship between the singular action and the collective body goes all through the work. I can see materially how that's been the structure of a lot of the projects: a singular reader, a collective pile. What's coming up for me now is probably this other manifestation of what that relationship is, but it's an aural form, the chorus to the solo. I want to be part of a collective body and I want to hold myself completely outside of it. Whether you talk about it emotionally or psychologically, those simultaneous, opposite poles are always operating for me.

How does that relate to religion?

I don't know. I'm drawn to situations where people are speaking together, and other than church or court there aren't a lot of places of public voice. You go to concerts, you go to a lot of things where people are sitting as part of an audience, and you listen. I don't think there are so many places where you go and you are actually participating by speaking. If I understood why that was emotional for me, I would probably know a lot more where this is all going. In church I'm not so drawn to what's being said—it's more that you cross this threshold and you walk into another space, and it's a space for something else to happen. A space where you might be able to leave a more instrumental world behind.

In the past your work has always found its impulse within a given space, no matter how you altered it—

It's always a response.

But now you've made your own architecture for the first time, a tower (figs. 12, 13) in Geyserville, California, on private property. Is this open to the public?

There will be times when it is open, and Steve Oliver [the collector who commissions artists to make work on his land] generously gives many tours as a way to both make the projects public and also raise financial support for arts programming. Each tour group designates an amount to an organization of their choice.

Richard Serra has done a major multiple piece there on a hillside, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, who was your teacher, and

Bruce Nauman have as well. Martin Puryear also made a stone tower. How did you think of making yours?

I'm not an object maker, and I don't work outside. I've always worked inside, and when I've worked outside I've made it a situation where it becomes an interior space. Steve and I were talking before I settled on a form. I finally thought, Well, what does this guy do? He builds things. So rather than respond to a particular quality of the space I began to think about the permission to build on a scale I have never had.

He's in the construction business.

And he loves solving problems. He loves physical challenges, and he loved all the complications of Richard's commission—the engineering of even getting the pieces down from Oregon. So that's what I responded to, and I found the story of the city of Orvieto and the well that's built like a tower into the ground. [St. Patrick's Well, built after the sack of Rome to ensure the water supply of Orvieto, Italy, has a double-helix staircase to accommodate two-way traffic.] I began to think about building a tower and over time to conceive of it as a vocal chord for the ranch. But that was not so clear early on. Over the long process of making this piece, the spoken, recorded voice was moving from the perimeter of my installations—it was outside the windows in *tropos*—and becoming the central figure of the work.

The voice, a recorded voice and a reading voice, are becoming more centrally my material. It's an ancient combination, the tower and the voice and the light. Instead of responding to a situation, I'm responding to Steve, but I'm also making room for other things to happen. And whether or how I work going forward with Steve to commission works for it, or to make works myself, is this huge challenge. I'm in the middle of thinking, Do I become a curator with Steve? I can think of all sorts of people that I would ask to respond to this in whatever way they're interested. But there's also a part of me that recognizes: Maybe this is your work right now. What sounds, what voice develops in that tower is maybe where my question is right now.

I thought you were going to say you would concentrate on the architecture. But no, you are going to concentrate on the voice.

Um hmm. I am focused on how it is animated. And, you know, I'm terrified of that. As a teacher, as a person who has given lectures, I'm not uncomfortable speaking in public. But the question of the voice in this project is not a voice I already know. Perhaps this structure is one way, a

14 Ann Hamilton, right, and first cousin Katherine Postle at the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, ca. 1965. Photo from the *Columbus Dispatch* /courtesy of Ann Hamilton

very large way, to approach my own desire for and inability to vocalize in another way. I would love to be able to sing—sing well. When I imagine the immersive experience of feeling your whole volume by sounding it, I think that's in my work, not acoustically but spatially. Perhaps my imagination of a sound volume is tied to my interest in volumetric and large-scale spaces.

Meaning operatic.

Perhaps. And yet I can't sing, so I try to get around that and approach that desire in other forms. Here on the one hand, I'm setting up a situation to make possible an act of attention, setting up a situation that's immersive, that allows space for experience. On the other hand, I'm always pushing myself toward something I'm really uncomfortable doing. A former assistant recently asked me about this: "I look at the images of your work, and they're beautiful landscapes," she said. "But to actually be in them is really uncomfortable. How do you reconcile that?" That's such an interesting question, because I have that experience myself of being on edge. Early on one of the tensions is between the person who is present as part of the piece and the person visiting the piece. Usually either the viewer is uncomfortable or the viewer takes an empathic relation to the attendant. My question of the relationship between a performer and an audience comes forward in the tower. Unlike the face-to-face relationship of a theater, the viewer is spatially wound and moving in the tower.

