



SWING STATE

From her Ohio studio,
Ann Hamilton
conceives a major project
for New York

BY KAREN ARCHY

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ROWING UP IN PLACID, conservative, rural northeastern Ohio, I understood contemporary art to mean Salvador Dalí, Picasso, and the

Impressionists. Artists were men touched by God, divinely talented and stricken with personality disorders. They were outsiders whose only curative was the insulating effect of alcohol and narcotics, along with artistic practice itself. As a small-town girl who didn't fit into what I perceived to be small-town life, I willed myself to be part of this group.

A few years later, I'm a full-fledged art professional. I no longer harbor any

delusions that the art world exists to serve unique minds. My peers and I have become inured to the fact that 95 percent of the art world is, in essence, an industry, and as inclusive as anything I was trying to escape.

At nearly 30, after losing my job, I found myself moving back to my parents' house in Ohio for the summer, laboring over freelance writing commissions in my teenage bedroom. I'm surrounded by Renoir posters depicting bourgeois domesticity, Monet's gardens, and a crudely painted man on a bridge, mouth agape, his hands on his cheeks, screaming into a crimson and azure oblivion. I don't bother asking how I got here. I already know.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Installation
view of
bearings, 1996.

BELOW:
Installation
view of
tropos, 1993.





FROM TOP:
Installation view
of *voce*, 2006.

Untitled,
1992. Book,
stones,
lacquered
birch, glass,
3½ x 38½ x 9¼ in.

But how, I wonder, did Ann Hamilton, one of Ohio's most famous artists, end up back here? In 1991, when Hamilton was in her mid-thirties and had already earned a solid round of international acclaim for her installations, she moved from California, where she taught at U.C. Santa Barbara, to Columbus, Ohio, where she still lives and works today. Her decision to move was an act of groping—for happiness, for practical solutions, and for career longevity.

"As an artist you want a lifelong practice," Hamilton tells me. "That's also part of being here. Having this much space allows a lot of things to happen that would be more difficult somewhere else. Here you can fill up and listen to yourself."

Hamilton and her husband, the artist Michael Mercil, purchased a large former linotype studio in Columbus's Merion Village neighborhood, gradually rehabbing the space over two decades. Although it may seem idyllic to some, Hamilton's time in Ohio hasn't been all sunshine and roses. "I think people have this fantasy that we have all the time in the world. We don't, we're super busy. It's as busy here as anywhere." Five years ago she stopped working with her longtime gallerist, Sean Kelly, and is now unrepresented, pooling income streams from a teaching job at Ohio State University, exhibition fees, grants, occasional sales, and lecture honoraria. About leaving the conventional

market model, Hamilton explains, "It was really me just feeling like I didn't fit. Maybe what's good for the work and for me was not going to work in that system. In many ways there's a part of stepping out that is very humbling, because you really do step out. I had no complaints about my relationship with Kelly, except that I didn't think it was where the work was going." Evidently, Hamilton intends to continue with her expansive installation-based projects rather than make smaller, more collectible works.

Known for installations that evaluate and intertwine aural, social, or spatial histories, Hamilton for decades has utilized the expertise of members of her local community. She employs grad students and engineers associated with nearby Ohio State as collaborators. An avid reader, she has a particular interest in communication, inscription, and transmission devices—the stylus, the two-way radio, Thomas Jefferson's polygraph duplicating device, and so forth—and employs them in her work to give voice to various texts.

Hamilton reads the spaces in which she works, their social and physical histories, and often chooses to tell the story of the marginalia associated with these spaces or to say what might otherwise go unsaid. In *myein*, her project for the American pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale, she countered the social history embodied in

the building's Jeffersonian architecture—namely that of slavery—by installing a semi-obstructive glass wall in front of it to impede the onlooker's view, and by rendering in oversize Braille a poem by the Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff on its walls. Hamilton engineered the structure's ceilings to cry incarnadine red powder down onto the raised Braille,

“portal” series, initiated in 1998, or the following year's monochromatic self-portraits cropping her face to just her mouth, sprouted with horsehair (*Untitled*, 2000).

While Hamilton often uses text and inscription devices to make legible histories that have been erased by time, the artist also “unmakes” text in

words, to overcome language.

Such interrelated sensorial components have remained characteristic of Hamilton's practice for nearly two decades. Rather than elucidate meaning pedagogically—or step-by-step, in the etymological sense of the term—Hamilton forges meaning via experiential cues, no doubt an increasingly democratic mode of artmaking. In our conversation Hamilton wonders, “How do you make a project that allows everyone to enter and become interior to it? Because if you become interior to it, that space of maybe allowing yourself to trust your experience can come forward.” She continues, “I think it's really about empathy. If we have any crisis socially, we have a crisis of empathy. So to enter into something is to enter into a relation, which is an empathetic position.”

