RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

RACAR
Revue d'art canadienne | Canadian Art Review

Attending to Presence: An Interview with Ann Hamilton

Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick

Volume 44, Number 2, 2019

Stay Still: Past, Present, and Practice of the Tableau Vivant
Stay Still : histoire, actualité et pratique du tableau vivant

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068323ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1068323ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Fisher, J. & Drobnick, J. (2019). Attending to Presence: An Interview with Ann Hamilton. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *44*(2), 144–164. https://doi.org/10.7202/1068323ar

Attending to Presence: An Interview with Ann Hamilton

Jennifer Fisher, Jim Drobnick

Ann Hamilton is an artist renowned for process-based works and immersive installations. Hamilton has received many awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship, NEA Visual Arts Fellowship, and Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. She represented the United States in the 1991 Sao Paulo Bienal, the 1999 Venice Biennale, and has exhibited extensively around the world. Her major commissions include projects for the Park Avenue Armory, the Guggenheim Museum, La Maison Rouge, Historiska Museet, MASS MOCA, the Hirshhorn Museum, the Wanas Foundation, the Stedelijk, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Gallery Liverpool, Dia Center for the Arts, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Hamilton lives in Columbus and teaches at The Ohio State University.
—www.annhamiltonstudio.com

Jennifer Fisher is a critic, curator and Professor of Contemporary Art and Curatorial Studies at York University, Toronto. She is co-editor of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and co-founder of the curatorial collaborative DisplayCult (www.displaycult.com).
—jefish@yorku.ca

Jim Drobnick is a critic, curator and Associate Professor at OCAD University, Toronto. He is co-editor of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and co-founder of the curatorial collaborative DisplayCult (www.displaycult.com).
—jdrobnick@faculty.ocadu.ca

Weaving. Unravelling. Burning. Engraving. Writing. Carding. Erasing. These are some of the actions that have been performed within the large-scale installations of Ann Hamilton. Amidst the gargantuan assemblage of horsehair in *tropos* (1993), the mountain of denim in *indigo blue* (1991), and other installations with evocative materials, individuals engage in simple, repetitive tasks; their enigmatic presence forms a focal point in a context that often feels intimidating and vast. One could easily feel lost in the immensity, but witnessing an individual executing a humble activity provides a grounding that serves as an effective counterbalance. Such performers are at one with the ambiance of abundance, humanizing the massive accumulation while dramatizing its sublimity. Despite the prosaic gestures, they are compelling to watch.

Unlike living museum interpreters or historical re-enactors, performers in Hamilton's projects, whom she calls "attendants," remain unresponsive to interactions with curious spectators. Absorbed in their tasks, the performers eschew role-playing; their names may not be known to visitors, but their actions are rooted in their everyday personhood. Theatricality in the gestures and self-conscious displays of acting are downplayed. Instead, the performers convey an unusual calm in conducting their chores, whether ordinary or peculiar. In Hamilton's works during the 1990s, visitors encountered environments in which a lone individual executed monotonous actions, like burning every line of text in the pages of a book (*tropos*) or using bread dough to make an impression of the mouth's cavity (*malediction*, 1991). The live individual resisted categorization as an automaton, but neither could they be regarded as available in a social manner—their presence operated somewhere between a body and an object.[1] Despite being silent, unassuming, and concentrating on their routine, they appeared cognizant of visitors around them. Observing their diligent, embodied activity subverted the convention of visualist distance that normally applies to aesthetic encounters.

Hamilton's attendants relate to the tradition of tableaux vivants, yet differ significantly. Nineteenth-century tableaux tended to be still; that is, the individuals enacting the scenes held a static posture. Motion only occurred during the transition between one pose and the next. The moments of stillness cued the audience to recognize and admire the composed image.[2] In Hamilton's installations, however, stillness and motion happen simultaneously as seated or standing performers continue their task for the extent of gallery viewing hours throughout the weeks or months of the exhibition. The

artist articulates this as the "paradox of stillness in movement and movement in stillness;" rather than fixating on a single image, as in a tableau vivant, visitors take in a continuum of ongoing actions as the performer engages with their specified task.[3] No designated viewing position exists in Hamilton's installations either, in contrast to the proscenium-orientation characteristically separating audience from performer in tableaux vivants. Visitors walk amongst, go up to, and circulate in the same space as the performers.

Historically, tableaux vivants often promoted allegorical and moral meanings to both the participant and viewer. Tableaux were meant to inspire virtuous thoughts and behaviour by personifying famous paintings and sculptures, righteous literary and biblical scenes, and nascent ideals such as the iconic "new woman" of the nineteenth-century suffrage movement. Such incorporation literalized thematic gestures to express or "interpret" specific knowledges and ideological values. Hamilton's tableaux, however, are far more ambiguous and mysterious; even though the actions may look familiar or banal, they are made strange by their prolonged length and lack of narrative explanation. For the artist, the labour is the point. As she explains below, sometimes things "mean what they are." Such expressions of ordinariness evacuate the baggage of didacticism carried by the tradition of tableaux vivants, yet make room for a contemporary reconceptualization of living display in more complex, open-ended terms.[4]

The locations of Hamilton's installations—former factories, workplaces, and warehouses—resonate with the residual echoes of physical labour as sites of manufacturing and craftmaking. As labour is increasingly outsourced to countries around the world and manufacturing becomes supplanted by the rise of information and service-based industries, situating a performer in these workspaces reanimates their industrial origins through associative and poetic tasks. In an age dominated by digital screens, seeing hands at work on pliant fabrics or manipulating tactile materials conveys a sensibility of caring for the things of the world and the value of manual labour.[5]