Let's shift directions now and talk a little bit about biography. You were born in Lima, Ohio, and raised in Columbus. You grew up in a supportive family, and sewing and weaving were your first artistic interests.

My father is retired now, but he was a businessman who worked hard, long hours and traveled. He was in sales initially but started a packaging company with another man. He's both very pragmatic, conservative, but also has this huge "what if" part of him and he is a creative problem solver. He and my mother were married very young, and my mother didn't work outside the home although she was involved in all sorts of volunteer activities in the community. We lived here in one of the first string suburbs, and I grew up here in Columbus with my older brother and cousins. It really is a truly loving, supportive family. There is no traumatic past—there are no demons in the closet. I come from *Leave It to Beaver*, which has its own things, right?

What are its own things?

Protestant culture can also be very repressive. As a young girl, I inherited the messages in the culture about being a good girl, doing the right thing, and being polite (fig. 14). There are a lot of questions for me about coming to have a voice or trying to make a space for those things that aren't nice, that aren't good. What to do with anger and those emotions that don't fit the picture of how everyone is supposed to behave. There's a high value on things being calm on the surface, things being in good order. On happiness. At the cost of that surface, there are a lot of things that aren't spoken. I'm interested in that unspoken part of the culture.

In the unspoken. That's one of your interests in language. But you started studying textiles. Why was that?

I love textiles. They are the first house of the body—the body's first extension—I can see now that all the metaphors of cloth as a membrane and skin, cloth as a process, underlay my work into the present. I grew up sewing. I was in a liberal arts program at St. Lawrence University [in Canton, New York], and then [transferred to] the University of Kansas, where I got my BFA in the weaving program. From there I went on to the Banff Centre for the Arts

[in Alberta, Canada]; they had a textile program there. Then I lived in Montreal for two years before going back to grad school at Yale University.

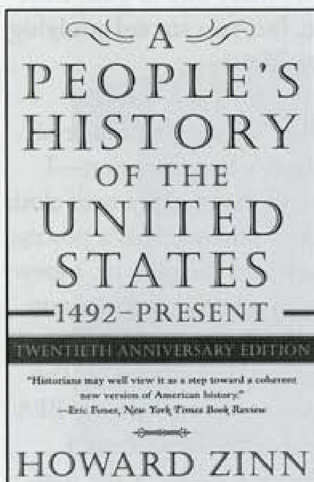
What did you do in Montreal?

I worked in a sewing factory that made futons, did production sewing. My French was terrible. I lived in a French working-class neighborhood, and I couldn't really communicate or chat very easily—the way that you're out of your own culture and being very aware, within the language and political tensions of the time, of being judged for that. That was a really important experience for me.

Since you came from a fairly prosperous upper-middle-class family, it must have been your first experience with being a worker. When they want to reveal an unspoken history, many artists will refer to slavery or the plight of Indians, but you go for labor, mostly.

I don't know why, I always have. Howard Zinn's writing (fig. 15) has continued to be very important to me. But I am also interested in the way the body through physical labor leaves a transparent presence in material and how labor is a way of knowing—this is very different than speaking about labor in terms of class relations and social history.

15 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States,* 1980 (twentieth anniversary edition, HarperCollins, 1999)



You don't present labor as demeaning or soul-chilling. You portray it as—

Redemptive. Someone said to me, "Ann, you fell for that story: labor as redemption. When my hands are busy, then my mind can wander and I'm extremely happy and very content, and very present. Labor with materials can be a way of being present. Now, why I have to do it on such a big scale, I don't know.

How was it that you began doing what you call installations? I call them performances, but there really is no word for them.

I'd done some really early things at Banff, but after that the first things started in the studio. At Yale, I was in the sculpture department. I decided that I was interested in all the metaphors of cloth. But I wasn't necessarily interested in all the processes of cloth. I was interested in the relationship between things. Everything in my mind was about relationships made when two things join or are in some spatial or metaphoric juxtaposition. That, I decided at the time, was more like sculpture than textile. I didn't have a clue what sculpture was. I think everything I'm doing in some way still has the sensibility of a textile hand. There is a literal connection in the current work between a line of writing and a continuous line of thread.

At Yale, working in your own studio in 1984 was really the breakthrough time, where you started doing your own installations and performing in them.

