

# exposure



## Ann Hamilton—On Virtuality, Collaboration, and the Vocal Chord

Colette Copeland

*For twenty-five years, internationally acclaimed artist Ann Hamilton has created multi-sensory installations invoking time, place, memory, history, and voice. I first encountered her work in 1998; mantle featured a seated woman (sometimes the artist herself) repetitively performing the domestic task of sewing. Behind her, a table stretched from one end of the room to the other, overflowing with an extravagant display of lush, rotting flowers. Speakers embedded in the flowers emitted a humming tonal sound. I had an experience of synesthesia, a condition in which the stimulation of one sensory function leads to an involuntary reaction in a second sensory pathway. I'm not sure if it was the smell of the flowers or the humming, but my entire body began to prickle. After a few moments, the feeling dissipated; soon my nervous system calmed. As I've followed Hamilton's work over the years, her engagement with the liminal through process and material never fails to immerse the viewer into a world both familiar and unsettling.*

*Over the past four years, Hamilton has worked on a number of projects. Commissioned by Steve Oliver and completed in 2007, Tower Project is located at Oliver Ranch in Geyserville, California. Hamilton worked with the Jensen architecture firm to design the site-specific artwork. Envisioned as a space for creative performance, the concrete tower has double-helix stairs. The open-air top allows the sky to reflect in a pool of water at the structure's base.*

*From 2005 to 2008, Hamilton designed the 118-foot meditation boat for the Sangha monks in Luang Prabang, Laos. Inspired by the monasteries' walking halls and the flow of the Mekong River, the boat was gifted in an official blessings ceremony in 2009. In 2008, Hamilton participated in Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet, a group project in the Galápagos Islands. Artists were asked to create work based on their travels and experiences to UNESCO World Heritage sites. Working with middle-school children in a collaborative reading/vocal performance documented by video, Hamilton's work addressed how a place is named and who has the power to name.*

*All images courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio unless otherwise indicated*

*The Pulitzer Foundation in St. Louis commissioned the multi-sensory installation stylus, which responds to Tadao Ando's architecture but also the larger context of St. Louis's urban environment and its social, political and cultural history. The work also poetically examines perception, communication, and the collective voice.*

*This interview took place January 29, 2011.*

**Colette Copeland:** You spoke on “virtuality” at the University of Pennsylvania's Humanities Forum. The topic presented an interesting paradox, since your work is rooted in the physical and experiential.

**Ann Hamilton:** I agree. When I was first invited it gave me pause: How might I address or embody the topic? But as I began to think about the prosthetics of bodily extension and the immersions of screen experience in relation to the virtual, I thought about how the virtual inhabits even those experiences we might least associate with it, like reading and the experience of proximity and distance that exists between the space where a reader sits and the world the page projects in the reader's mind. When I hear the word virtuality I immediately think of technology, of digital and electro-mechanical means, but this is maybe too narrow a form of address. Perhaps the question is how tactile or bodily knowledge comes forward to interact with technologies of extension.

**CC:** As the relationship between the physical and the virtual relates to installation-based work, the challenge is always about documentation. The first time I saw *mantle*, I was completely immersed in the multi-sensorial environment. I purchased the book *The Body and the Object: Ann Hamilton 1984–1996*, which included an interactive CD-ROM. I was able to navigate through layers of moving images and sounds. Although it didn't completely replace the physical experience, it did give viewers a sense of the complexity of your work.



AH: We are working on integrating sound and video into the experience of my personal site. In doing so, we find ourselves referring back to this CD-ROM, which was made under the auspices of my Wexner Center for the Arts residency from 1994 to 1996. The experience had a tremendous influence on my practice. It made me think about how the camera apparatus is voyeuristic, and with it, how one's attention is guided from behind the mechanism rather than through one's direct physical experience of a space. I began to move the camera in tandem with the movement of a stylus or the pressing of a finger to explore how it creates a visceral experience.

