

*Representing the U.S. at the 48th Venice Biennale, Ann Hamilton creates sculptural environments that convey an intimate feel for objects, architectural space, and the "fabric" of both language and history.*

**BY JOAN SIMON**



Recurrent elements in Hamilton's work include domestic or library furnishings—especially tables, chairs, books—as well as mirrors or windows, fabric and clothing. Handwritten texts or spoken language are often incorporated, too. But it is, above all, the reverent, detached, sometimes mournful atmosphere of Hamilton's installations that quickens our responses on-site, and that remains with us long after we leave.

Hamilton lives and works in Columbus, Ohio, not far from the city of Lima, where she was born in 1956. In the mid-1970s, she studied geology and literature and became interested in weaving at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y., and so transferred to study with weaver Cynthia Schira at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, where she received a BFA in textile design in 1979. After graduation, Hamilton moved to Canada, first to Banff, then to Montreal, where she lived and worked before returning to the U.S. in 1983 for graduate study in sculpture. She received her MFA from Yale in 1985, and in the fall of that year began teaching sculpture at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Her earliest work developed in a spirit of community: in the open studios of

Yale bracketed by the years in Canada and California. At the Banff Center for the Arts, she absorbed the interdisciplinary exchange of performance, photography and textiles; at Yale, she was involved in discussions with artists Judy Pfaff, George Trakas and Ursula von Rydingsvard and in course work with Robert Farris Thompson, Vincent Scully and especially Leslie Rado, who taught a class in the cultural construction of the body. In Santa Barbara, she found kindred spirits, among them Katherine Clark and Buzz Spector, with whom she explored conceptually based photo, text and book works. With her colleagues, she scoured flea markets and surplus warehouses for materials. In each of these communities, she encountered exhibiting situations that were open forums as much as places to show work.

Hamilton has a pronounced yet skeptical affection for both the spoken and

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*Ann Hamilton's mattering, 1997-98, silk vellum canopy, peacocks, pole-sitting performer, typewriter ribbon, recorded voice and music; at the Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon. Photo © Blaise Adilon.*

the written word. Language is often key to her choice of elements in her installations and to her overall process. From her wide-ranging reading, especially poetry and interdisciplinary essays in cultural studies and literary criticism, she has often gleaned particular words as reference points for imagery and for titles. She has also incorporated texts in her works, ranging from poems by Walt Whitman to entries from a laundry ledger.

Hamilton's first solo exhibition was also her first room-sized installation, *ground* (1981): it existed for only a few days at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff; there, she implanted 1- to 2-foot lengths of telephone wire in each square foot of walls and floor, producing a formidably square yet overall bristling surface. It would be two years before the artist again made this kind of large-scale environment for which she is now known. As Hamilton has said, "The Banff piece was really important because the room became the ground that earlier had been warp and weft."<sup>2</sup> The projections erupting from the surface of the architectural space related, in fact, to certain textile techniques. "The link most people miss is from the textile work. It was a simple step from covering the body and seeing clothing as a skin that surrounds one to looking at architecture in that way. But it was still a huge shift in scale and thinking."<sup>3</sup>

Hamilton's first large-scale installation in New York was part of a group show at Twining Gallery in the spring of 1983. In the fall of the same year, she presented her first performance tableaux in an open studio at Yale, and in 1984 she performed at Franklin Furnace in New York City. Some of these early actions were also staged for the still camera, resulting in what came to be known as her "body object" photo series.

Beginning in 1989, Hamilton started to travel extensively for site visits and for building her installations. By 1991, the year she gave up teaching and moved from California to Columbus, she was traveling almost constantly; she represented the U.S. at the São Paulo Bienal, and also produced installations in Washington, D.C., Charleston, S.C., London, Madrid and New York. Also in 1991, she began to work with the dealer Sean Kelly in New York, who continues to represent her. Hamilton received a Wexner Center Residency Award for 1994-95. There she developed new work in video and also collaborated on a CD-ROM as part of the catalogue for a traveling exhibition, "the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1996," organized by Sarah J. Rogers, which was the first survey exhibition of Hamilton's pieces issuing from installations, along with independent objects plus photo, video and sound works.

The first such overview in Europe, "Ann Hamilton: Present-Past, 1984-1997," was organized by Thierry Prat of the Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon, where it was seen in the winter of 1997-98. Prat's show featured two major new installations, *bounden* and *mattering*. Also in 1998, Hamilton undertook her first sustained collaboration with a dancer, Meg Stuart, and her dance company, Damaged Goods. The resulting dance piece, *appetite*, had its European debut in Brussels and its American debut in Columbus.

January 1999 marked the end of the Wexner show's tour and the opening of an ambitious site-specific installation at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn. [through May 23]. Hamilton will represent the U.S. at this year's Venice Biennale, which opens to the public June 13. Though the printed page obviously cannot encompass the physical experience—the sounds, smells and tactile sensations—of a Hamilton installation, and multiple photos are required to capture the ever-changing points of view that characterize the visual encounter, it is the imaginative space of reading that comes closest to approximating both the extended duration and the shifting sense of scale that viewers undergo when moving around in her installations, where one feels immersed and quite alone in an imagined world.

Below, I will discuss several Hamilton installations made in the late 1990s, drawing on research for a forthcoming book that will cover all Hamilton's installations. My intention here is to follow her processes, to place the pieces in context and to give a sense of their multiple details. Another picture also emerges—a view of institutions as active agents in fostering as well as in framing artists' ideas and actions.

## **bounden**

"Ann Hamilton: Present-Past, 1984-1997"

Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon

Nov. 16, 1997-Feb. 6, 1998

Here, Hamilton gave us the generic "wide white space" of modernism—but for the fact that one long side wall wept and its parallel boundary bespoke (however discreetly) lamentations and slaughter and visions of the body flayed or dissected.

A freshly painted, glistening expanse is how *bounden's* weeping wall presented itself from afar, a 72-foot-long, 16½-foot-high wall from which droplets of water emerged and slid down the surface, catching glimmers of light. Secreted behind the lachrymose goings-on was a gravity-fed PVC-tube delivery system, not unlike that used to intravenously introduce blood or other fluids into the human body. The crying wall, which she has used repeatedly, is the most evocative of Hamilton's architectural "skins." It is an organic presence that is overflowing its bounds, an object that is both structure and process, fixed form and fluid gesture.

