

SCULPTING IN TIME:  
ANN HAMILTON'S DISTILLATIONS

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tattered white cloth hovers in the air. It flutters in place, then moves forward, backward, forward, inch by inch, as though purposefully, tantalizingly eluding capture. Suddenly—whisk!—the cloth seems to tire of its own game and vanishes. A heavy wooden butcher's block, its surface scratched and rutted sits squarely before a large window. Nearby, a tiny video screen is set into the wall. On its screen an image of a hand incessantly reaches into a pocket filled with honey. Against the fabric of the trouser pocket, the outlines of fingers can be seen, stroking, twisting, reveling in the viscous goo.

The white cloth. The butcher's block. The pocketful of honey. These are elements artist Ann Hamilton uses to invent worlds filled with ideas communicated without words. She has fashioned art from turkey carcasses, eucalyptus leaves, horsehair, hundreds of thousands of pennies, canaries, flour, soot and meat-eating beetles. Her installations—sculptural environments that tantalize the mind through touch, sight, sound and smell—are usually site-specific; often they include plants or animals or a person endlessly performing a repetitive task. There is, for instance, the installation called

*whitecloth*, commissioned in 1998 by the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. In it, as in many of her other works, Hamilton asks that those who view it abandon conditioned ways of responding to art. Instead, she urges audience members to be open to alternative ways of perception. *Don't speak*, her installations seem to say. *Listen to a different sort of language, one that springs not from what you think, but from your experience.* Her works wrestle with the questions: How do we know what we know? How does language affect what we know?

"We live in a culture that privileges something that can be stated in language over other kinds of experiences," Hamilton says. "The language that we are born into structures how we think. This is what I think about: Can you have a thought without language? Isn't thinking how you think it through?"

The artist is a slight, puckish woman with clear blue eyes and a sharp mind that distills ideas as though fed by countless tributaries of information, each beginning at some distant point, then twisting and turning through vastly disparate landscapes, from icebergs and mountain tops to red clay canyons and evergreen forests, until finally meeting, streaming and bubbling, in a bottomless ocean of thought. From this ocean comes art. A graduate of the Yale School of Art, Hamilton does much of her work in Columbus, Ohio, far from the hubbub of the contemporary art world with its galleries and openings, celebrities and wannabes. There she lives with her sculptor husband and her 4-year-old child and makes art that is site-specific but that considers universal issues, that is about language but is not about words.

At 42, Hamilton has created a body of work that includes sculpture, photography and video, though she is best known for her installations. Her creations have appeared at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; DIA Center for the Arts, New York; the Tate Gallery, Liverpool, England; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France; and the Miami Art Museum. In 1991, Hamilton represented the United States at the Sao Paulo Bienal. In 1993 she received a MacArthur Award. And last summer, she rep-

resented the United States at the 48th Venice Biennale, a sort of World's Fair for contemporary art that featured artists from 58 countries. "Her ideas spring from an enormous range of sources," says Harry Philbrick, director of the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art. "Her work is almost like a novel. She weaves together so many strands that all circle around a body of ideas that finally come together. It's poetic."

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At the moment, Hamilton simultaneously is making tea in the Manhattan apartment of art dealer Sean Kelly and trying to describe how she nurtures her mind. She is wearing the requisite artist's uniform of black and black: T-shirt and jeans deeply cuffed to accommodate her slight frame. Her conversation often veers away from the topic at hand—or does it? One minute she's explaining that writers have influenced her work more deeply than visual artists. She cites writers such as Ann Carson, the poet. Or Whitman, Thoreau or Emerson. In the next moment she is talking about her 4-year-old and what he reads, or about taking long runs along the river with her dog. "At a certain point in my life, I can remember feeling very...not exhausted, but very empty, drained totally. Totally. Like you've given everything you had and there's not anything left. And I realized that I had to totally change the way I worked. I realized that it's not like there's work and there's your life. It's like your life is in your work and vice versa," she says.

Hamilton is in New York on a whirlwind visit to oversee the details of the installation that will soon open in Venice. A day later, she will go by train to Ridgefield, to lecture on *whitecloth* at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art. Then it's back to Manhattan for more detail work, then home to Ohio. Though the late spring sun is just setting, Hamilton has already put in about 12 hours. "The process of work is kind of moving from what you know to what you don't know," she says. "Some people need to be in a highly stimulated

environment and some people need another kind of stimulation—something other than, say, a cosmopolitan center.”

“I read. I read a lot of kinds of things and depending on who I’m talking to I get ideas of what next to read. You know, they say, ‘oh, you should read this. . .or this. . .’ and that creates a very lively interior to have for your work.”