Above: *Figure 1. meditation boat, construction completed 2007; officially gifted to the Sangha, February 2009, in The Quiet in the Land, curated by France Morin, [www.thequietintheland.org/laos/](http://www.thequietintheland.org/laos/). Photo by Thibault Jeanson*

Opposite: *Figure 2. Face to Face 2, 2001, pigment print, 4 x 10 inches*

CC: So is virtuality about how to document your work or give the viewer an alternative viewing experience?

AH: Initially my intention was documentation; just as I work to find words to write or speak analogous to my making hand, I tried to use the video camera in parallel gestures to record a work from within the process and the actions of its making. The attempt to document became, in time, a way of making something new. Working on the CD-ROM caused me to think about immersion in a virtual space and immersion in the contingences of a particular physical space and time. The tension between the desire for material contact and the inevitable distance of a viewer that is part of the experience of an installation is, perhaps, both collapsed and amplified by its representation in an extended media form.

Language works in a similar way. How we name or describe our experience can also separate us from the experience. What was difficult to convey in the CD-ROM, or the virtual experience, was how the tactile aspects of the earlier installations evoked a psychological tension. The work pulls you in and pushes you out at the same time. That is both bodily and linguistic. Technology also does that. It pulls us in;

The work pulls you in and pushes you out at the same time. That is both bodily and linguistic. Technology also does that. It pulls us in; it connects us with proximity and an intimacy, yet at the same time, it asserts a distance. The paradox is a condition of both language and technology.—Hamilton



it connects us with proximity and an intimacy, yet at the same time, it asserts a distance. The paradox is a condition of both language and technology.

CC: In a 2001 interview, writer Mary Katherine Coffey asked you if your shift away from material and process-oriented work was due to the “Disneyfication” of large-scale installations prevalent in contemporary art. You responded:

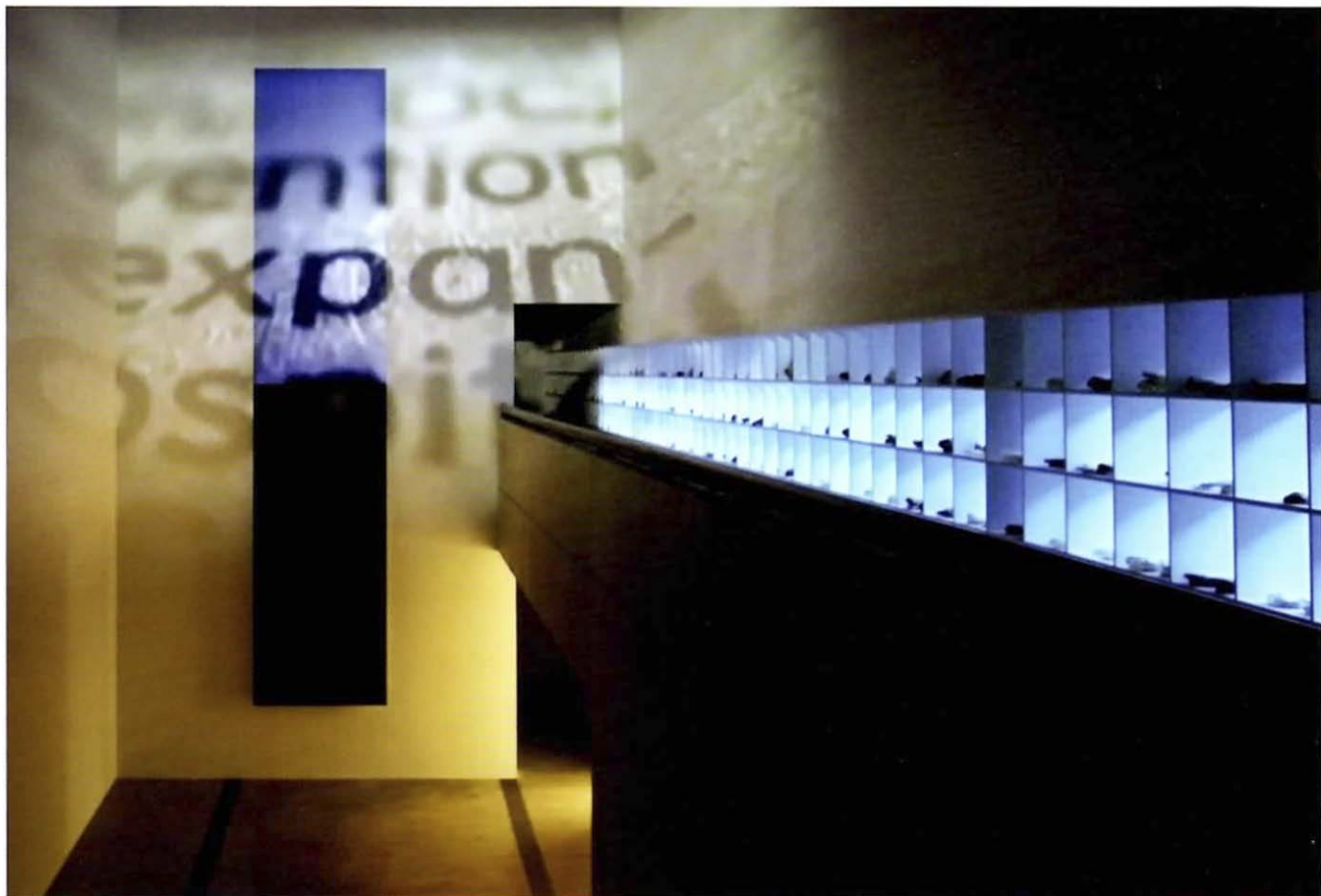
I sometimes don't like the way my installations are becoming more technologically dependent. I've been concerned about the cost of some of the technologies that this work now needs; I can't afford them anymore. You know, it's really different than detritus that is collected, or materials that are borrowed and laid out and returned to their economy. I've entered a different economy. I depend on technologies that I don't always control or understand.... The material excess is perhaps very American, but does it eclipse what I'm actually doing?<sup>1</sup>