Opposite the crying wall was the building's external wall, punctuated by luminous white surfaces of a different kind. Selections of text were hand-embroidered in an open, looping, cursive script on white silk organza panels that descended from the ceiling to veil each of the nine 16½-foot-high windows, whose bays marked regular intervals in the long expanse. These curtains presented an anthology of texts: a poem by Susan Stewart titled *Lamentations*, the Shaker elder Rebecca Cox Jackson's 19th-century visionary text *A Dream of Slaughter*, Jorie Graham's poem *Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay (Penelope at Her Loom)*, part of Angela Carter's story "The Company of Wolves" and excerpts from C. H. Leonard's edition of *The Concise Gray's Anatomy*. (Among the chorus of female voices, Henry Gray's stood alone.)

The nine curtains changed course after they met the floor, continuing up on a diagonal trajectory to the middle of the room, where each, laced to a wood frame, came to rest on what initially appeared to be the high back of a chair with a low straw seat, but which was in fact a prie-dieu, a piece of furniture on which to kneel during prayer. The row of prie-dieux down the middle of the room turned the gallery space into a chapel of sorts. At the same time, by supporting the framed and inscribed body of the artist's written handwork, they offered an exchange of secular and sacred tasks. The hushed atmosphere of Hamilton's installations, and her previous use of votive candles and votive wax heads, have often been noted as examples of religious symbolism. Here, with the prayer furniture in a pivotal position between the word and the light, the presentation seemed to manifest a symbolic equivalence of body and spirit.

Hamilton's cloth "manuscript" was handwritten and then hand-embroidered. It evoked Lyon's luxury-goods industry, and the city's history as a center of the silk trade.<sup>4</sup> The white fabric served quite literally as a permeable membrane between the museum's inside and its outside. Each curtain both concealed and revealed the foliage beyond, just as it did the texts it embodied. The linked, abstracted words in *bounden* intimately conflated drawing, sewing and writing for the first time in Hamilton's career. The works here also indirectly express a body politic. While Hamilton's use of textiles and weaving was not, for her, a reclamation of an



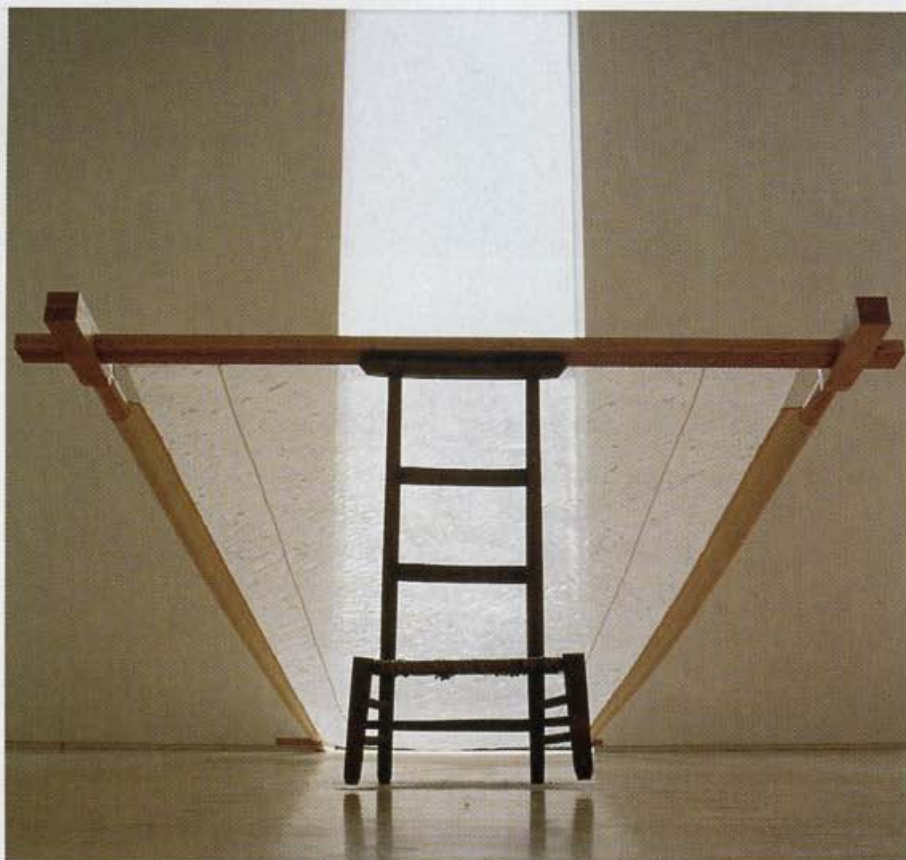
*Views of bounden, 1997-98, showing the 72-foot-long "weeping" wall and hand-embroidered panels stretched between the windows and nine prie-dieux; at the Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon. Photos © Blaise Adilon.*

undervalued craft but rather an extension of her own hand- and lap-work, the great divide between writing and sewing is an important, and acknowledged, interval in which she labors creatively.

The word "bounden" is described in the dictionary as archaic. Used in phrases like "one's bounden duty," it is related to an array of definitions for "bound," which, like many of Hamilton's titles, have multiple implications—movement, constraints, the relation of parts to whole, borders and book imagery.

Any number of works may issue from a multipart Hamilton installation, sometimes many years later. These are known by the same name as the generative event, but are distinguished from it typographically by being set within parentheses.<sup>5</sup> All Hamilton's titles are written in lowercase letters, echoing American Imagist poetry, because, as Hamilton herself explains, "everything's always part of a larger context."

In light of Hamilton's forthcoming Venice exhibition, it bears noting that the inscribed poems were seen for the first time in Hamilton's *the spell*, at the last Venice Biennale, part of the show "Present Past Future" in the Corderie at the Arsenale. There, the distinctive looping script was etched into the silver backing of a half-dozen round mirrors, some concave, some convex, some flat, accompanying a pair of swirling curtains.<sup>6</sup> Writing the words slowly and self-consciously to form



open, rounded letters, Hamilton continually linked each to the next and closed up the spaces between words as well as between lines above and below. Perhaps more notable than the individual letters or words themselves were the exaggerated swells of the characters' descenders, which became saclike or teardroplike shapes that transformed readable script into a difficult-to-decipher pattern.

## ***mattering***

"Ann Hamilton: Present-Past, 1984-1997"  
Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon  
Nov. 16, 1997-Feb. 6, 1998

An undulating canopy of red-orange silk hovered above a vast gallery space otherwise empty but for a restricted number of visitors, who shared the territory with five male peacocks walking about or sitting on any of six wall-mounted perches. The space was more theirs than ours. We were let into the gallery in small groups to join them; doors at each end of the room were kept closed, and head counts closely monitored.