While Hamilton's work has frequently considered our relationship to physical space, in recent years the artist has meditated on the interaction of multiple bodies existing together in social space, often using the quotidian staple of cloth as a metaphor for social and cultural connectivity. Her motorized curtain projects, such as *appeals*, 2003, at the Istanbul Biennial, or *volumen*, 1995, at the Art Institute of Chicago, use specially designed cloth on ceiling-mounted tracks to alter one's perception of the gallery space. In *volumen* she uses translucent white curtains to obstruct the view of the audience, partitioning visitors off from their surroundings, whereas for *appeals*, opaque blue curtains open and close portals leading into corridors.

Her installation debuting this month at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City focuses on the concept of communality. “I've been working on some projects that have been incredibly weird and awkward, but I'm trying to figure out how to make a condition for people to stand and speak together,” the artist says. Titled *the event of a thread* and installed in the Armory's enormous drill hall, the piece includes a field of swings hung from the space's ceiling. Their chains attach to a system of ropes strung to a giant white cloth that undulates in tandem with the swings' movement. Two readers recite improvised texts to a flock of 42 pigeons, their voices relayed via radio transmitter to handheld devices that viewers can carry through the venue. Two writers seated at desks occupy opposite ends of the hall. Each night a singer will close the exhibition with a song that is cut onto vinyl, live. On subsequent mornings the previous night's songs are replayed.

Back at her studio, Hamilton shares



making accessible the text, which was patched together from heterogeneous, often violent stories Reznikoff found in American court records from 1885 to 1915.

Hamilton's practice speaks to the necessity of contextualizing, writing, or rewriting the history of those historically marginalized, be they women or any other group. The beginning of a 1975 essay, “Laugh of the Medusa,” by the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous comes to mind: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies...Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.” Hamilton's work employs a bevy of materials that revolve around the animal or human body, or the categorical reversal of material usually associated with interiority or exteriority. Take, for instance, her use of her mouth as the shutter for a pinhole camera in her

order to challenge the authority and finitude of historical accounts that are widely assumed to be factual. In her first non-installation, stand-alone works dating from the early 1990s, specifically *Untitled*, 1992, she placed unbound passages from such texts such as Carolus Linnaeus's plant identification system in a vitrine and obscured them by laying small rocks over the words. Hamilton's 1993 installation *tropos* at the Dia Art Foundation in Manhattan similarly unmade text as an act of performance. She installed a sea of horsehair in the vast 22nd Street exhibition space, situating a desk in the center of the gallery where people invited by the artist sat, burning the text out of volumes she chose from New York's famous Strand bookstore. The viewer, walking through the expanse of horsehair and breathing the smoky odor of burning books, also heard the recorded sound of a man with mild aphasia trying to speak—in other

Installation view of *myein*, 1999.



“I’m responding to the Armory’s history. I’m not narrating any of that.”

It’s beautiful. I’m responding to its history, I’m not narrating any of that, but it’s like a landscape of responses to my own set of questions that I bring to these things.”

Perhaps what renders Hamilton unique today is her steadfastness and resistance to trend in the face of an industry in which artworks are treated as commodities, and are thus divorced from the histories in which they were conceived and the social worlds to which they react. Often I hear young artists question their relevance with an inbuilt sense of obsolescence, as if their ideas are as impermanent as the phones they use. Rather than trying to link Hamilton to some trend, it seems to me more pressing to point to figures such as she, who have carved paths for artists to circumvent a gallery system that promotes art unattached to any social responsibility. Hamilton’s words on this

topic are more empathetic than my own. “How do we cultivate a process that is allowing, so that we can be responsive? I do think it’s really hard for women and for men, too,” she says. “How do you trust your own responses and build on those? How do you trust that your responses are legitimate? That you don’t have to work from the third generation of someone else’s idea about something? But then how are you completely rigorous with yourself? It’s this balancing of both.”

Hamilton is a rare figure who, through her own self-rule, strikes the balance between home and travel, the market and integrity, listening and speaking. Through writing her own history and those of others, she has taught us what artistic practice can and should be, and what it means to be human and an artist simultaneously. **MP**

with me her approach to working within a civic space. “The Armory is tied to its military history, but it’s also tied to sociability and camaraderie and a place of gathering. And thinking about that in a larger sense of assembly: How do we gather together? How do we sit face-to-face? What’s the nature of that interaction in a technologically extended, hyper-attached world? And so I feel it in its bones: It’s 19th-century, it’s iron and wood, and it’s material, and it’s fantastic.



FROM TOP:
Ann Hamilton
at the Park
Avenue
Armory,
New York, 2012.

Model of
*the event
of a thread*,
opening
at the Armory
this month.