You responded to this concern by making pinhole photographs with your mouth—a series that referenced old technology, but also reclaimed the body as a tool to counteract the reliance on technology

(Figure 2). How has your concern with technology affected and/or inspired your work?

AH: It's interesting that you bring up the pinhole images. I am working on a pinhole project at my son's school. Part of my interest in the pinhole is its simplicity and magic. The images hold durations of time. Perhaps I've revisited the pinhole because it provides a counterpoint to the other technologically complicated work. Yet the school pinhole project wouldn't work without the aid of technology. They work as images because we can scan them in, correct, and output them in multiple ways. It's a merger of nineteenth and twenty-first-century technologies.

I recently completed *stylus*, a very complex project at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis (Figure 3). The Tadao Ando building is an architectural work of art in its own right. I couldn't address the project as in previous works where the spaces had former industrial or domestic histories. Its formal elegance and pristine surfaces made attaching to the building difficult. After several proposals, I understood that light is the animate figure in the building;



it mirrors the outside and reflects off the interior water court. Light animates the architecture; the architecture exists to choreograph the light. That directed my own research towards a project about light and sound not confined by material.

I collaborated with composer Shahrokh Yadegari, and we installed a multi-channel sound system in the building. It is a complex digital audio system that allowed sound to move and build through the space, reflecting the manner in which light transforms the architecture. We worked with soprano Elizabeth Zharoff, improvising with Shahrokh's digital instrument, Lila, to record her voice; we mixed these recordings with others we made of the sounds of two surfaces making contact. The project also had a tactile, material presence of jumping beans, taxidermy birds, newspapers, and player pianos. The technologies co-exist with the material of the installation, and the forms that emerge are only possible because of their intersection.

CC: Over the last few years, there has been a shift in your work, not only in the global scale of the projects, but also the emphasis towards

architecture. The tower in Geyserville illustrates this transition (Figure 4). While all your work responds to the history of a site, this work in particular required years of planning and collaboration. How do you negotiate the balance between the hands-on aspect of your practice and stepping back to allow others to fabricate or produce the final work?