Barely heard were the recorded sounds of an opera singer giving lessons to a student—the student mimicking the teacher—amid the rhythmic billowing of air as waves of fabric passed overhead. More audible were the swishing, dragging sounds of peacock feathers, and the clicking of the birds' feet as they moved and sometimes slid across the polished wood floor, all this punctuated at times by their loud screeches. A wood utility pole, the kind used to support power or telephone lines, ascended from the floor and penetrated a large circular hole in the silk drift of color.

Approaching this zone, one soon saw above the red horizon a man sitting in a perchlike seat attached to the pole; he methodically drew up from the ground, out of a small white porcelain ring embedded in the wood floor, a seemingly endless thin blue line. This turned out to be an inked typewriter ribbon, which the figure wrapped around one hand with the other, "using his fingers," as Hamilton says, as "warp, the typewriter ribbon as weft." In winding it, he was "finding the negative space of the hand." By continuously wrapping one hand in the blue ribbon, he saturated the skin of the other hand with blue. When the binding had created a dense mitt, he cut it free from its tether, slid the glovelike mass off his hand and let it drop to the floor. Then he began to wrap again. Over the course of the exhibition, these bundles accumulated at the pole's base, not unlike the blue moltings and other droppings of the birds—which, by contrast, were collected daily.

The word "mattering" isn't readily found in a standard dictionary. Its specific usage is something that struck Hamilton when reading cultural theorist Elaine Scarry:

The notion of "consequence," of "mattering," is nearly inseparable from the substantive fact of "matter." Or, phrased in the opposite direction, when "matter" goes from being a noun to being an active verb—when we go from saying of something that "it is matter" to saying "it matters"—then substance has tilted forward into consequence. What matters (what signifies, what has standing, what counts) has substance: mattering is the impingement of a thing's substance on whatever surrounds it.<sup>7</sup>

The gallery in Lyon is large, 105 feet long by 58 feet wide by 16 feet high. Hamilton covered this expanse with a single horizontal membrane measuring 90 by 54



*In mattering, a "perched" performer wrapped his hand with typewriter ribbon then discarded the "mitts" at the base of the pole. Photos © Blaise Adillon.*

feet. The silk element was set into motion by a mechanical drive that raised and lowered the fabric at one end, causing a repeating wave. The forming of the blue-inked mitts was also repetitive. Hamilton returned this room to the original proportions designed by Renzo Piano by removing all interior walls. She also flooded the space with natural light by fully throwing open the louvers that control a system of fabric panels in the ceiling. Light was then diffused through the red-orange "horizon" to the space below. Visitors were bathed in a fulsome glow in a setting that was remarkably spare.

The elevated solo performer, sitting up above this abstracted landscape, enlivened the geometric structure of the room. In this piece as in others, the performer was effectively distanced from any of the other living presences in the room; here, the distance was extended in kind and in degree, by virtue of his elevation.

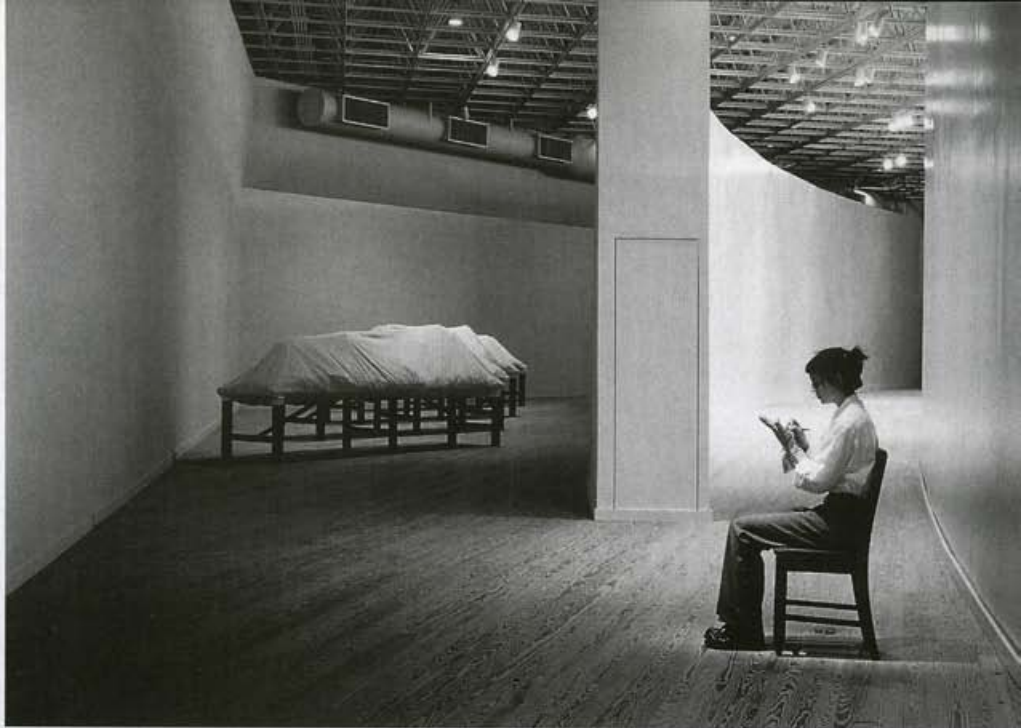
More curiously, the hand-wrapping worker was doubly removed from the source of the seemingly endless inked ribbon. Some time during or after viewing the complete show, most visitors probably figured out the relationship between the almost immaterial, thin blue line on the museum's second floor—extending from floor to ceiling—and the dark blue length extracted through the small porcelain ring on the third floor by the man working from his perch. This continuous line between apparently unconnected places was a small gesture but an important one. An element that appeared only marginally interesting suddenly assumed disproportionate significance when it was fully understood, causing our attention to take off on a flight through the building. Thus, in recognizing the totality of an individual work, the viewer also became aware of an exchange between the program of an architect and the reach of an artist.