As much as Hamilton's performers differ from those in tableaux vivants, they share a sense of aspiration. It is hard to miss the meditative attunement exuded by her performers as they single-mindedly pursue their tasks, engrossed and seemingly at peace in their concentrated focus. "Meditation in action" forms a part of many spiritual disciplines, from karma yoga to Zen Buddhism. Hamilton's installations offer a more secularized version, whereby a simple gesture, repeated over and over, generates a state of absorption. What visitors see, then, is not an image but a way of being. In this vein, the artist's choice of *habitus* (2016) for a title is particularly apt. Referring to the way individuals comport themselves, do things, and fashion their display, *habitus* refers to the way in which people conduct their lives.[6] The toil engaged by Hamilton's performers permeates the atmosphere of the space with a sense of quiet intensity.

More recent installations, such as *the event of a thread* (2012), afford visitors the opportunity to engage in more than just viewing. The activities differ from the worklike tasks of the earlier projects; instead, visitors play. They can pull on ropes, hold, and then let go to spin monumental columns of fabric, or glide back and forth on swings to collectively lift and lower a gigantic curtain. By incorporating live individuals to animate the concept through exertion

1. These performers recall Hamilton's photo-sculpture series *body object* (1984/1991), except that the performers in the installations tend to be in constant motion.

2. On the alternation of movement and stillness in tableaux vivants, see Judy Burns, "Reconstructions," *Women & Performance* 10 (1992): 112–147.

3. Ann Hamilton, "Spinning," *Ann Hamilton: habitus* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2016), 5, www.annhamiltonstudio.com/images/FWM_Newspaper_8_26_spread_FULL_NEWSPAPER_revised_no_bleeds.pdf.

4. Living display is our term for the reconsideration of performance and exhibition, especially through the interrogation of bodily tropes and exhibition archetypes. See Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, *CounterPoses* (Montreal: Oboro, 2002); Jennifer Fisher, "Interperformance: The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni and Marina Abramovic," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 28–33; and Jim Drobnick, "Body Events and Implicated Gazes," *Performance Research* 13, no. 4 (2009): 64–74. *The Journal of Curatorial Studies* has published two issues on the theme of living display: 7.2 (2018) and 8.1 (2019).

5. It is important to note that Hamilton has performed in many of her installations, and so does not ask volunteers or paid performers to enact anything she has not done herself. Hamilton thus avoids the ethical issues involved with artists such as Vanessa Beecroft, who only occupy the directorial position; see, for instance Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils and Clover Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft," *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 753–783.

6. On *habitus*, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

and diversion, poetry and exploration, Hamilton reconceives the tradition of the tableau vivant in terms of a gestural and tactile aesthetics. Discussing both early and recent work, this interview explores the scope of Hamilton's oeuvre to draw out her perspective on staging live human beings in the contemporary art context.[7] The artist discusses the preparation of participants, the building of trust in collaboration, and the production of atmosphere that is so distinctive to her practice.

JIM DROBNICK Your installations have often featured the presence of a live individual that, in effect, undermines the viewer's ability to assume a traditional aesthetic posture of distance and autonomy. How integral is this disruption to your practice?

ANN HAMILTON That subject/object displacement and the breaking down of that distanced viewer is an invitation to enter. To enter the space of the installation is to be implicated in its relationships—what I have come to call a "withness." Like touch, which is always reciprocal, the presence of a person complicates any expectations an audience or visitor may walk in with. What is your position as an observer, witness, voyeur, agent? Where are you asked to stand? Are you supposed to speak with this figure? Early on I thought about this in an emotional and psychological sense as a demonstration of how one is simultaneously subject, object, witness to oneself. More recently I have come to think about how the action or activity of the attendant is demonstrative in relationship to the other elements and agencies in the project. Where the installations, structured by a single figure engaged in a repetition of acts, assumed a mobile audience, more recent works have included benches and seats to make a place inside the landscape of the work for everyone to stop, rest, and take time. In the case of *the event of a thread* at the Armory and *habitus* at the Philadelphia Pier, benches were specially built and placed around the exterior of the Drill Hall and Pier respectively.

JENNIFER FISHER The individuals stationed in your installations are typically engaged in enigmatic, repetitive actions. Sometimes the tasks seem related to the materials comprising the work, such as *again, still, yet* (2016) where performers weave on a giant loom or unravel sweaters, while at other times the actions seem somewhat incongruous, such as the erasing of books in *indigo blue*. How do you choose the tasks for performers?

AH The live action or task is specific in each piece in the same sense that the architecture and the materials and their relations are specific. Perhaps consistent across some of the projects is how the tasks engage forms of reading: for example, the printed concordance scrolls in *the event of a thread* were read out loud by two readers side by side, to each other and to the pigeons on the table who they addressed beside them. Rather than reading line by line, it became a kind of improvisatory duet or an act of composition between them, which could be heard via a low-watt radio broadcast to receivers hand-carried in paper bags and circulating with the moving visitors. Much earlier, the books in *tropos* were read line by line with a hot stylus that marked the path of the reader by singeing and burning the paper. Like acts in other projects that linked unmaking with making, this reading and marking was also a form

7. This interview combines several discussions the authors have had with the artist in 1997, 2006, and 2019 done in preparation for the exhibition *CounterPoses* (1998), Hamilton's involvement with *Do Me!* (2006), and for this publication in *RACAR*. See www.displaycult.com/index.html?list=exhibitions.

of erasure. The unravelling of the sweaters in *habitus* could also be described as the making of a hole or a space, and was located in the installation facing across the space to another figure who prepared and spun yarn from raw fleece.