AH: [Patron] Steve Oliver and I made a pact that we wouldn't make any major decisions by phone, fax, or email—only face to face. I went to California regularly. We forget that buildings are hand-made no matter how much computer modeling is involved. In this case, there was a lot of engineering work; though the form appears simple, the individual elements that comprise the interior radius change. As the stairs climb, the distance from the interior wall to each stair shifts, so each had to be slightly shorter than the one before it. The shifting diameter of the interior helix required the railing to be bent on-site. Every post in the railing inserts into an individual sleeve cast into the concrete. This would be impossible in a commercial building; it is too labor intensive.



The tower functions as an aperture; when you look down, the double helix of the stairs shifts in diameter; though different in scale, it is much like a lens and seems somehow related to the aperture of the pinhole....

Opposite: *Figure 3. stylus, 2010–2011, video installation, main gallery, The Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis. Photo by TOKY Branding + Design/Geoff Story*

Above: *Figure 4. tower, designed by Ann Hamilton for the Steve Oliver Ranch, Geyserville, California, completed 2007. Photo by Alex Fradkin. Photo courtesy of Oliver Ranch Foundation*

I am interested in responding to the physical and the social conditions of architecture; I don't have a form until the work meets the possibilities, restrictions, and complications of its location. In order to make the context for the work, I have to allow for conditions to happen—conditions that invite or allow other things to happen. Steve has commissioned other artists to create work for the space of the tower, so its context continually evolves. The tower functions as an aperture; when you look down, the double helix of the stairs shifts in diameter; though different in scale, it is much like a lens and seems somehow related to the aperture of the pinhole ... the extreme contrast in the work between the miniature and the gigantic.

CC: Although your collaborative process was very long and complex, the resulting project is minimalist. It is a response to water, light, and architecture with sound activating the space.

AH: I think of it as a vocal chord.

CC: You have said that your work has shifted towards the voice as central focus. Certainly, that theme is prevalent in *tower* and *stylus*.

AH: I'm interested in how to make a circumstance for a collective reading. For the closing of *stylus*, we built amplified speakers that resemble old glass telephone receivers. When you speak into the headset, the voice is amplified and vibrates as it projects from the speaker held within the palm of your hand. The slight amplification of a voice speaking softly has a different quality—a more interior quality—than a voice that attempts to project unamplified.

Connected to my question of the location of public space and public speech and how one might participate in the process are ideas philosophically situated in American history—my interest lies in creating a form for both a personal and a political voice, as well as the manners or conditions of speaking. Some questions are long term for me; this is a question I have been grappling with for, perhaps, fifteen years.

CC: Interviewer Jan Garden Castro asked you whether viewer participation changed with your global projects. You responded that your job was to listen and respond. This generosity of spirit is embodied in many of your projects but especially in *meditation boat* (Figures 1 and 5). Please expand on your collaborative process.

AH: In the Laos boat project, curator France Morin was responding to the enormous number of international shows where large numbers of artists are catapulted in, do their work, and then leave. France wanted the participating artists to stay longer, to let the projects grow through meaningful contact. For me, it was a four-year project. It wasn't feasible to be there during the entire boat building process, so there was a lot of emailing and Skyping. In some ways, the life of the project had two distinct phases: the first was its conception and building, the second was its gifting to the community. It's the only project that had a tangible object that remained after the exhibit

ended. Although the boat was blessed several times during its construction, it was a long process of giving it away, of understanding how to give it freely without expectation of function or attachment. This was completed on my last trip to Laos; in the gifting ceremony, it not only became something for use there, but perhaps also something for here. I recently ran into someone at a conference who said they saw my boat on the Mekong River. So it's there and in use. It's having its own life, which is very gratifying.

CC: With the Galápagos project, you involved local school children in a community collaborative process (Figure 6).

