

ANN HAMILTON'S
the event of a thread
AS A LITERARY EXPERIENCE

By David Colosi

*There's a very strong connection for me
between the thread of sewing
and the line of that thread
and the thread of writing.*

-Ann Hamilton-

When I moved to New York in 1994, I had already begun thinking of my work as a form of Three-Dimensional Literature. I hadn't publically coined the phrase yet, but I tried it out occasionally whenever someone asked that cringe-worthy question, "So what kind of art do you make?" It was, and still is, the perfect answer because people don't know how to hold it. Just by chance, I met Ann Hamilton around this time and tried it out on her. She caught me by surprise when she replied with something along the lines of, "That's what I do," or some other expression of affinity. I hadn't thought about her work in these terms yet, so I gave her the benefit of the doubt. Recently as I've begun to define Three-Dimensional Litera-

ture and situate it in the broader landscape of art making, her work and this memory clearly come to mind.

As she remarked in her Art 21 interview, throughout all of her projects, as if the entire body of her work existed as one massive quilt, Ann Hamilton is attuned to the constant tie of the thread as line and the line of writing. In many of her works, she uses sewing, weaving and cloth, and embedded in the fabric of her installations, a “reader” and a “writer” are usually always present in voice, text or in person. The first work of hers that I physically experienced was *tropos*, 1993-4, while I was a guard at Dia Center for the Arts. The floor was covered with a carpet of horsehair and in the center of the room, at a lone table, sat a reader. As the reader read from the stack of books available, after reading the words, he or she burned them with an electric burner transforming them into smoke. The smell of the burning paper and the smoke-infused horsehair plus the feel of the modified carpet landscape underfoot and the dull, recorded sound of “reading” created a full sensory experience. The viewer couldn’t make out the words being read, either in the audio track or in the burned pages, but still reading – the essence of reading – filled the room. Once the viewer entered, he or she too became a reader and a writer because, as Arthur C. Danto once said, “We read as we look because we interpret as we see,” and, after all, interpretation is an act of writing. In *lineament*, also from 1994, which Hamilton described as well in her Art 21 interview, she cut out the texts of books line-by-line and created threads of words that she then wove into balls. “The two-dimensional line of the page,” she said, “is made into a three-dimensional body because each line is lifted out of the book as if it were a thread.” The page gets a new body, as does a paragraph, poem or an entire book. The body

takes the form of a ball, and she, in a very literal way, makes literature three-dimensional. This continuous thread of literature and the processes of reading and writing in connection to weaving and fabric can be traced through much of her work. While her work is open to a multitude of interpretations, the particular focus of my inquiry is guided by looking at the ways in which she makes literary experiences physical. Another time I will try to illuminate this aspect of her work piece-by-piece, from before *indigo blue* 1993 and beyond *human carriage* 2009. For now, I will show how it is sewn into her most recent work.

the event of a thread opened at the Park Avenue Armory in New York from December 5, 2012 – January 6, 2013. The first thing the viewer noticed when entering the installation in this 55,000 foot Drill Hall was a large white curtain in the center of the space flapping from what at first appeared to be a mysterious wind. Surrounding it, swinging back and forth like pendulums were other viewers, other participants, riding on swings large enough for two adults or three children. The viewer quickly united these two elements and realized that the force generated by the swingers caused the movement of the curtain. And, in turn, the movement of the curtain inspired the continued movement of the swingers. The social metaphors of cloth that Hamilton spoke about in her Art 21 interview, whereby the clothes we wear are connected by individual lines of thread and each line of thread is something that we can see and is equally important to the whole, fully play out in this viewer-becomes-participant installation. The curtain is center stage and first captivates all who enter. This is the element for Everyman or Everywoman, the accessible welcome mat of delight that transcends what it all might mean. In this respect, for New York, this is reminiscent of *The*

Gates that Christo and Jeanne-Claude gave to New Yorkers in Central Park in 2005. It operates at first on a superficial level and seduces in the success of its simple yet complex engineering. It invites by a mere demonstration of the law of cause and effect: "If I do this, that will happen." But swinging is not the only means of participation, and the depth of Hamilton's poetry lies below the surface.