## kaph

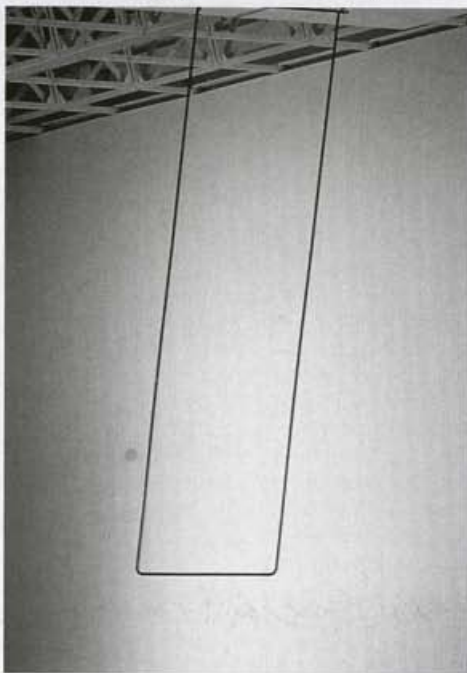
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston  
Dec. 13, 1997-Jan. 25, 1998

Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum (CAM) takes up its corner site with an unusual parallelogram of a building clad in vertically ribbed steel. Resembling a warehouse in overall form, the building is complex in geometry and detail, with its mechanical systems in full evidence in the interior. It was an unusual container for Hamilton's work by virtue of its exaggerated scale and lack of right angles. Entrance to the museum is through one of its obtuse angles. Upon crossing the threshold one was immediately within *kaph*, hearing the sounds of creaking metal and faced with a long curving wall. As Lynn Herbert, curator of the exhibition, wrote of the 16-foot-high, 118-foot-long wall: "imagine three 18-wheeler semis lined up, each with [an] additional one on top."<sup>8</sup>

Though one could have sought a path to the left or right, the museum's admission desk and the show's introductory wall panel drew visitors to the right. Once past the end of the long curved wall, one could see the source of the squeaking sounds: a steel trapeze swinging from the ceiling, though empty of anybody to set it in motion. The trapeze was controlled by a timer that cyclically kicked it off with a loud metal-to-metal screech. Momentum then kept it



Above, *kaph*, 1997-98, included draped, dirt-laden, 14-foot-long tables, an attendant at work extracting threads, and a 118-foot-long "weeping" wall. Below, the work's mechanized trapeze (left) and several wall "tears" (right); at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston. Photos Hester & Hardaway.



swinging back and forth, slowing to an ever-shortening arc with its sound diminishing. The trapeze's creaking was not really awful, but it was all-pervasive and could not be ignored.

Behind the first enormous, curving wall was a second monumental arc, the two together creating a vast, glistening corridor. The scale matched that of Richard Serra's whale-sized *Torqued Ellipses*, which in fact inspired Hamilton's structures. Hamilton's surfaces, though, once again, were sweating (or tearing)—oozing liquid from some 3,000 minuscule holes. Behind these massive walls were more than 1.8 miles of PVC tubing and the same type of gravity-fed pumping system, now fine-tuned, as was used in the previous weeping wall pieces. The distilled water this

time was mixed with a small percentage of bourbon whiskey; while not giving off much of the expected musty scent, over time the bourbon streaked the walls, staining their surfaces like mineral tracks on cave walls. As Herbert wrote, the effect of the monumental corridor was of "a grand ice canyon bisecting the 9,000 square foot gallery."<sup>9</sup> Oddly, in the kind of scale shift we have come to anticipate in a Hamilton installation, the streaks also suggested mascara running down a gargantuan cheek.

Though the trapeze was empty, the installation once more included a human attendant. A male figure was seen at work, seated in a school chair at the far end of the corridor. Advancing down the corridor, the viewer approached him from the side. In all

Hamilton's works, we encounter these personages obliquely. Though one can often move about to see the attendant fully in the round, there is never a face-to-face encounter. His or her gaze is fixed on some kind of work, and he or she never addresses, visually or verbally, anyone in the room. At CAM, the man's task was removing threads from blue embroidered numbers (based on columns that Hamilton originally found in a laundry ledger) on a large-cuffed work glove made of white organza, worn on one hand. The numbers were picked out bit by bit with a sharp tool held in the other hand. The extracted threads were dropped to the floor. As the numbers were eliminated, the glove became a "clean slate," a blank page with "erasures" and sometimes actual holes.

Hamilton noted,

"kaph" . . . is the thirteenth letter of the Phoenician alphabet. The definition and the name came from a poem I was reading that talks about the word as describing or referring to the palm of the hand. I was thinking about quantity and I was thinking about reach and touch. I was thinking about how the grasp to something more than one can hold is something that seems unfortunately to be a very large part of our culture. And so that reach, that extension, the capacity of the hand to hold something, is a kind of larger metaphor behind the structure of this work.<sup>10</sup>

Having observed and passed the seated figure, one was again drawn almost inexorably to the right, soon to catch a view, behind the second wall, of four 12-foot-long wood tables, staggered in their placement, each piled with a lumpy mound draped with white sheeting cinched with ropes.

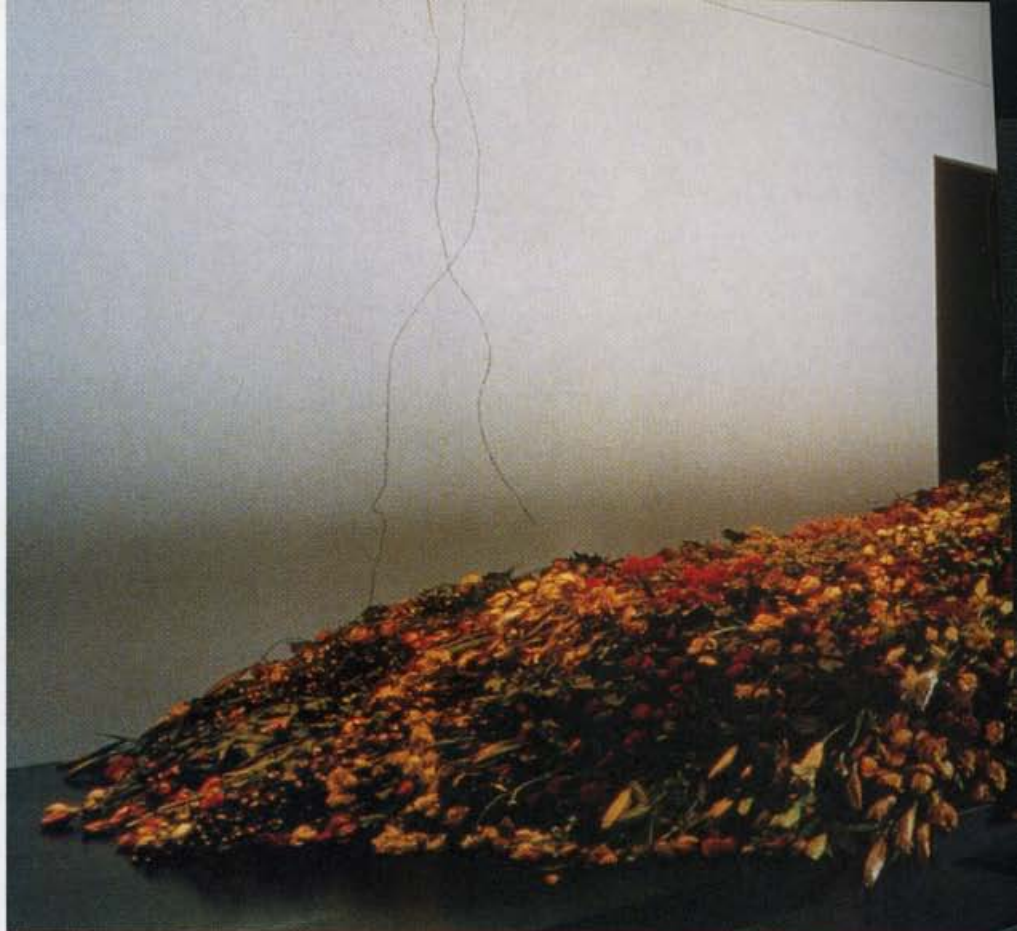
A wrapped bundle of enigmatic contents is a familiar image in modern and contemporary art. Innumerable wrapped pieces by Christo come to mind, as does Henry Moore's drawing of a wrapped, tied column *Crowd Looking at a Tied-Up Object* (1942). Perhaps most relevant is Man Ray's *Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, a bulky wrapped sculpture which is supposed to contain a sewing machine—concretizing the famous statement by Ducasse, the self-styled Count of Lautréamont: "Lovely as the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." Such objects with Surrealist connotations are not uncommon to Hamilton's work. (She has used dissecting tables in two installations.)