AH: I was interested in how the seventh and eighth graders at the UNESCO school where we worked would describe and name their islands and how this might be the same as or different from the evolution of vocabularies that have named and made it both a significant locus of scientific research as well as a mythical place in the world's imagination. I was interested in creating a vocal choir. What was most effective for the kids was not necessarily the speaking at the ocean (vocal choir), but rather the field trips we took together, going out on a boat and exploring their island. Many had never been on a boat, and though they are stewards of the island, they don't have access to many of the sites. We were in a place of extraordinary history and incredible beauty. The question was what could we do that was meaningful.

CC: A large percentage of our readership teaches as a means to support themselves and their artistic practice. While most are deeply committed to teaching, the number one complaint I hear is a lack of sufficient time to dedicate to their own practice. At this stage in your career, why do you continue to teach? What role does teaching play in your own practice?

AH: I'm fortunate that my teaching appointment is flexible with my schedule; I work primarily with graduate students. I teach in part because I need to financially. Installations are expensive to make and without marketable objects, there's not a lot to sell. That's the reality. But teaching is also a way of making a context for and cultivating a conversation. I feel very lucky to have the job I have. It does take a lot of time—emotional time. But it keeps me involved in something that I care about. I enjoy the studio visits with the grads. They are very committed to their work. I'm able to structure the seminars around questions that I am also asking in my own work. I never teach the class the same way twice. University galleries and programs focus on the professionalism of the artists, but they also provide opportunities where other work (not tied to the market) is supported.

Opposite: *Figure 5. meditation boat, construction completed 2007; officially gifted to the Sangha, February 2009, in The Quiet in the Land, curated by France Morin. Photo by Thibault Jeanson*