While others are swinging, more visitors – or maybe Anthony Braxton's term "friendly experiencers" is more appropriate – gather just below the curtain, sitting and lying down, watching it move above. This is the gravitation point, the tail of the lobster or the chorus of the song, as if nostalgic New Yorkers so limited by coin laundry had forgotten what it's like to lay on a sunny day beneath the clothesline. For many, this undulating cloth and the swings that move it constitute the piece. Everything else, many claim – the pigeons, the writers, readers, speaker bags, bells, lamps, etc. – isn't needed. But comments like these only insult the work, if not the artist, and are indicative of a decadent public who only takes what it likes from art and then discards the rest. The work operates on various levels if we are willing to look and read deeper.

What happens when we enter the space? What exactly are we participating in? Why does a curtain, attached to a swing, interest us? And how or why could we, if we wanted to, consider this to be a product of literature? Starting again from the entrance, I will focus on the details to see what the piece wants to give us.

On either side of the main entrance, settled in what look to be antique folding wooden chairs, possibly those very chairs that once sat in the balconies of the Drill Hall, are newspapers consisting of three sections for viewers to take. This is a familiar experience for New Yorkers accustomed

to free newspapers waiting at the top of escalators at many subway stations. These newspapers, announcing the piece, wait in the chairs to be read later or picked up on the way out if not on the way in. For most, they go into a bag or pocket because there is too much to see and do first. Next the viewer sees two people dressed in identical outfits, a denim coat covered by a large grey felted wool fleece cape (the newspaper tells us that these are the products of Hamilton's time spent at The Workshop Residence in San Francisco in Fall 2002). Each sits at a desk reading texts from scrolling paper. They speak into a microphone, but at first they can't be heard. The text they read is split down the center, created in three columns with the thinnest in the center like a spinal cord bisecting two sides of a torso. The products of what they have read gather on the floor beyond the table. A large identical water glass sits symmetrically to the outside hand of each reader. In front of them pigeons idle in wooden cages. A spotlight illuminates the tableau with a perfect circle of light.

The viewer then walks into the main space and witnesses the swings and the swingers and the undulating white curtain. Navigating the space can be dangerous depending on who is swinging, and one has to be careful to watch before crossing a path. The swingers must likewise be careful of pedestrians. Following the ropes of the swings up toward the ceiling, the viewer can see how these ropes intersect with other ropes that lead to the curtain on one end and a pulley and weight system on the other. One can't help being part of it – the moment you enter the space, you become a participant whether you choose to swing or not. If you swing, you feel a direct connection to the movement of the curtain. You can see exactly how your movement contributes. If you do not swing and remain a pedestrian, your

path has an effect on the path and speed of the swingers, and, in that way, controls the activity of the curtain.

Walking through the space you hear the voices of the readers. They are contained in 42 brown paper bags, sensitively wrapped with a piece of twine, crossed and sealed with a dollop of wax. Inside the bag is a speaker. There is a right and left channel: one bag offers the voice of one reader and another the other. Depending on the volume of the bag, the listener must either place the bag next to his ear or just hold the bag in front so that not only he can hear it, but so others can hear it, too. The pedestrians who pick up the brown paper bags now become carriers of the readers' voices. Like pigeons carrying a message, these pedestrian couriers deliver the voices contained in these simultaneously high and low-tech devices like criers or newsies. In a city like New York, so sensitive to mysterious packages and drilled by reminders of "if you see something, say something," the bags are both an eerie beacon of a presumed daily threat while at the same time reminiscent of a more peaceful and trusting not-so-distant past. Once the bags are handled and recognized as safe, they are nostalgic of brown bag lunches, street beer in a can and a reminder of when brown paper bags didn't warrant a mandatory search upon entering a library, subway or airport. Forgotten items were once opportunities for good Samaritans to do a neighbor a good turn; conspicuously wrapped packages were once codes for the exchange of ideas or secrets or the fortuitous chance of finding treasure, and we did not always presume that they contained Anthrax or plastic explosives. The wax seal meant it was approved for confidential delivery, and the authorities had no right to break that seal in transit or in mass transit. In this imaginary environment of our distant past, when the listener finishes using the bag he

simply sets it down for the next person to make a discovery of her own.

Circumnavigating the space, when the viewer reaches the opposite end, at another spotlight table, dressed in the same outfit as the readers, sits a writer. She writes in pencil (the shed skins of sharpening sit on the floor at her feet) and notates the conditions in the space – the temperature, humidity, volume or other environmental responses – or ruminates in letters addressed to qualities, emotions and distance, “Dear Far,” “Dear Time,” “Dear Sadness...” Above the writer a large disc mirror undulates back and forth, again the result of the motion of a swing. The mirror reflects the image of the writer and the light from the spotlight across the space. The writer writes on carbon copy paper – another nostalgic reminder of our clerical past – leaving her finished work in an outbox for an unknown someone (not us, as guards enforce) to pick up and carry away for processing.