Entering a Hamilton installation is like peering into the artist’s mind. But the viewer is not allowed to play a passive role: Again and again, Hamilton cajoles, nudges, *insists* that members of her audience step outside the typical patterns of experiencing art. Visiting one of her installations is a little like attending a play at which each audience member is asked to step onto the stage and help out with the dialogue.

At the DIA Center for the Arts, in a 1993 installation titled *tropos*, Hamilton remodeled the gallery’s floor, covering it with cement so that it rose and fell, undulating like the gentle swell of a wave. She covered the cement with a carpet made of horsehair combed from the manes and tails of horses in China and woven into a carpet at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia.

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Finally, she placed a single table in the center of the 6,000-square-foot space. A woman (sometimes the artist herself) sat before the table on a stool. Using a tiny tool, she burned the words out of a book, line by line. As the slightly acrid smoke drifted away, words metaphorically hung in the air.

The effect of the near-emptiness of the white-walled space, the rise and fall of the floor and the swirling, tangled horsehair carpet was to create a slight feeling of imbalance—an off-kilteredness—in any who entered.

In Venice, Hamilton used her installation to prod members of her audience into different ways of seeing. The U.S. Pavilion, which last summer housed her installation, is one of 30 pavilions at the Giardini Castello. With two large galleries flanking a central courtyard and a domed rotunda, the 60-year-old building is reminiscent of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Hamilton’s preparation for the biennale began a year in advance with a visit to Venice—and with a visit to Monticello. “It’s just to really know in a

physical way how to respond to what the physical tensions are, what the qualities are that you keep coming back to in this space. To get the sensation of being there,” she says.

But she also returned to her home in Columbus, Ohio to think. And to read. “A long time passes before I’m actually ready to make anything, and there is a really broad spectrum of reading that occurs. I think my reading has been misinterpreted by some people, because it’s not like the reading directly informs. It’s a part of the atmosphere that I work out of as much as the space is the atmosphere that I work in response to.”

While contemplating how to approach her installation in Venice, she read works by Susan Stewart, author of “On Longing.” Stewart, in turn, suggested that Hamilton read works by John Donne, George Herbert and Lucretius. And poet and friend Ann Lauterbach gave Hamilton an essay titled “Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency,” which Hamilton says had particular resonance. “I’m not necessarily a good writer, so I can’t get to things in words that I can get to in the forms I use. But the poets I read—I feel a sense of recognition with some of that writing. And I think my work in ways is a reaction to how in college everything had to be tied up in words. And what about your experience?”

In the end, the artist placed a screen made of thick, wavy glass in front of the American Pavilion in Venice. The screen altered her viewer’s vision: From the outside, the building’s outlines were blurred as though one were peering through a waterfall. And from the inside, looking out, one’s view of the world was changed as well. “The glass liquifies the image of the building in relationship to your movement. First in the view in and, specifically, it distorts the view out. That immediately makes you think about the building and your relationship to it,” Hamilton says. Inside the pavilion, a fine pink powder floated from ceiling to floor, collecting on Braille dots that had been engraved on the walls. The Braille text was taken from Charles Reznikoff’s “Testimony: the United States, 1885-1915,” which has passages drawn from court cases involving violent crimes. Throughout the installation,

a voice hovered, barely audibly; it was a recording of the artist reading parts of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address—in code. "Alpha." "Echo." "Omega." The whispered sounds hung in the air.

To create *whitecloth* at the Aldrich Museum, Hamilton again considered history and location. Over the years, the museum, a large white house that sits on Main Street in Ridgefield, has been a private home, general store, town meeting place and church. Hamilton's work here refers to the roles the building has played in a Puritan society, in domestic and spiritual settings.

The first room is furnished only with a wooden kitchen table. A large white cloth hovers about an inch above it as though it is levitating. (It is held aloft by tiny jets of air channeled through the table's legs.) In the second room, the butcher's block squats near the tiny video screen. The image of the artist's hand moving suggestively in a pocket filled with honey flickers repeatedly. Across the room sits a barrel of water. As a visitor peers into it, the floor shudders, sending ripples across the skin of the liquid. The water moves, the sensation of the floor moving sends reverberations through a visitor's feet, legs, hips, torso. Suddenly there is a flash of white overhead. A white cloth, this one not levitating by fluttering through the air, but propelled by a wire and pulley, flutters from this room into the next. What does it suggest? A ghost? The Shroud of Turin? A handkerchief dropped by a flirtatious young woman? A magician's trick? "I think the work is actually quite literary, but is not actually about words. It is literary in its structure, in its references," the artist says. "It's about the felt sense of this in relation to the quality of that. It is always about that thing you can't quite name."