JF Performers reside in these situations for long periods. Their attitude recalls certain kinds of meditative techniques of "turning within" that come from focusing on repetitive actions. What feedback have you received from the volunteers that have performed in your works? What states of mind do they experience?

AH The duration—of several hours or an afternoon—has varied from project to project but is intrinsic to the experience. For me, and I believe this has been shared by the people I have worked with, the experience ranges from absolute attention to tedium and boredom, from discomfort to exhilaration. A friend who was a regular attendant in an early project shared with me how sitting still on the wall—at first uncomfortable—became a gift of time. The opportunity to not be "doing," but to instead be daydreaming, was something that the task offered up. It was a kind of spaciousness of thought and time that is hard to give oneself in our purpose-driven world.

People mostly communicate to me things they overhear. Or they speak about, "this occurred to me ..." or "I understood this about the piece because once you're in it, all of a sudden it's live and ...." There's a different kind of understanding that comes out of being in the piece itself. It's not until you're in the installation that the layers really start to come up. For *tropos* at the Dia Art Foundation, which was a piece that was up for a long time, there were about six or seven people who were scheduled for the opening hours once or twice a week. Some did it for the whole nine months. There was a certain regularity. It was a job. A job of reading and being.

We had to find a way to decompress and make the transition from the New York City street to the space of the piece. What they decided to do was to come an hour early and sweep the floor. It became a way to slow down and to ready oneself to be in it. It was difficult to just come in, sit down, and say to yourself, "OK, now I am inside, now I am performing!" This is a distinction in attitude. You have to prepare yourself to be present to the immediacy of the task and the space, and all the sameness and all the subtle shifts in the atmosphere of the day. One needs to be very present to be able to do it, because that really is the experience. It isn't a performance, it is a being present and perhaps, by demonstration, an invitation to the visitor to occupy that same space of attention as well. It can become an awareness of subtleties: of how you breathe, how you hold your hands, where you focus, what you're thinking about, the light in the room, the presence of a visitor you can't see—a felt awareness of how each moment is different in its sameness. Audra Wolowiec, an artist who was the almost full-time animator of the project with the bell carriage at the Guggenheim (*human carriage*, 2009), had a much more complicated task of putting the project's mechanical system into motion and feeling and responding to the energy in the space to orchestrate its rhythms. Unlike earlier seated silent attendants, she interacted to some degree with people in conversation and had the task of the system's operation but also maintaining a sense of privacy and self-containment while being available to the public.

JD Volunteering in the art context provides a model for expanding one's own practice beyond the individual creator.

AH Early on, the making of the projects relied on the work of many volunteers. The laying of the 750,000 pennies into a skin of honey at Capp Street (*privation and excesses*, 1989), the candle sooting of the walls at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle (*accountings*, 1992), the setting of the linotype floor at LA MOCA (*capacity of absorption*, 1988), the assembling of the cut up book blocks for the Guggenheim project. As budgets have grown, it has been possible to remunerate everyone for their time. But volunteer or paid, the experience of the shared labour, the elbow-to-elbow of working by hand side-by-side has had a sociability that I have found deeply satisfying: the cadences of falling in and out of conversation encapsulated by the intense short duration of a temporary project. The process is conversational and I often involve the whole team in the discussions as decisions are being made about aspects of the work. Gathering around food is central. In complex projects I try to sense what someone likes to do and give them responsibility for that, and I always take it as a sign the project is going well when someone gives me a task and tells me what to do.

But my role is complicated and multiple: director, organizer, fellow worker. More recently, I have learned from working with SITI Company and director Anne Bogart how a theatre structure works and that has been tremendously helpful. I worked with the actors and students of their training in the Armory project and, although I was present every day, for most of the day someone full-time was there for the writers and readers and singers who took shifts in the project. It was important everyone be comfortable and taken care of; it was important that someone was there to talk with as they came in and out of the piece. I don't know that I have always completely succeeded but have tried and it is important to me to recognize everyone's contribution both personally and publicly. Just as the installation invites the viewer "inside," so too the process invites but also necessitates a dedication. For many years I felt a lot of guilt about not staying in contact with every person involved in a project and was confused about where responsibility to the relationship continued or ended. This is where obligation and the gift economy get messy. As I have gotten older I am more comfortable with trusting how work—intensely shared—is ultimately an intersection in time to be fully acknowledged but not to become a weight.

Every project results from processes that demand different kinds of relationships. For example, the recent photography work and how the camera and photographer and subject and the image interact through a semi-transparent membrane is wholly different than the installation work, even though it also unfolds in public.

JF In the experiments in community building that you've achieved, how do you value the exercising of affiliations?

AH I love what happens. It really makes you feel excited, alive, connected. Wonderful, serendipitous things happen.

JD I have tried to talk to performers in two of your installations and none offered any reaction. How have other beholders acted in terms of this encounter?

AH The assumption is that if you're sitting in a public space, you should be available to give information, but they are not there to offer information or explanation. What the work does is make a private space—a solitary space—in public … a sense of being alone together. It frustrates the hell out of some people. You can't enter into that individual's subjective space but there are subtle silent ways to register the acknowledgement of someone. We communicate with more than our speech. I suppose that is the contradiction in the early work: on the one hand there is a material absorption, an invitation to enter, yet there, in the figure's silence, entry with words is refused. You can only witness.