One of the things that's unique about that program is that the sculpture studios were located in an old engineering building, and we all had big spaces to ourselves. We all had our own galleries. I was married to a photographer I had met in Banff, Bob McMurtry. I took a lot of the furniture that had been part of [an earlier] project, and I just put it on my body as an appendage. I took functional, really basic domestic household objects, and I wore them in some way or another. I wore two wooden chairs—one on the front, one on the back. I put myself in the middle of the table, and put a shoe in my mouth. Bob took photographs of it.

So that was the first time you introduced the body. Do you think that may have come out of seeing a Robert Wilson performance? What was interesting about that?

16 Ann Hamilton wears toothpick suit and chair during graduate school at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1984. Photo, Bob McMurtry / courtesy of the artist

17 Ann Hamilton in toothpick suit at Yale University, 1984. Photo, Bob McMurtry / courtesy of the artist

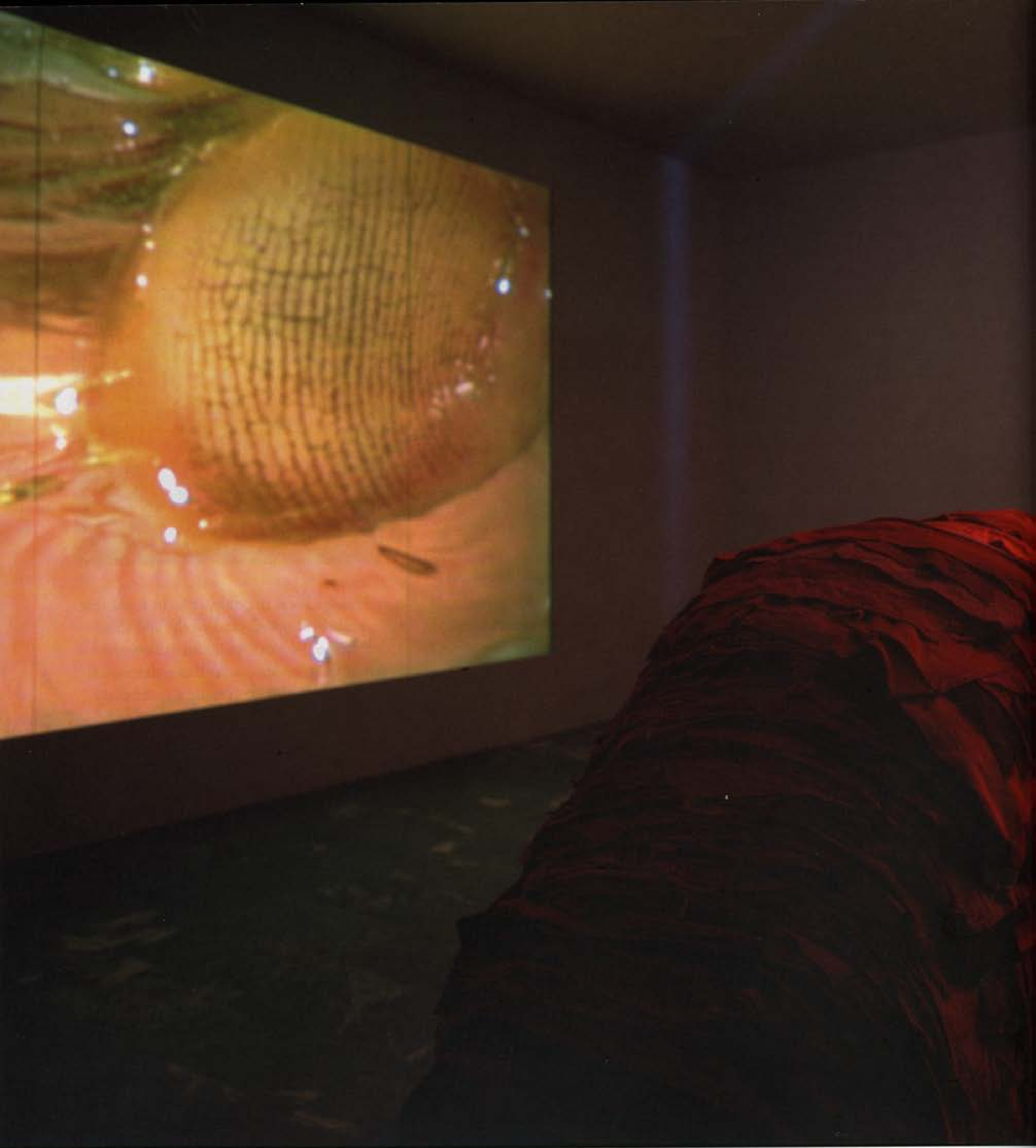
Probably. I think it was the idea that the body is a kind of inanimate object in a larger field. People are moving very slowly, and they're like objects in a field. Sometimes they don't move at all. As images those were very interesting to me. I'm trying to remember what I saw, I think the [1984] restaging of *Einstein on the Beach* [a production Wilson wrote with composer Philip Glass] at BAM [the Brooklyn Academy of Music]. I did try to go in and out [of New York from New Haven] to see a lot of BAM's new Next Wave Festival performances. The next thing I did was really important; it was when I made the suit that was covered in toothpicks (figs. 16, 17). I realized that I had to work from my own experience and not from a picture of an experience.