Hamilton's sheeting, however, turned out to cover earth, strangely cold and odorless, patted into place by many hands; the size and volume of the irregularly shaped mounds suggested the volumes of earth displaced from grave sites. The hangarlike building containing rows of biers also weighted the reading toward body bags for unidentified corpses. Here, in *kaph*, where damp glacial walls structured our path, where stitches were picked out of a glove like sutures from a postoperative body and where an empty trapeze swung by itself, the effect was not only stark but chilling.

## ***mantle***

Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida  
Apr. 2-June 7, 1998

The bouquet of Hamilton's *mantle* enveloped viewers well before they reached the second-floor gallery, where a woman sat in a chair facing a win-



dow that reached from the floor to a height of 10 feet. She was sewing sleeves onto the bodies of wool coats (such a sleeveless garment is but one meaning of the word "mantle"). She was either unaware of the 60,000 cut flowers laid into a single mountainous heap on a 48-foot-long table at her back, or was quite conscious of them and preferred not to notice, favoring her work instead.<sup>11</sup>

Multiple wires descended into the floral mound from 11 shortwave radio receivers placed on a 72-foot-long, wall-mounted shelf behind the table: the babble of voices and static emerging from the radio speakers embedded in this arrangement did not distract the worker from her task. Despite her modern unisex work clothes of white shirt and black pants, she was in appearance reminiscent of the isolated women sewing or reading, bathed in the light from a window or the glow of candlelight, in 17th-century Dutch paintings.

The ensemble in fact condensed references to any number of Dutch genre pictures: an artist's self-portrait in a room, at work; an architectural interior, rendered faithfully in detail; a profusion of dying flowers in a lush still life, at once a vanitas and a memento mori. While Hamilton, for her Miami project, seemed to draw on a storehouse of memories and research for earlier projects in Holland (Sonsbeek's *attendance*, 1993, and Eindhoven's *reserve*, 1995), she did not set out to evoke 17th-century Holland any more than she did to reflect specific aspects of Miami, despite commonalities between the two locales as centers of international trade (including flower markets) with economies supporting a growing middle class as well as a new group of patrons. The artist came away from her site visits to Miami without a sum-



mary image but rather with a sense of the city's smells and sounds, and so included in her project multiple voices and many fragrances.

Her massive flower arrangement included floral material from many different parts of the world, the blooms put in place one by one and dying at different rates, with new matter added periodically. It was as incongruous yet complete in its bountiful juxtapositions as a Dutch rendering, in a single bouquet, of an improbable diversity of flower specimens. Also evident was a sense of changing symbolic and monetary worth. Hours of handwork were lost as the blooms faded and died; and over the same period of time, a pile of coats grew on the back of the chair as the productive mendings continued. Service/manufacture and luxury/necessity



*Above, view of mantle, 1998, showing a 48-foot-long "talking" table topped with 60,000 flowers. The seated figure, sewing a wool coat, is Ann Hamilton. Below, left to right, items used for mending, collars of piled-up coats, and radio receivers; at the Miami Art Museum. Photos © Thibault Jeanson.*



were treated not as juxtaposed oppositions but as continuums of questions. What is the value of labor? What is the worth of one or 60,000 flowers—or one or many winter coats—especially in tropical South Florida? (In the context of today's turbulent stock market, Hamilton's piece additionally brought to mind 17th-century Holland's "tulipmania," where a single flower bulb could have more cash value than a large house.)

Hamilton's table was particularly talkative around dusk, when, according to one of the project's volunteer ham radio advisors, the earth's atmosphere (its "mantle") causes radio waves to bounce at different angles, thereby traveling farther and more intensely than at other hours of the day. (At quieter times, visitors leaned into the

mound of flowers, reaching for the source of the sound in order to amplify the volume, often coming away wearing an imprint of pollen.) Most of the receivers were set, as Hamilton instructed, to frequencies that picked up voices. As a result, overlapping debates and advice sought and given, amid traffic and weather reports in many languages, were heard along with static and Morse code.

In *mantle*, Hamilton's primary sculptural engagement was architectural. Though her conversion of the museum's gallery space became invisible in the final installation, her complex reconfiguring of it was crucial. After studying the museum's architectural plans, Hamilton found her structure in Philip Johnson's scheme for the build-

ing. The museum's second floor was originally a flexible open cube around a central staircase. Hamilton removed a small reading room whose walls had surrounded the 10-foot-high window that would be a critical element in her piece, liberating a flow of light along an axis extending from the window to the staircase. She then built a large gallery in the newly opened expanse. Parallel to and 24 feet from the window wall, Hamilton put up a wall 72 feet long, broken by a doorway directly opposite the window. In doing so she also created a narrow balcony behind the wall overlooking the staircase. If on the way to see *mantle* on the second floor of the museum (where the Wexner's traveling show was also to be found), the viewer lingered on the staircase landing, the installation was already within view; it appeared to be suspended high on a two-story wall, framed by the doorway as precisely as any Dutch genre scene. Only a slice of the work was seen, backlit, including a bit of the view outdoors; below the table, the worker's legs and the legs of her chair could be seen as well.