JF So there's an imaginative leap where you have to empathetically "identify" with the participant, but at the same time remain detached as a witness.

AH In the early installation it was hard for me to see the work unless I was in it. In many ways those pieces were optimally made for one person to see at a time. They were radically changed by the presence people brought with them into the space. What I hoped for was the presence of the activity, or live element, to set a tone, or be an example that invited the audience to join in the concentration. Perhaps that was optimistic on my part. The more recent work has given way to motion and rhythm and another kind of landscape.

JD Do you expect people to sit down and be still with the attendant?

AH Perhaps not to sit down but to slow down and to pay attention not only to what is there but also to your own presence in space. It's always interesting to me how much one can understand about a person by how they open a door or pass through a threshold. Even if you can't see them, so much of a person is immediately present.

JF This speaks to a rethinking of the notion of the senses in aesthetic practice. You've talked about the room as a skin, as an extension of the body. And much of your work involves negotiating space, smelling things, engaging with all of the senses.

AH I think a lot about forms of tactility and how we know things through touch and embodied experience. One ongoing challenge is to find form for the ways vision, which can so consume the world, can become tactilized. The value of the body's felt experience and the importance of sensory knowledge is increasingly acknowledged but cultural habits that privilege rationality and language-based experience over other forms of knowing die hard. My work explores those relations and hierarchies.

JD There is a complexity in your work, where different kinds of semiotic and sensory systems are enacted simultaneously—indexes, traces, objects, living people—you have a "systems" kind of approach, which makes links and connections between representation and performance, materials and language.

AH And I want it to be visual enough so that people will remain long enough to allow the experiential layers to come to the surface. Our bodies lead us. Our feet and skin know things long before we can form language around them. We are both insides and outsides; we are both containers and contained; we are in the process of growth and decay; we are motion and stillness. We think

Figures 1–2. Ann Hamilton, *tropos* (1993), installation views at Dia Center for the Arts, New York; materials: translucent industrial glass windows, gravel topped with concrete, horsehair, table, chair, electric buren, books, recorded voice, audiotape player, speakers. Photos: Thibault Jeanson, courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

Figure 3. Ann Hamilton, *indigo blue* (1991/2007), installation view at Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival (1991), Charleston; materials: blue work clothing, steel and wood base, wood table, chair, light bulb, books (military regulation manuals, blue bindings), saliva, pink pearl erasers, erasures, net sack, soybeans. Photo: John McWilliams, © and courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

in and through our bodies, and our language, our metaphors, are of this experience.

JF By what name do you refer to the individuals in your installations, and do they undergo any training for their role?

AH The designation "performer" is easy to use. Everyone will recognize it not only as an activity but as a role. More nuanced is the descriptor "attendant." In containing the word "attend," it functions as both noun and verb, object and action, which for me is more demonstrative of the position.

Training or preparing someone to be in a work is relatively informal and more of a conversation than anything else. Most often, the people in the pieces are those that have helped make it. There is already an existing relationship to the work. What I try to do is very intuitive. Someone comes in, they're helping with the work and I sense that they have a kind of self-contained presence that's necessary to perform or inhabit the work. I trust that and then ask them, "Would you be interested?" I share my intention and my own experiences being in installations, and what might happen for them. I emphasize that it's important that they're not doing it for me, they're not performing, but that they have to find their own way to be in the installation. Just as the pieces are built out of many different hands doing the same thing a little bit differently: that is what helps to makes the installation alive.

Keeping the piece perpetually alive to meet the convention of gallery or museum hours is a challenge for this kind of work, and I have been confused about how to structure time when the context maintains the conventions of a perpetual present that an object on display might have. How the gesture is enacted is often a work's centre. Over-performing or being self-consciously precious can undermine the work. Everything is in "how" something is done—it is subtle, like touch. What I hope to make is a condition both attendant and visitor can share. What creates a sense of participation that may not necessarily be interaction? This is the real question.

JD It almost seems that the ideal situation is a one-to-one relationship between the attendant and viewer.

AH That may have been true with the early installations but in the later works there is no singular, ideal situation. This changed with works that began to take on entire architectures, such as the projects at the Venice Biennale (*myein*, 1999), Mass MoCA (*corpus*, 2003), and of course more recently at the Armory and Fabric Workshop Pier installations. Perhaps this has been the influence of having worked on two public park projects with my husband Michael Mercil and our collabourations with landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh at Teardrop Park in NYC and at Riverfront Park in Pittsburgh. With these works I began to think much more about civic space and the work as landscape.

JF An interesting aspect of your work has to do with the belief or trust necessary on the part of the participants as a way of bringing coherence to the group.

AH In both the making and public manifestation of the work, TRUST is the core. Trust of people, trust of process.

JF How do you negotiate your leadership role?

AH In some ways a work, when made public, channels and contains the energy of its making and so the relationships internal to its making are not separate from what it becomes. It was a challenge for me to learn to become the director—all my impulses were to be on the floor working side by side with everyone on the repetitive hand labour. The work is still being made, a project is still forming, and decisions have to come from and be informed by standing inside the process. That's where I do my thinking—physically working with everybody. That's where I learn. That's the conversation I love. On the other hand I have to choreograph, direct, and organize. In big projects it's been hard, because of the need to oversee the many other aspects of a project: to help develop writing, to be public and present for other institutional needs. I'm happiest when I'm doing the physical labour that's necessary for the work along with everyone else. I'm very frustrated when I can't be in that position. It is part of trusting and allowing the process to evolve organically in response to what is happening. It is live—we are always flying, always by the seat of our pants. That's how things get done. Sometimes everyone's paid, sometimes it's all volunteers, but it's still a "gift economy," in terms of asking people to have a relationship with the work. It's a lot to ask and it takes time.