Beyond the writer another spotlight illuminates a large vinyl record lathe, antique, heavy and, in keeping, nostalgic. Its use and purpose become known when, reading in the newspaper provided at the entrance, the viewer/reader understands that at the opening of every day a vocalist sings a song from a balcony. The song is recorded daily, scored onto vinyl. The purpose of this stylus is not for reading a record; it is for writing one. While the singer sings – at noon when the installation opens for the day and at 7pm when it closes for the day – the lathe transcribes and the pigeons are released. At the opening of the day, the birds exit from a cage high above in the ceiling and make their way to the table where the readers sit; at the end of the day, after supposedly receiving their messages to be carried, they return to the ceiling. This cage contains a painted red

square because apparently pigeons can distinguish multiple shades of red, and this particular red is the shade that indicates their 'home'. The use of song is reminiscent of the rituals for the beginning and ending the day like the bell on Wall Street or a rooster's call on a farm, or the anthems sung at the openings of ball games or the bugle calls or pledges that we presume frequently sounded in this very Drill Hall.

The side balconies are also open for viewers to get a different perspective. The end balconies are not. At the far end, opposite the entrance, a large clock – part of the armory architecture – is illuminated with a spotlight. A ladder leads to it. Seats below the clock, waiting to be filled, have silver desk lamps attached to them and mysterious black buckled cases on their desktops. These too are illuminated from above indicating that the details are intentional. This is the site of note taking, the waiting room for a lecture. The vacancy of this area and its inaccessibility make one wonder what will happen there – is it a performance waiting for its scheduled time? But that anticipation is the very heart of it. There is no performance to come; it is already taking place. You the viewer, the reader, the participant, are the performer, filling the vacancy with a story and an interpretation, noting the details and weaving the elements into a whole that coheres.

Again down below, wooden benches line the perimeter of the great hall. The viewer/reader/listener can sit here to rest, to watch, to read, to listen. The swinging action takes place in the center, so here on the sidelines the viewer feels somewhat like an anxious could-be-dancer, waiting to be invited to dance, to be asked to share a swing or to try to catch an empty one. This area of respite also offers the viewer/reader/listener a chance to study the space, to take it

all in and, possibly, to pull out that newspaper they picked up at the entrance and read a little more about what they have been experiencing.

In this moment of rest on the sidelines, after having experienced the readers seated at the desks speaking into microphones reading from the columned text they scroll through, *you* now, as you loosen the creases of the newspaper and begin reading the horizontal lines of text in columns, with your mysterious brown bag speaking next to you, no longer feel on the sidelines. You, too, are a participant. By reading the newspaper you join in the action, become a cause to affect the environment, and contribute to the movement of the curtain. And if you choose to read the articles aloud, so much the more will you solidify your role as agent. The air caused by the swingers, joined by the action of the pulleys, causes the curtain to move. The words exit the bodies of the readers by their lungs adding more air to the space, filling the room with content. Sitting on the sidelines reading the newspaper from left to right, on occasion looking up at the swingers, you soon realize that from this side view the swingers are also moving from left to right and then back again just as your eyes do as you read the lines of text on the page. Are the swingers mimicking your act of reading or is your act of reading mimicking their swinging? (Though the articles in the newspaper are written in English, and therefore the lines flow from left to right and from top to bottom, even a reader of Chinese, Hebrew or Arabic would have a similar experience of mimicry, though he might have to change his seat to get the right view). The perspective of your position stacks the swings in rows, like the lines of text.

In her statement “regarding *the event of a thread*” included in the newspaper, Hamilton refers to the warp (lon-