After the exhibition closed, the cut flowers were sent to be composted at Miami's Kaphong Gardens. According to curator Lorie Mertes, the voices broadcast from the radios will have a different sort of extended life: taped during the course of a single day and later edited, the soundtrack has been released as a compact disc.



Scenes from *appetite*, 1998, Hamilton's collaborative performance with Meg Stuart and her dance company *Damaged Goods*. Photos Chris Van der Burgh.



## appetite

Collaboration with Meg Stuart and *Damaged Goods*

Premiere Sept. 9, 1998, Lunatheater, Brussels

Ann Hamilton and Meg Stuart challenged each other over the course of a year, especially intensely during two months of workshops where they created *appetite* with the seven dancers of Stuart's company *Damaged Goods*. They hoped to make "a haptic work," the two wrote, "in which the space and the body are considered as membranes which peel, leak and molt," a piece where the "animate and the inanimate transform as the body meets the object in an embrace with the audience."<sup>1</sup> They accomplished their tasks in surprising ways, beginning with a sequence that offered parallel kinds of contact improvisation between figures and material on both sides of a curtainless proscenium.

Upon entering the black-box theater at the front near the stage and turning to mount the stairs alongside the inclined bank of seats, theatergoers saw a sea of colored bundles—a grid of oranges, pinks, blues, plaids and patterns. Each seat bore a single folded blanket that had been washed, fire-proofed and banded (the last two actions to insure public safety in the case of an emergency). In one of the seats a woman sat reading from a ledger. She spoke in measured three-part sequences stating a street address, number of rooms therein, and the number of inhabitants. She was unheard and unnoticed until the crowd, deciding how to deal with the bundles, settled and quieted. The blankets were clutched, sat upon, tossed on the floor—in all cases in some way touched.

Concurrently, another tableau was becoming animated. A silken expanse of white fabric fully covered the stage floor, creating an abstracted terrain as it passed over three mounds. One of these mounds, in the middle distance to the right, was formed by a dancer tucked part way under the sheetlike cover. Arms extended upright, he continuously gestured, hand over hand, as if climbing a rope; in fact, he was grabbing an almost invisible thread, and collecting bits of it in a pile on his chest. In the foreground, a plump-looking female dancer in overalls sat at attention on the second largest of

the three mounds, staring into the audience. A third dancer, a man, was seen near the backdrop, which consisted of another expanse of white cloth, pristine at first, but over time marked by descending water stains that slowly, almost imperceptibly, evidenced the work's duration.

The piece had already begun with the entry of the audience into the theater and the understated actions on the stage. The dance began again, in earnest, when a fourth performer (also a man) entered the scene at left, approached the figure in overalls and began to pull what at first appeared to be a magician's red silk handkerchief from her sleeve. This quick visual surprise escalated as the silk turned out to be a rather bulky red turtleneck sweater. Other items were extracted from various parts of the rotund figure: a blue sweater, and then two dresses, more overalls, a pillow and other things, in a spectacle akin to the endless stream of clowns emerging from a small circus car. By turns magical and mundane, the gestures became those of the ragpicker or bargain-bin shopper, sorting, examining, rejecting, dropping the discards to the floor, until the right item, a shirt, was finally found and donned.

Soon, in a reversal of this extracting process, the fabric covering the stage was itself swallowed up into another piece of clothing, becoming part of the belly of the performer standing at the back of the stage as it was stuffed into his shirt. The silk was gathered slowly at first, then the action picked up quickly, an inhalation of whiteness approaching gale force; the fluid form became a dynamic, spatial turbulence before it vanished.

Gradually, another architectural "skin" was revealed: the stage floor was surfaced with moist clay, which hardened, cracked and powdered as the performance continued. At the same time, the powder coated the dancers as bodies entwined, were hurled or carried like bundles, and heaved themselves about the floor, like crabs turned on their backs pitching desperately to get righted.

Partnering in *appetite* was sometimes tender, sometimes fiercely devouring: the lifting by one partner of another's arm with the clamping of teeth; a "kiss" bitten and then spat from a face that was a mask made of a round loaf of bread. One of the most striking episodes was seen in the bundling of all seven dancers as an abstract unit, which moved en masse as an intense pressured force working its way downstage. Individuals were always in changing contact with one another, leaning and interweaving, sometimes embracing or shoving. On the verge of spinning out of control, the dancers maintained their individuality in what appeared to be an escalating unbinding of the social contract.

The concluding sequence, with its grand, double-waisted orange-red felt ball-gown of a skirt, was literally a showstopper. Worn by two dancers (one of them Stuart herself), the skirt was an island from which they performed a slapstick duet of hand gestures—armpit-scrubbing, eye-opening, hand-washing, skirt-hitching. As structure and frame, and as moving, billowing force, the red expanse rephrased and recapitulated the vast expanse of red-orange silk of *mattering* in Lyon and Montreal. —J.S.

1. Ann Hamilton and Meg Stuart, production notes for *appetite*.

After its Brussels premiere, *appetite* was presented by the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. It will appear June 4-6, 1999, at the Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, followed by engagements at Tanz in August, Berlin [Aug. 12, 13], the Edinburgh Festival [Aug. 21, 22] and Berner Tanztage, Bern [Aug. 26-28]. An extensive European tour is planned for the fall.

## whitecloth

Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn.

Jan. 17-May 23, 1999

Research for her 1999 Venice Biennale installation in the American pavilion, a 1933 building based loosely (though at reduced scale) on Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, prompted Hamilton to read widely in colonial American history. These readings would also pertain to her project for the Aldrich, where she continued her explorations of the intellectual history of colonial New England, especially its Puritan religious heritage.

The Aldrich installation, comprising 16 different elements, was sited on two floors of a structure built in 1783. For its first hundred years it served as a general store, meeting place and post office. Later it became the private home of Grace King Ingersoll, a descendant of one of its builders; in 1929, it became a Christian Science church. It was purchased in 1964 by collector and patron Larry Aldrich and renovated to become a contemporary art museum.