JD That forming of a relationship breaks down the detachment we are acculturated to maintain when viewing art. Instead of separation, your work asks for involvement. Are you interested in restorative behaviour, that these actions be held as therapeutic in some sense? Does it attract individuals who are searching for some kind of resolution or some kind of care?

AH I am uncomfortable with therapeutic vocabulary but I do think the processes can be meditative, calming—perhaps restorative. Research shows that repetitive cross-hemisphere manual activities release serotonin, and serotonin makes us feel good. Early on I was insistent not to make claims for what the work "does" in order to refuse the notion of the work as a form of redemption, either cultural or personal. Over time I have grown to be more comfortable leading a project and thinking about how it might offer a site of care.

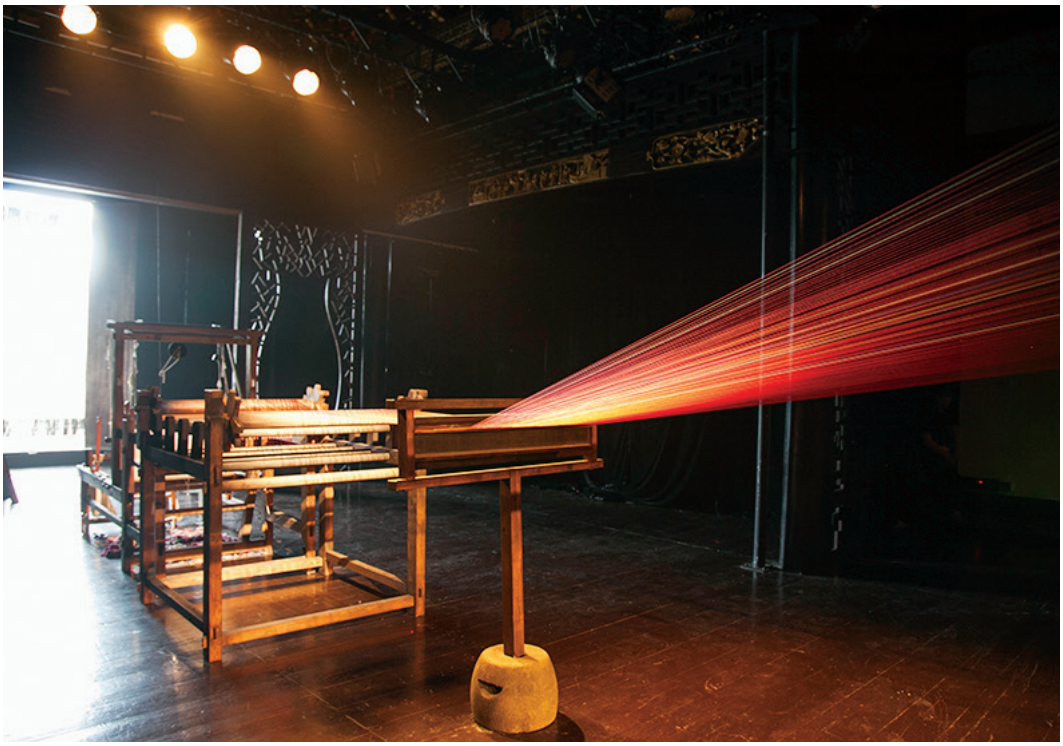
JF Your work, however, is feminist in the sense that the context is foregrounded, rather than merely the action or performance. It inverts the relation with the central power figure.

AH When I began working 40 years ago the word "intersectional" was not in use but it is tremendously useful now as the work has always at its core been relational and contingent. I've also tried to protect and trust the process. It's like trying to protect an interior space but also to share its intimacies.

JD Is there a risk to placing oneself in a vulnerable position in public space? Have you experienced situations where the attendants have been at risk?

AH Never. In a lot of ways you are completely in control of the space. Placing oneself on display has a vulnerability that is real but it is the visitors that are often made nervous or intimidated. It's a transgression to be in public in that state of mind, to be inside a space and not available.

Figure 4. Ann Hamilton, *malediction* (1992), installation views at Louver Gallery, New York; materials: 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 Ann Hamilton Studio.



Figures 5–6. Ann Hamilton, *again, still, yet* (2016), installation views at Wuzhen International Art Exhibition, Wuzhen. Photos: Niko Dimitrijevic (top) and Cameron Sharp (bottom), courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

JD To what degree does the audience's response rely on the etiquette of museum-going?

AH The work both relies upon it and tries to interrupt it. There was a time when I was doing *malediction* in New York. In this work as in other works the person (me in this case) has their back to the audience when they walk in. It's not a confrontational relationship, you join the person rather than face them as you enter. One time there were two guys, and I was in the space that day myself, and they were being obnoxious—throwing the fabric around and making a lot of noise. I wanted to say, "Just leave." But the project was not about oral speech, so I took the dough out of my mouth and threw it at them. They left. It felt good but perhaps I too was being a bit obnoxious.

JF That underscores the distinction between the performative role of the attendant and the role of conventional gallery attendants who have to be available.

JD There's a gestural openness to the work, too: the actions of the performers seem to go on interminably, unlike the enacting of a script with a beginning, middle, and end.

AH The time in my installations has an ongoingness, a perpetual present. The durational structure is part of what I might describe as the experience of being completely present in the here-and-now and also completely somewhere else.