How did you realize that?

I was really insecure. I didn't know how to trust my own ideas or even recognize what I thought about as an idea. I applied to take a class with Leslie Rado in the American Studies Department at Yale. It was a class on the cultural construction of the body. I was the only artist in it. At first I spoke very openly and freely, and then became self-conscious because there were a lot of grad students who had a theoretical background and were using a vocabulary I didn't have. But it gave me a way of reading and thinking that connected my interest in the studio to something larger.

Do you remember some of the ideas?

I can remember the whole section about death and dying, cultural attitudes toward what happens to the body at death. We had to write for that class every week in response to the reading. I remember at the end of the class meeting with the teacher and her saying, "I saw you become very self-conscious in this class. And I saw you clam up because of the background of the other students. I want you to know, you're not a great writer, but what you're writing about is yours and it's much more original than anyone in this class." That was huge, what she gave me, because it said to me: Trust your experience, and if you work out of that you're where you need to be, even if you don't know where that is.



18 Ann Hamilton, *seam,* November 10, 1994–January 3, 1995,
Museum of Modern Art, New York. Pieces of red cloth, with video.
Photo, D. James Dee / courtesy of the artist

Let's talk about moving back here to Columbus. You'd gone to Yale, you'd been teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara, you'd done the Carnegie International, the Charleston Spoleto Festival, the São Paulo Biennal. You'd had a couple of major New York gallery exhibits. Then you quit your teaching position in 1991 and bought a house in Columbus. How did that come to be?

I'm close to my family, I did a project at the Wexner Center [for the Arts at Ohio State University], and I thought maybe this could work. My practice isn't located in any one place, and this is an economy I can afford. I didn't meet my husband Michael [Mercil] until after I moved. So I began working here. And the first year, I was very happy to have a house.

It's a wonderful nineteenth-century house, brick. When you were pregnant with your son, Emmett, you did a project at MoMA, *seam* (fig. 18), stacks of red clothing with the seams undone and a video of a finger smearing honey on glass.

That video is related to the video *ABC* where all you see is the orb of the finger as it presses against a piece of glass. The glass has a stamped alphabet on it. The finger is wet so the lens that the water makes absorbs the alphabet and rewrites it as it loops backward.

Robert Storr, who was the curator, called *seam* "a giant picture of touch, a churning organism, a viscous environment." And you were pregnant with Emmett. Do you think that pregnancy is actually in that piece?

I remember Lawrence Weschler interviewed me for an article he was doing for the *Threepenny Review*, and he made that connection. I said, "No, it has nothing to do with it." But he was right. The work shifts.

Has it helped the work to be here, or made it harder to exist in the art world? Or both?

Probably it's both. I'm certainly off the radar in a lot of ways, I'm not doing so many huge projects right now; that's probably partly a function of age. Certainly part of that is being here. My work only happens in the art world. The work only happens with institutional support; it only happens with invitations. Being here you don't bump into things in the same way you might living in a more cosmopolitan city. I just have to trust that I'm asking questions in the work right now, trying to make space for another process. And that's okay. I have to trust that I won't totally disappear.

You've just left the Sean Kelly Gallery, your dealer in New York of seventeen years.

Yes. In some way it's a really scary time and in others ways it is exhilarating and full of possibility. This year, with all the changes I've been going through trying to think about the next step, I have this image, and I have to make it, but I don't know what the form will be. It's a cloth on my lap; then the cloth is disintegrating in front of me. I don't know if worms are eating it. I think it's because a clearing is being made for something else, and that's the succession of things. Even if I try to stitch it or plug those holes, it's giving way to something else. Our lives go through those processes, and I don't know what's under that cloth yet. Sometimes I feel very confident and strong and clear about that, and sometimes it feels like an untethering, a letting-go. That's what you have to do. I think that's what making is. You move from what you know to what you don't know. You have to make yourself uncomfortable to grow.