

Projects 48 : Ann Hamilton : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 10, 1994-January 3, 1995

Author

Hamilton, Ann, 1956-

Date

1994

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/441

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48

ann hamilton

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

November 10, 1994–January 3, 1995

Installation is Ann Hamilton's primary medium. Having studied weaving in the mid-1970s, she began her career as a craftsman. Hamilton returned to school in the early 1980s, entering the graduate sculpture program at Yale University, where she did her first performances using herself as a model or mobile base for her sculpture. Shortly after, in 1981, she created her first environmental work. Since then she has made more than a dozen major installations in this country and abroad. In 1991 she represented the United States at the Twenty-first International São Paulo Bienal with a huge, two-chambered environment featuring a ship-length cradle of votive candles, floors tiled with thousands of copper tokens, and twin glass cases containing the moldering carcasses of a pair of turkeys. Like most of her other space-works, whether grand or intimate, this piece was characterized by mesmerizing quantities of her typically rich and sensuous materials, and by extremely labor intensive fabrication; that is, by thousands upon thousands of discrete elements, and thousands upon thousands of individual strokes of a hammer, drops of hand-applied wax, or other working gestures. Often present in Hamilton's installations is someone attending to a repetitive task, like those that resulted in the everywhere tactually- and visually-activated surface of the room in which they are found. Lately, Hamilton has concentrated on a series of video pieces that also involve reiterated movement and the perceptual interplay between sight and touch.

What follows are excerpts from an interview with the artist that took place in early October 1994, nearly two years after she first agreed to create something for the Projects space at The Museum of Modern Art, and began conceiving of the work. The differences between her ideas even at that late stage in its conception and the eventual work itself offer useful insight into the gradual intellectual and intuitional processes that body forth in Hamilton's utterly distinctive and all embracing environments.

Robert Storr
Curator
Department of Painting and Sculpture



aleph. List Visual Arts Center, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992. Detail of installation. Photo: Charles Mayer, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

Robert Storr: *I'd like to begin by asking about your process for developing installations. How much do you know about what you are going to do at the very start, and what are the stages you go through in fleshing out an idea? Take the MoMA project as a case in point.*

Ann Hamilton: It's tough for me. One of the things that I learn as I am preparing a project is that there is a stage where I feel I'm out on a branch and it's about to fall — I'm out at the end and I want to know so badly how it's going to turn out. Especially because the way I work I never see it until it's public. It's not like I'm in the studio making the work in advance. So much of it is in my imagination. The biggest balancing act for me is to put off this need to name it, to allow myself to not name it for as long as possible, which means I'm always pressed up against a deadline. There's some kind of adrenaline that comes with that. Right now, I suppose it's because it's the Modern and it's a really different context for my work. I have not worked extensively in museums with collections, places that have more of a painting history. So it's actually interesting because this project has come at a time when I'm stopping and asking questions about the way I've approached working in relation to a site. Making a piece for an institution such as the Modern raises different kinds of issues.

At the moment I'm doing a video shoot for the project; it is really simple which scares me because the material presence of the pieces has always been such an important part of establishing the context, or the gesture of the work. This time it's a question of letting the space be the space and not transforming it into something other than what it is. Right now, I think, the space is not going to be completely open. The first thing you will encounter will be a curtain. I'm still in the process of resolving how it will be made. I don't want it to be an image, I want it to be made up of the physical evidence of touch, not the image of something being touched. I've been working with glue, the way you did when you were a kid, you painted glue on your skin and peeled it off, and it contained every mark. I've been making glue skins from my hands and they will all be glued together. I don't know if it's going to end up that way, but at the moment I'm thinking about a veil of hand imprints, that is suspended six or eight feet into the space. You will have to walk around it to get to the interior of the room. I think there will be three videos, one on each of the interior walls. So far what seems to work best is an image of a text on glass, a text you can't really read that is printed in water-soluble blue ink which a finger moves along and erases. That movement is like a snail moving on glass, it's slippery enough that part of the finger stays in contact with the surface, it's not a lifting and taking off; it's a slow movement of erasing the image. The image is rubbed away, it's very sensual.

I've been thinking for some time about making an image that is about how touch feels. It's about the whole relationship between how we know things by touch versus how we know things by sight. How do you make an image that brings those senses together? I may put sound in it. You know how glass is when it's wet and you get that low, slipping squeak. I don't know if this is too much or whether it will change. That's how it is now. It's just this very simple gesture of erasure and the evidence of touch.

RS: When you've talked about other installations, you've emphasized the importance the given situation has in your initial conception of the project. What kind of situation is the Modern?