gitudinal path) and the weft (transverse path) of knitting and weaving in relation to this piece. Her interest in the parallel metaphors of lines of thread and lines of text, of cloth and the page, are fully in play. With each line of text the reader reads across (weft) and then takes one step down warping, changing direction and weaving the text into a pattern for practical use. For the reader/viewer/listener who decides to walk through the swingers, cutting across their paths like a pedestrian on a busy two-way street, she must look both ways. Acting along the trajectory of the warp, the walker must allow the swingers to “weft” between his steps. The walker as writer writes across the swinging lines of text created by the swinger/writers, weaving an intricate text in space with his motion. Add to this walking/writing action a book on tape in a brown paper bag that one might hold to one’s ear, and you have a literary work with an audio guide that not only guides you along a narrative or literary path, but also one that guides your body in physical ways. Some installation works are made in the form of a labyrinth or they have a clear path leading from beginning to end. In this work, the reader/viewer/listener is free to move about the space; there is no specific beginning or end. But the piece still guides the walker. And it does so temporally as well as spatially. In order to avoid being struck by a swing, the walker must select or reject certain paths that the text and the space don’t allow. The walker must also speed up at certain times so as not to be struck by a swing or can slow down at the benches or at the spaces between the lines of the swingers. And reading between the lines – within the subtext – is often where the most fruitful insights reside. Writers, and more importantly texts, always control the pace of reading, slowing down with explication and accelerating with dialog. Hamilton has constructed a physical

space that mimics the way a text determines how and at what speed a reader/writer/listener circumnavigates.

After observing these various details, one looks up again to remember the massive undulating curtain that dominates the center of the room. Is the curtain merely an elegant and ephemeral touch to seduce viewers or is it something more? Earlier I recalled the social fabric metaphor that Hamilton referenced in her Art 21 interview, where each line of thread, each individual person can be seen and can contribute and is in fact required for the whole piece of fabric to function. The ropes connecting the swings to the curtain make this metaphor apparent. This is one way to look at it. Another way – and there are many – might be to see this hanging white sheet not as a curtain at all, but instead as a blank sheet of paper, a clean slate, a page waiting to be written on. Before the opening of the day, the sheet is still. No swingers are present to set it in motion. At the close of the day when everyone vacates the space, the sheet again comes to rest. But during the day, after the pigeons are released to the readers' desk, and the writer starts writing, and the swingers start swinging, then the white sheet is filled with information, with notations, with thoughts and words, with observances and reminiscences, with factual observations and emotional responses. Readers and writers activate the sheet for the seven hours that the Park Avenue Armory is open to the public. Each swinger transcribes his or her movement onto the page. The page is a palimpsest of the daily activity of every participant who enters. The swingers write it, and everyone reads it.

As a work of three-dimensional literature, to which I am nominating it, one might ask, what exactly is being written and what is being read in Hamilton's piece? The answer, I say, is written on the white sheet that hangs in the center of

the space. The page is alive like the imagination of the writer unhinged from writer's block, constantly changing, shifting according to the point of view and vantage point of both the people writing it and the people reading it. The page is blank and inscribed in the same instant. Just as in *tropos* where the lines of texts were read and then burned, so too is this palimpsest being read and reread, written and rewritten in a different way by everyone who swings, by every pedestrian who traverses or walks between the lines and by every reveler who sits below it in wonder. The sheet remains simultaneously blank and full. The pigeons are released at the end of the day, but no message is tied to their legs. Their destinations are only the readers' desk and their home cage. So at the end of the day, they seem to be carrier pigeons without messages. Sad? No. Their flight alone marks the completion of their delivery. When the sheet stops moving and the pigeons are again roosting in their cage, they have completed their daily work. The act of flying signifies the delivery of their message. The same goes for the swingers. They are performing like all good metaphors do. The record that records the song as it is sung, the same song every day by different singers whether it's onto a piece of vinyl or onto this white sheet, is another layer of the palimpsest. The work of the day has been recorded and rewritten, the same song every day, but different each day. Like any song, *the event of a thread* evaporates when the event comes to an end; it lives only in the moment.

Despite the layers of writing and reading that the sheet absorbs, it does not gain weight. It is not easier or harder to swing in the morning or night. Like the saxophone or the violin that created so many beautiful songs and weathered so much practice, the blank sheet, the next day, is just as ready be picked up and played again, emitting a new song

or the same song played differently. A musical instrument retains no memory of the song before; it is always ready to play the next one; better or worse, it depends on the player, yet it is a new song nonetheless. A writer marking on a white page in ink or pencil leaves an indelible mark. Even if the page is erased, erasure marks reveal the memory whether in residual ink, graphite or impressions in the fiber. But this sheet, Hamilton's literary musical instrument, is woven just as any piece of paper but it functions more like a pigeon. It works all day, from beginning to end, being written and overwritten, read and reread, but by the end of the day, it returns to a blank sheet, a clean slate, not worn, not exhausted, not burdened by extra weight, having delivered a message that even it doesn't understand. It wakes the next day ready for work, starting fresh, anticipating the next poem to be attached to its leg. It and we are denied the ability to know exactly what it says, not really caring either way because the meaning is in the action.