JD Several of the gestures performed by the attendants seem to indicate a distrust of language, such as those pieces where books are being erased or burned, such as in *indigo blue* or *tropos*. These acts of destroying language bear a certain poignancy and symbolism, but how would you distinguish them from gestures of anti-intellectualism, such as book burnings?

AH I know some people who witnessed the erasure of books were quite angry. Oh, my god—what a transgression! But if you paid attention to how it was being done, you might recognize it also as a marking, and marking is a form of making, which is how I think about it. The gestures are always acts of transformation. If you're going to destroy a book, you're not going to take the time to read it line by line. The meaning of the work is in how the acts are done. In *indigo blue* the books—military publications outlining the legal regulations that govern the territory between land and sea—were erased from back to front with a pink pearl eraser and the saliva of the attendant working. The labour left a trace of the body but cleared the page of printed type.

JD In order to rewrite history...

AH Not to rewrite but to make a clearing, and in making a clearing to account for what is absent in history. For *tropos* I selected books that didn't have titles or chapter headings. I didn't want the particular book and its narrative to become important. Instead, if you looked over the shoulder of the attendant there were no narrative clues—just a classic page of printed text. For the project at the ICA in Philadelphia, *lumen* (1995), it was a big leap for me to have intentional words. The words cut out of the curtain read "A voice from the exterior opens and closes to reveal and conceal the hand." When the curtain was pulled open, the words become legible on the background wall. This happened when

the attendant, seated across the space and operating a prosthetic wooden hand, caught and pulled a metal ring attached to the end of the curtain rope.

JF In an individualist society, suspicions can be aroused when alternate kinds of social groupings are created and experimented with. Individualism is perhaps most evident in the mythology of the artist. How do you see your practice negotiating these myths?

AH The structures and processes that form the underpinning of my work all come from textiles and are interdependent, relational, and cooperative. In a woven cloth, many individual warps and wefts intersect to make a larger cloth. Every cloth is an example of a coordinated social fabric. Knitting is the same way. Each loop of yarn is pulled through the loop that came before it and, like a choir of individual singers, a knitted fabric is the outcome of coordinated harmony.

JF You have mentioned the influence of your mother's volunteer work. I find it interesting how your work shifts the scale of what might be construed as women's domestic labour and makes it public, even gigantic, in the museum context.

AH Both my mother and my grandmother taught me to knit, embroider, and sew. The work was at the scale of the lap and the gesture the reach of the hand. From them I learned the power of small accretions becoming big acts. I watched the individual loops on the knitting needle form a blanket, the individual stitches of the sewing machine join two flat pieces into a three-dimensional shape. If shaped cloth is the first architecture of the body then it isn't such a leap to architecture itself. The process of making is a little bit like sewing: you work the surface of what is close at hand—visible, knowable, immediately tactile—but you stick your needle down through the cloth into the immense space below—a space large or small that you cannot see. Perhaps making is the process of bringing what is hidden or obscured in that space up to the surface for it to be knowable.

JF Your tableaux seem to make a lot of demands on the sponsoring institutions. How do you sense the limits of their capabilities?

AH Every project is a form of collabouration with the people and the conditions of the institutions I work with. My job is to ask "What if?" But also to ask "What is here?" "What is the situation asking of me?" I aim to push against the edge of possibility—in myself but also in the condition that I find. But my job is also to be able to intuit and understand where the edges are. When I don't understand or read these conditions it can be difficult. The work or the process might need something that the situation cannot provide or support, and the work's need might be perceived as a critique of an existing structure. Yes, the work is demanding—it requires care. It requires time. It requires resources. It requires a relationship. It requires devotion. I have found that willingness, that understanding, and that capacity and then some in almost every situation. People want to help and are inherently generous. Institutions bend.

JD Do you consider the individuals in the work, the attendants, to be objects or another material?

Figures 7–9. Ann Hamilton, *habitus* (2016), installation views at Municipal Pier 9, Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. Photos: Thibault Jeanson, courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

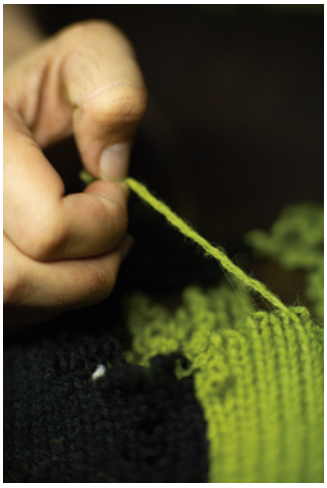


Figure 10. Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread* (2013), installation view at Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photo: Marika Wachtmeister, courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

Figures 11–12. Ann Hamilton, *the event of a thread* (2013), detail of record lathe at Park Avenue Armory, New York. Photo: Thibault Jeanson, courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

AH The individuals in the work are attendants, are agents, are dignified, are human. When still and on display, they may occupy an objectifying position but how they offer themselves in that position is to me a demonstration of beauty, vulnerability, and strength. When I did *indigo blue* in Charleston, where the attendant erased books, someone came in to see the piece and was livid. "You are taking advantage of people. You're like a fascist." They were very aggressive about the position of the person in the piece and their interpretation was very much at odds with the empathy that was my intention. Such an extreme and immediate reaction emerged from their own experience, not from the conditions of the work.

JF It's ambiguous enough to be open for projection. This brings up for me the similarities between the attendant and the artist's model, as a different kind of performance. As an artist's model, a person is objectified, but still has an interior life that no one knows about. Once a model sees how they've been rendered, what becomes evident is how creativity gets played out in projections upon a person.