AH: Part of it is the condition of how one physically looks at paintings. I was thinking about how there aren't places to sit in museums and really look. One has this self-conscious time in front of the picture and one is aware of one's own constant movement through the space. I was thinking about that not as a condition specifically of the Modern, but generally of museums as picture galleries. Since I started doing installation work, I have wanted to break down the distance between being inside and being outside an enclosed space. That's what working architecturally has allowed. When you look at a painting you are standing outside and looking in at something from another space. What I do is to implicate the viewer by placing him or her inside the viewing plane. I want to activate the physical space that historically painting has sought to engage visually. I find myself feeling anxious about doing the same thing with another medium, which I think is interesting. My focus has not been to think about the museum, or its particular collection, but more about the primacy that the act of viewing has for us now culturally. It seems it has to do with moving almost back to a more oral and visual culture; why is it then that so many of our perceptions are so textually based? That is what I want to investigate.

RS: You've talked before about the danger of naming things. The alternative is physical contact through all five senses, not just sight which is subject to pictorial conventions according to which things are framed, posed, and staged. Though your work is very visual it also engages the other faculties. How do you decide on the balance among these various, sometimes conflicting, forms of apprehension given that all are at issue in your installations?

AH: I think that I have a tape that runs in my mind that says something like, "Don't make a picture of it, demonstrate it," which is a little different from the point you are making about pictorial space. It's funny but the piece I made at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool is the first project where I realized that you could never get into the picture nor far enough outside of the space to get a pictorial effect. So your experience as you walked through it was really physical, you were always in this very ambiguous position of being both inside and outside the piece. In the Projects piece I am very conscious of the question of the placement of the viewer, but I don't know what that experience will be. A reference to landscape is always there in the horizontal framed space that we know from looking at paintings or looking out the window. I feel I'm getting very preoccupied with that.

RS: Preoccupied by what aspect of it?

AH: Some of the pieces I feel the strongest about are the ones that don't actually photograph as well because there are core experiences going on in them that aren't visual or pictorial. I guess there's always this balance, as you said, between elements of the pieces. All the senses are working together; for me it's a question of trying to address some hierarchies and

habits that determine how we assign certain perceptions more value or more authority over others. In this new piece, there's a contradiction because I want to make something that is experienced visually, yet which you feel in a physical sense.

RS: With installations certain things are lost in documentation: smell, temperature, the sense of touch. When those things are taken away, what is preserved and what is its status? It's more than just a theoretical question of permanence versus impermanence, since the problem really bears on the nature of installation art as a medium.

AH: It's interesting because if we had done this show three years ago I think that my response would have been very different. At that time my attitude toward museums was, "How do you make something live in here? How do you bring the street in?" I would have been doing something to make the walls weep or something that started to break down the edges more literally. Now, I think I'm trying to resolve what can be preserved, because otherwise you only have the memory, but you can't recreate the experience. The project at MoMA has probably made me think more about the condition of viewing than I would have done a couple of years ago. An installation has meaning because it has a particular relationship to time and particularities of a situation that you can't recreate — to windows, to sounds in the city, to the scale of the room. Every time that I try to recreate a piece or adapt an old piece for a new space I realize I can't remake it. It makes me feel sick basically, when I start to do that. I know that's the wrong way to go.

RS: You often have people in your installation performing some kind of repeated action. What is their role? And who are they when it isn't you yourself?

AH: The role of the person in the piece is that they are subject, object, and witness. If it's somebody who's helped me make it, I already know them personally. Most of those people have a relationship to the piece through having been a part of creating it. But I've always been ambivalent about the role of the audience. In some ways, being inside the piece, as the person who is winding the balls, or whatever the activity is, is so central to the work that one can't imagine the experience of the person who is witness to that activity. Similarly, I have sometimes felt that the pieces exist solely for the experience of the person who is in the piece.

RS: You can't establish the distance one would need in that situation?

AH: No. It's hard for me to go back and see pieces. There was one piece where I remember saying to an architect that I wished I could come visit again and again and have the experience of seeing it in different light and when I wasn't exhausted. There's always something about the work that is entropic and being released in some way, so that ultimately you can't hold onto it, maybe that's part of the point.

RS: *You began as a weaver, and painstaking work is an always visible aspect of your installations; sometimes the people in them are actively engaged in such tasks. Could you talk a little about the role craft plays in your approach?*

AH: I missed the educational loop of really being computer literate, although I use one all the time. I think for me it has something to do with responsibility. The screen is a kind of infinite world that isn't real, in that you don't see the results of your actions. So the material emphasis in my work, the emphasis on how things are done, has to do with the metaphors that materials create in our imagination. Working with your hands, with materials, still has a role; it's a matter of how you bring this forward as a value, not as nostalgia. I hear a lot of people say, "All that labor that you do is really nostalgic. Why are you doing it?" They think it's looking back in a utopian sense to something that's been lost. But I think it's really necessary. It's not about recreating anything, it's reminding us that we're objects, we're physical.

RS: *What do you think the consequences of being reminded are? How do people process that information?*

AH: I think for a lot of people it brings out memories. One of the things that occurs is that I get a lot of letters from people that I don't know. They want to share their experience. It's not that they think that this piece was this or that. It is more that it reminded them of something in their own history. It's important that there's room for those memories and associations. Sometimes the materially intensive quality of the work repulses people. It makes them very uncomfortable and hesitant to enter the work. That evocation is equally potent.