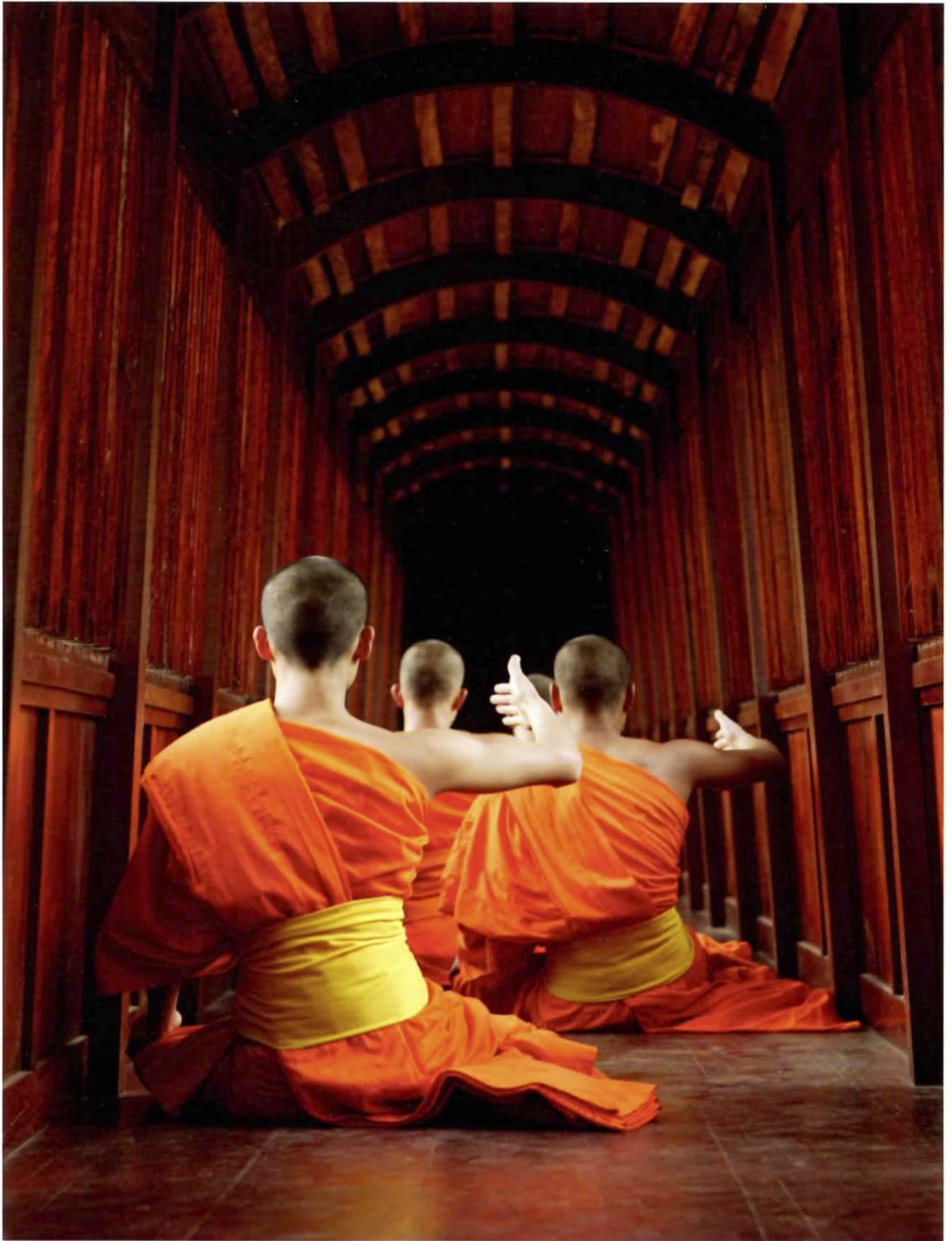






Figure 6. Ann working with children, Galápagos Chorus, 2008. An installation of the documentation of Hamilton's work in the Galápagos was included in *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet*, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, University of California, and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Photo by Emily Pozo

CC: My students keep me on my toes and prevent me from becoming intellectually or creatively lazy.

AH: They keep you honest.

CC: How do you juggle the various demands of international travel and global art making with parenting and teaching?

AH: It's complicated. I wonder if I'm doing any of it well. My attention is always focused on the work. I'm often dealing with many projects at once. So I have to think of it as one big project. My son tells me that I work all the time. Rather than separating my work and life, I think of it as one entity. I'm also traveling less internationally. But you should see our house. It's chaos. I have great help. It can be stressful, but I can't imagine not doing this.

CC: The Pulitzer Foundation's mission is to provide a sanctuary and laboratory for cultivating collaborative work. Those two words seem to epitomize your work and practice. Yet the viewer is not allowed to become complacent. In so many works, the viewer is required to activate the space. The laboratory is not a sterile environment, but rather one where the creative spirit flourishes.

AH: It's a space of abstraction with a poetic relationship. One that's not necessarily functional.

CC: You've said that your work engages the place of inbetweenness. Perhaps that is the space between visibility and invisibility, or the space between knowledge and intuition, or the space between personal and collective memory.

AH: It's about bringing something to attention. **It's not about a resolution or answer, but more about how to bring the question into an experience.** For example, the Pulitzer's interior resembles a temple—pristine and elegant. But outside is an urban neighborhood that historically has experienced a lot of racial tension and physical abandonment. How does one reconcile everything that goes into making a space of interiority that simultaneously brushes up against the harsh reality of the exterior? I never know how things will unfold or amplify after I've left. I have to trust the power of the experiential. My attraction to making social choirs is not about coming together as one voice, but highlighting individual voices collectively.

I am haunted by choirs of readers speaking, and I am getting ready to begin a large project at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. During a site visit, I met with a young professor who teaches conducting, Giselle Wyers, and videotaped her class from a camera attached to her chest facing out toward her hands and the student singers. The project is still in its beginning stages. I'm not sure where it will lead, but the question of the singular conductor and the body of the choir is intriguing to me.

1. Mary Katherine Coffey, "Histories That Haunt: A Conversation with Ann Hamilton," *Art Journal* 60:3 (Autumn 2001), 11–23.