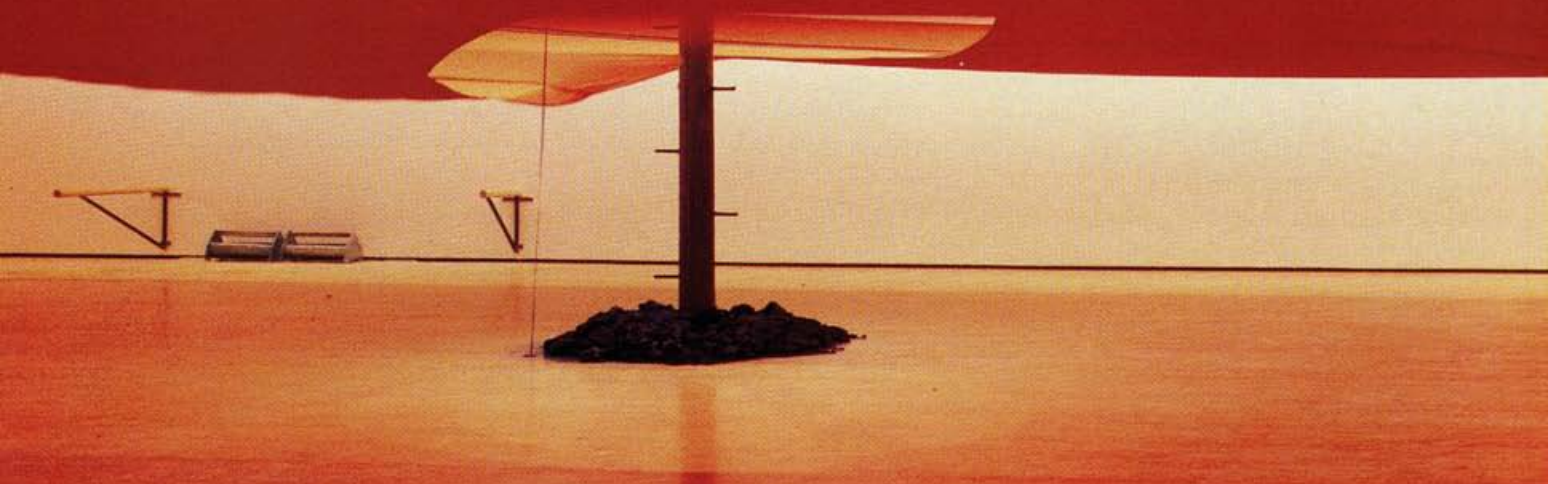
The Aldrich Museum provided rich territory for Hamilton's investigations. While all of *whitecloth's* elements contributed to this particular site-specific presentation, a number of them had played a role in previous installations. In her *whitecloth* catalogue essay, Nancy Princenthal notes Hamilton's "inclination to fold history back on itself, treating it as a reversible narrative."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the installation included a dozen newly created components.

The Aldrich Museum's domestic scale and its layered history prompted a kind of "mischievousness," as Hamilton says, that she hadn't allowed herself for a while. When the structure was converted to a museum, sheetrock interior walls were put up to mask windows and fireplaces, though the building's outside facade toward Main Street still had the countenance and detail of neighboring colonial houses. Thus the discrepancies between the build-





# Ann Hamilton: Inscribing Place



**A**nn Hamilton is a sculptor who over the past 15 years has produced works as big as a three-story house and as small as a thimble. All are meant to be read as structural, sensory and linguistic surrounds. A maker of photographs, objects and performances, as well as text, audio and video works, she is well known for her large, encompassing installations that are simultaneously *tableaux vivants* and *natures mortes*, and that combine any or all of the preceding elements. Hamilton has made almost 60 installations to date.

Whether amassing enormous quantities of materials or, conversely, clearing volumes of architectural space, Hamilton always focuses on the way a body of knowledge is generated, contained, perceived, absorbed. Her installations are also about each increment of material positioned or formed by the hand in the making of the totality; about the memory embedded in objects, materials or gestures; and about the concrete realities of poetic composition, going back to the earliest Latin and Greek meaning of *poesis*: a making.

She has created composite spaces filled with copious material substances: 40,000 pounds of flour; 750,000 pennies (the entire budget of a project, trans-

lated into the smallest monetary unit and laid into a skin of honey); or, most recently, 60,000 cut flowers. Hamilton's installations often include a living presence—plant or animal life, a human attendant continuing the task of creating the work, or at times a video that may focus on a key hand movement. Typically, Hamilton isolates a particular gestural activity, an ongoing action that takes place within a much larger visual field. The artist herself has often assumed the part of one of the "tenders," and as she's described their function and actions: "I saw myself present as both an object and as a witness. I thought about the figure as being a center of animation."<sup>1</sup>

Hamilton often juxtaposes Minimalist procedures and geometric framing with the mutable irregularities of her materials. She has described her work process as a "conversation." She begins with a particular site, and engages in animated discussion with its constituent communities, all the while researching its socioeconomic, historical, cultural and commercial contexts. An intense dialogue develops as a work is built between the artist and an exhibition's curator, technical crew, team of volunteers (frequently very numerous) and guards.

Images this spread from Hamilton's site-specific installation *whitecloth*, 1999; at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn.

Right, butcher-block table and ink-splotted windowpane. Photo Steve Willard. Center, a white cloth in motion next to a reexposed window. Photo Thibault Jeanson. Below right, a visitor on the spinning floor. Photo Steve Willard.

Opposite page, video still of Hamilton's looping script (top) and view of a black organza glove inside a black organza muff (bottom). Photos Steve Willard. Photos this article courtesy the artist, the respective museums and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.



mouse. The moving cloth drew on a range of associations with birth, death, seduction, religious symbolism, and the plain white cloth on which paintings are made. The rooms themselves seemed strangely stitched together by Hamilton's cable, which functioned as a guideline to the visit. However, the cable did not clarify or predict the movements of the animated white cloth which crept, shimmied, stopped and then headed on, in ever-varying distances and time phases. (The cable was motor-driven, with a computer controller that randomly governed the choice of moves from a selection of 64,000 patterns. Anticipating the cloth's position was complicated by the fact that a second white cloth of the same size was attached to the cable far enough from the first that the two could never be seen together.)

After passing the large table with its billowy surface, the visitor moved to the center of the building's cruciform layout, with window-lit bays on each side, and another room ahead. To the left a double-length butcher-block table was placed parallel to a set of windows. One of the windowpanes was splotted with blood-red ink, turning it into a "stained-glass window" in several senses, and inflecting the hefty chopping block with perhaps ominous portent. Was this merely a place for preparing food, or an altar for ritual sacrifice? To the right, sunk into the floor, was a tub of water which periodically shook when the

white cloth passed a sensor and set off a sound wave from a hidden speaker whose vibrations unsettled the liquid. The floor shuddered, and so did the viewer. On a low glass shelf was a black organza glove within a black cocoonlike organza muff; the pair's other half was sited one floor up.