RS: *Why?*

AH: I think people don't necessarily want to be absorbed. Especially as the larger-scale pieces tend to do so. We have a fear of the body, a fear of the material. It's almost as if one is afraid of losing oneself in the body or in that experience, so one anchors oneself with language. Language allows a certain type of control over one's experience. The physical side is frightening because it's about losing yourself, letting yourself lose your edges a little bit. It's just like that Protestant culture, which I come out of. Those kinds of experiences are only sanctioned in a particular way, and you're confronting those borders when you immerse people in material. It's not really confrontational—like here are these shocking images and materials—it's more like you're slipping through the net.

RS: *Actually, in the present situation, people are in a double bind because, on the one hand, you have a pervasive aesthetic denial of the senses in the name of de-mystifying art, or, on the other, a tendency to emphasize only the erotic aspect of sensual engagement. How does the pronounced physical dimension of your work relate to that split; what kind of sensory experience are you setting up?*

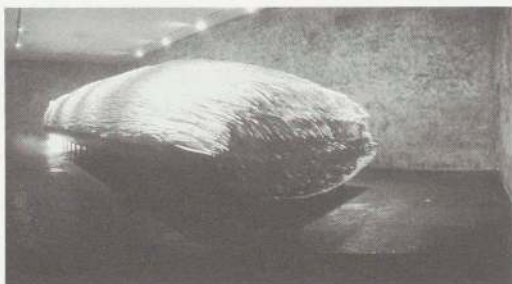
AH: One of the things that most interests me about the video portion of the MoMA piece is how these gestures look when they are translated in scale and technology. They are really very sensual. If it were just a gesture of erasure, it wouldn't be interesting. It is fascinating that something so commonplace as touch, when focused upon, can assume such far reaching implications.

RS: *We were talking a while back about this installation in relation to painting galleries and painting conventions and that makes me think about de Kooning, whose Woman I painting is hanging upstairs. One of his great discoveries was to make erasure in painting as compelling as painterly gesture. Watching that "happen" on the surface is part of what makes his paintings so amazing. When the finger in your video moves, it does much the same thing that de Kooning's scraping away does, because it results in something that is very precise and a blur at the same time. That sets up a relation not just between writing and physical erasure, but to a whole tradition of painting that is thought to be the antithesis of installation or video.*

AH: Which is great.

RS: *To go back to the beginning a bit, compared to what you've done elsewhere over recent years, the piece you are making for the Modern is very spare. I'm curious about that because we got started before you agreed to do the DIA installation last year, and it was extravagant in terms of space and materials.*

AH: The Projects room is a very active space with the city flowing through and by it. Some people are coming to see what's there, but a lot of people are passing it on their way to somewhere else. Early on I decided it would be inappropriate to make a large-scale piece with a live presence, like I did at DIA. It just didn't seem right. I think the rest really comes from all the other work I've done and the questions working in this institution has raised. It is more unnerving for me to do less. In some ways I would be more confident going into it if it were more materially-laden. I would say, "Well Rob, I'm going to cover the floor with this material and I'd like to mark the walls in the following way," but these are gestures I already know, so I won't do that. I already know what that experience will be. I think this installation will have restraint, but warmth. The worst thing in the world would be to stop questioning how you respond to a situation. We all have our habits and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, but you must push them. I hope I am doing that. So no one will know where I am necessarily coming from.



parallel lines. Twenty-first International São Paulo Bienal, São Paulo, Brazil, 1991. Photo: Richard Ross, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

biography

Born Lima, Ohio, 1956
Resides in Columbus, Ohio

exhibitions

- 1994** *mneme*
Tate Gallery Liverpool, Liverpool, Great Britain
- 1993** *tropos*
DIA Center for the Arts, New York
- a round*
The Power Plant, Toronto, Canada
- 1992** *aleph*
List Visual Arts Center, MIT, Cambridge
- accountings*
Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle
- HAMILTON/IRELAND**
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
- 1991** *malediction*
Louver Gallery, New York
- parallel lines*
Twenty-first International São Paulo Bienal,
São Paulo, Brazil
- view*
"Works," Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Washington, D.C., collaboration with Kathryn Clark
- 1990** *palimpsest*
Artemesia Gallery, Chicago, collaboration with
Kathryn Clark
- palimpsest*
Artion A Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden, collaboration
with Kathryn Clark
- between taxonomy and communion*
San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla
- 1989** *privation and excesses*
Capp Street Project, San Francisco
- 1988** *the capacity of absorption*
"Temporary Contemporary," The Museum of
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
- 1985** *reciprocal fascinations*
Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum,
Santa Barbara

Ann Hamilton is currently Artist in Residence at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. The video for this project was created as part of this residency with the generous assistance of Melodie Calvert and Tim Frank. Special thanks to Connie Walsh, Judy Millar and Rebecca des Marais for their help on the installation.

The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from The Bohen Foundation and from The Contemporary Arts Council and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

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