AH I suppose the task is to be made aware of and to understand how we project our own experience or expectations upon what we see and how we perceive. You may not be able to enter anyone else's subjectivity but empathy is always a possibility and its lack is a crisis of our time.

JD Interpretative projections especially apply to the repetitive actions that the individuals in your installations perform. Some critics have observed that the attendants act like mere automatons, display compulsive behaviours, or suffer some kind of disciplinary behaviour.

AH I am puzzled by this response in the sense that all of the acts are familiar, quotidian, and in some ways mild domestic tasks. Their repetition in the work shifts the functional to the ritualistic and to other readings but I think it is important to remember that the experience of the person engaged in the piece may be and very likely is different from someone describing it. What matters is the intentionality with which something is done. It's the "how" things are done that I come back to again and again. It's not a symbolic presence, it's an active one. But the gestures are certainly open to multiple interpretations. That's the risk I take.

JD That's inherent to performing, basically.

AH A lot of these concerns are from very early work when the person was immobile and silent and are not questions that have occupied me for a long time. I was asked then: are they mannequins, are they alive, and is this a trick like the guards at Buckingham Palace? In a project at the Whitney Philip Morris, where the walls were covered in paprika, a person sat quietly on a chair attached to the wall, holding a metronome. This didn't generate any of the negative reactions I experienced with the person in Charleston. Even there most of the response was positive but I do remember some anecdotes from this New York project. A woman entered, walked across the room, and said, "You can't fool me. I saw the Duane Hanson show. I know you're not alive." Another woman remarked to the attendant, "This is supposed to be a sculpture show. You're alive, so you must be a sculpture. I think I'll be a sculpture

today too." She was in her seventies, with white gloves and a purse, and had an obvious sense of humour. Later, five or six meter maids who were working the beat around Grand Central Station came in and matter-of-factly asked: "So what's the deal, here, are you really alive?"

When gesture entered the work, everything changed. The question of endurance loomed and I was challenged about how time could become a material of the work. Examples of Chris Burden's work were raised, as was the theatre work of Robert Wilson, which was an important influence. The early pieces did have an endurance aspect because I was interested in maintaining the image for the duration of time imposed by institutional hours. There are some early tableaux with more than one person. *detour* (1984), a work done in graduate school, had five people in it. Each was placed in physical predicaments with a mass of material. A figure sat at each end of a wood table with a large pile of feathers in the middle. They wore harnesses that suspended open blade fans oriented not toward the feathers but into their faces. There was an inability to communicate but the real element of danger was the unprotected blades spinning so close to the faces.

A person and the porch swing they sat on were covered in a blanket of burdocks. They sat rocking back and forth while another stood with a catchers' mitt worn as a facemask, with an automatic tennis ball machine firing balls toward them. The fifth person stood up to the shins in a large pile of gravel supporting a tall wood ladder on their shoulders. The positions were uncomfortable and physically demanding and carried a sense of threat. I was interested in maintaining the image, but in denial about the demands necessary to do so. A big shift occurred when I understood I was less interested in maintaining the fiction of the perpetually present image and more interested in the quality of the experience. This moved the attention toward gesture and motion, although bodies in material predicaments continued for quite a while. It takes a long time to walk across the room and into one's next questions.

JF Could the attitude of a performer's non-interactivity with the audience be read as a meditative state or a kind of autistic withdrawal?

AH At the time I don't think I thought of it as either meditative or autistic. I thought of the stillness and silence as a form of active attention and even a form of voice.

JD Your work deals significantly with the poetry of materials, yet is there not an ethics of materials as well? I'm thinking of the masses of materials that typify your installations. Even though some materials, for instance the horse's manes strewn across the floor in *tropos*, are recycled, how can they be distinguished from the industrial processes that created them, or from displays such as those at the Holocaust Museum, which carry the affect of unspeakable tragedy?

AH The materials, their processes of production, and their histories are at the centre of the work. The familiar is put to work in unfamiliar contexts and relations. Things are physically literal but abstract in their relations. The 750,000 pennies laid one by one into a skin of honey comprised the main element in *privation and excesses* at Capp Street. The budget—literalized in the copper coins, the product of a human economy—represented an abstraction of value used

in monetary exchange, the honey was a product of an animal economy, and the sheep who lived in the back of the space were the live witnesses to the display. At the side, two mortar and pestle machines wound mechanically away. One wearing down human and animal teeth, the other abrading but not wearing down a handful of pennies. The multiple inherited social and economic histories of each of the material elements cannot be separated from the work. Their narrative constitutes some of the work's relations and those speak to the complicated, emotional, and sometimes fraught co-dependence of people and animals.

Afterward, the sheep went back to the ranch, the floor and pennies were washed, and the coins counted and reconstituted as legal tender to pay for the costs of the work. The excess was donated to a local school. But not all projects are so clean. Some elements are saved and are artifacts of the time, some of the materials are thrown away, some recycled or returned to the larger industrial systems they were lifted or borrowed from.

JF Your work courts and undermines the suspicion of mixing politics and poetics … it's politics conducted at the level of the visceral and tangible.

AH It has been easier for me to articulate the poetics than it has been to articulate the politics. The form of the work is turned toward the democratic and toward the value of tactile embodied experience.

JD Is it true that the inclusion of attendants ceased in your work for a time? If so, what informed the decision to stop using attendants, and why were they brought back?