Directly ahead was a room whose windows afforded a view onto Main Street. The room was nearly empty, though one could note that an 8-foot-diameter circular cutout of the floor was revolving at a speed that required some attention if one stepped on board. In so doing, one had intimations of the ecstatic state to be obtained through ritual spinning in any number of religious groups, whether the skirted Sufis or the more austere dressed New England Shakers. As more viewers came on for the ride, the spinning slowed, and then stopped.

On the second floor, Hamilton set up a face-off between the word made flesh and the word made light. In the room above the spinning floor was a tall desk; inset under a glass top, and beneath a white wool cover, was a ledger handwritten in Hamilton's familiar looping script with a sermon by Cotton Mather. Around the words of the famous hellfire-and-brim-

stone colonial-era preacher, the pages were filled almost to the graphite lines with washes of red ink, leaving a thin edge of white between ink and penciled mark. Thus the words appeared to be scripted in white and stood out on the bloody ground. At the opposite end of the floor was another desk, in line with the first, with a video inset into its surface, the glass also covered with a layer of white wool fabric. The video shows an animated, illuminated script as it is written with a stylus on a sheet of glass, and photographed from below (à la Hans Namuth); the soundtrack issues the noises of its scratchy making.<sup>13</sup>

This installation dispensed with the solo performer, or attendant, who is such a crucial component in the majority of Hamilton's installations. But, while the physical body (except for that

*continued on page 130*



ing's interior and exterior were pronounced.

Hamilton peeled back the historical layers. Her most pervasive critical gesture was to uncover 13 windows, cutting openings in the sheetrock and allowing the ragged edges of this intervention to remain in place. The windows themselves became focal points for the artist's placement of each of her chosen objects. She also removed carpeting from the staircase connecting the two floors of the installation and repainted ceilings from black to white.

The entire exhibition was keyed to two types of white cloth. One of them was a large rectangle of silk that hovered over a refectory table as if levitated at a spiritualist's seance; it was actually held aloft by air pumped through a subterranean system, up through the legs, and emitted from tiny holes drilled in the table's surface. This component was seen immediately as the viewer entered the first of the installation's ground-floor galleries.

Coursing through the entire two-floor exhibition was a handkerchief-sized white cloth, whisked along on a cable and pulley system. The fleeting white apparition slipped in and out of holes in walls, floors and ceilings with the speed and unpredictability of a

# Hamilton

continued from page 85

of the visitor) was absent from *whitecloth*, each element nevertheless continued to be performative, whether the hovering cloth, the well-used butcher block or the handwritten texts. The hand itself, moreover, was ever-present, even when implied, disguised or concealed: the glove within the black organza muff, the hand guiding the stylus in the video or the pairs of curatorial hands that daily replaced the tattered cloths with fresh ones to start their erratic journey anew. Indeed, the hand behind these gestures seemed the more compelling by virtue of its absence.

Two of the newest works in the ensemble were telling in this regard. One was a video, mounted flush to a wall, in which a hand, hidden from view, slashes honey in a pocket. Perhaps even more important was a small photograph that in the overall context of this installation was easily missed. Placed in the same room as the desk with the Cotton Mather sermon, it recalled the many appetites that are implicit in Hamilton's installations. She once said, our "eyes have become voracious like mouths." This image, not much more than an inch long and isolated in a large white field, appeared to have the form of an eye. But the shape was in fact that of a mouth. Hamilton made the picture by putting a small pinhole camera in her mouth; then she opened her mouth as if to speak (or as if to form the letter "aleph," as in the video of the same name showing a mouth rolling

marbles within it [see photo, p. 59]), and took a picture of her own face as seen in a handheld mirror. The hand, here out of the picture, is for Hamilton as important a scaffolding as ever. □

1. "Ann Hamilton: Temporal Crossroads," interview by Joan Simon, *ArtPress* 208, December 1995, p. 27. Unless otherwise noted, all Hamilton quotations are from conversations with the author.

2. *ArtPress* interview, p. 25.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

4. Hamilton penciled the writings on the cloth. A changing group of volunteers at Hamilton's Columbus studio assisted her in the hand-embroidery and in poking word-size holes in the fabric. Light from the windows would thus penetrate the cloth and "illuminate" the floor with the absent "words." The Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon, which commissioned *bounden*, acquired the work for its collection, which comprises the largest set of installations in Europe.

5. In a rare exception, (*bounden*) made its first public appearance a month prior to *bounden*'s opening in Lyon, the space for which it was actually conceived. It was front and center in the lobby of P.S. 1 in Long Island City, when the building reopened in 1997. The piece remained on view through Apr. 26, 1998. Another variation of the weeping wall was shown in "étrenature," at the Cartier Foundation, Paris [June 17-Sept. 20, 1998], where it was sited in a subterranean gallery and titled *welle*. It is this variation that was part of the *whitecloth* installation.

6. The work's title derives from the name of the poem by Susan Stewart whose poetry and critical writings, especially her *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1993, have been important for Hamilton. A line in Stewart's poem "The Spell" reads "Adam lay I-bounden, bounden in the glade." (*The Forest*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 30.)

7. Elaine Scarry, "Introduction," *Literature and the Body*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. xxii.

8. Lynn Herbert, *Ann Hamilton: kaph*, Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum, 1997, p. 22.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Ann Hamilton, quoted on the CAM, Houston, Web site.

11. Hamilton herself assumed this role when the work opened, until she left Miami; another woman did it for the run of the show.

12. Nancy Princenthal, catalogue for "Ann Hamilton: *whitecloth*," Ridgefield, Conn., Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999.

13. The video, dating from 1995, is titled (*reserve*) and is extracted from an installation done that year in Eindhoven. Also on the second floor were other elements familiar from recent installations, including the weeping wall from *bounden* and the pile of wool coats on a chair from *mantle*.

*The Wexner Center's show, "the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1997," opened in Columbus [May 18-Aug. 4, 1996], then toured to the Wood Street Galleries and the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh [Oct. 12, 1996-Jan. 5, 1997]; the Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Ill. [Aug. 26-Nov. 2, 1997]; and the Miami Art Museum [Apr. 2-June 7, 1998], where, at the same time, curator Lorie Mertes organized Hamilton's installation mantle. The show continued to the Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal [Oct. 9 1998-Jan. 17, 1999], accompanied by the installation mattering.*

*"Ann Hamilton: Present-Past, 1984-1997" was organized by Thierry Prat for the Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon [Nov. 16, 1997-Feb. 6, 1998], and it was accompanied by the installations bounden and mattering.*

*A new installation by Ann Hamilton appears at the American pavilion of the Venice Biennale [June 13-Nov. 7].*

Author: Joan Simon is the author of *Ann Hamilton: Installations*, forthcoming from Abrams.