AH Yes, for many years the work did not include a living presence. Perhaps the experience of live works in other forms satisfied the need I felt for doing this work. I worked on a dance collabouration with choreographer Meg Stuart, two theatre projects with Meredith Monk, and began to work on more public projects in civic spaces. The tower with a double helical staircase built with Oliver Ranch in California came from my questioning the traditional face-to-face tradition of performer and audience and built a condition in which they are spatially wound. When the figure re-entered the installation work it benefitted from these experiences and came as a necessity for the project. Perhaps most overtly in the project at the Armory in New York where I worked with SITI company and where shifts of readers, writers, and singers animated the daily life of the project.

JF In the early works, a single performer usually laboured within the installation. More recent works, however, include several types of persons engaging in actions. For instance, *the event of a thread* incorporated readers, singers, writers, and record makers, all doing their tasks simultaneously. Does this complexity change the focus of the beholder?

AH Yes, the singular has given way to the multiple and to another kind of complexity and perhaps too to another kind of openness. From rooms to whole architectures and from binary relations to mobile shifting ones, the form of the work continues to change. Accompanying this, I have a sense that we pay attention when at least three things are going on simultaneously …

that a form of focus rather than distraction occurs in their overlapping attentions, and in this more open and expanded field there is room for the viewer to find their own relation within and to the whole.

JD In *habitus* and *the event of a thread*, visitors become more than just passive viewers. They have the opportunity to physically engage with aspects of the installations. What changed in your practice to create such participatory roles? Are the participants a complement or a contrast to the attendants?

AH I don't think I ever consciously said to myself that I wanted to create more participatory work. Perhaps it grew from the question "How do I make a condition people can enter—can join—can be alone together?" *the event of a thread* was a response to research about the building history and civic space in America. The swings were a gift of the truss system in the architecture. When we suspended the first test swing in the space—hanging from almost 80 feet—the sense of suspension was nothing like a swing on a playground. Low on the pendulum, it felt more like flying across than pivoting up and down. It made us all smile. It took our weight—our hearts fell open. Collectively the swings, suspended from overhead, were also connected via rope and pulley in pairs across the space—the collective motion of the swings set the cloth into a dynamic rising and falling, separating but joining the two halves of the Drill Hall. The entire space was breathing. Bracketing this field of motion were the still and more solitary figures. At one end, reading to the pigeons, and at the far end facing the newly opened view to Lexington Avenue, a solitary writer whose only view of the space was from an overhead mirror also linked to the curtain and rotating up and down as a consequence of its movement.

JF Beyond the installations, you have also created performances that stand alone without an installation, such as operas, concerts, readings, dances, and theatre. What do you consider to be the difference between a performer in an installation and one on a proscenium stage?

AH All of the work is the structuring of nearness and farness and is a response to the conditions of a space proscenium or otherwise. Working most recently with Anne Bogart and SITI company on a project based on the reading of Virginia Woolf, we approached the entire theatre as the space of the work. We asked ourselves: How can the experience of reading—the solitary experience of sitting still and reading quietly—become the shared spaciousness of theatre? When we read, we are simultaneously in the far-away world of the book and in the immediacy of the close at hand. They are two opposite but simultaneous intimacies. The stitching together of the two became the structure of the project. And the theatre in this case was approached like an installation space but working with trained actors is an incredible experience and wholly different than working with untrained participants.

JD In some recent installations like *habitus*, there is a prominent curatorial aspect in which performers are accompanied by numerous artifacts that have been gathered and arranged into an exhibition. In what ways does curating things differ from curating people?

AH The opportunities to work with museum or institutional collection objects came through considering the sites where I was working. A project always begins with understanding and asking: "What is here?" A project will always evolve in response to what is found, whether that is people, systems, histories, architectures, or objects. At the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle—beyond the building of the museum and its collection—were many other special and natural history collections in the university. I began to think about how those collections might become the material of the work in the same way that back at Capp Street I had thought about how the budget might become the material of the work. The work continues to be responsive to places and processes that the different circumstances or conditions offer or invite. What is found shapes the questions. What informs the questions is always the question … what is here, what is present but perhaps not visible or shareable, what is needed, how is it alive?

What we have not discussed is when and how the live figure first entered the work and perhaps at the end it is important to return to this. I was in graduate school, taking an American Studies class on the cultural constructions of the body, thinking about context and camouflage, the animate and the inanimate. What makes something alive? In this context, I was in the studio diligently painting hundreds of wood toothpicks black—leaving their tips unpainted and gluing them into a man's dark wool suit. I finished the pants, the jacket; it grew heavy with the weight of the dense accumulation on the surface. But I was confused as to what it was and how to display it: on an armature, wall, or floor as an object, or at the suggestion of a peer to simply wear it. She said to me: "You are an armature, why don't you just wear it?" That question set the path for the immediate present and consequently the experience of wearing it—standing, exposed as a stilled but living presence inside its animate skin—for the next years. Initially, an objectified figure standing in the middle of an empty room gave way to considering the architecture of the room, its space and its surround as a skin. The room became the body and the space within which I made different tableaux—or installations—and in which the animate and inanimate were brought into relations. A living bush sat in front of a window, a person sat on the wall encrusted with dead painted sticks. I was perplexed as to what to call this work. Performance? Tableau? Installation? Living Art? But I knew the sense of time and atmosphere within the works—the sense of something alive, of the animate—influenced my thinking and form as I responded to working in other contexts and architectures. A live presence was one way for me to bring into the public life of the work the ongoing process of its making and to see the juncture when a project opens as not a completion but another beginning. I asked: How can the exhibition space of an institution based on preservation and storage be made alive? Beyond showing artifacts, I want to share the attentions, energies, and unknowns of the process. ¶