



# ACTS OF FINDING

A Conversation with

# Ann Hamilton

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Acts of reading have multiple dimensions yet leave no material trace: this is the subject of *human carriage*, Ann Hamilton's recent installation circumnavigating the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum, which was on view last year. Pulleys, guillotined books, a silk-sheathed bell that rang as it raced down the building's iconic spiral, and a Reader who operated the pulley system all demonstrated how Hamilton's work can transform a space through minimal means. Through performances, objects, and installations, she explores the sensory and spiritual dimensions of our bodies and the spaces we inhabit, delving into ways of seeing, touching, hearing, and reading that are as tactile and immediate as they are subconscious and invisible.

Above and opposite: *human carriage*, 2009. Cloth, wire, bells, books, string, pipe, pulleys, pages, cable, air, and sound, site-specific installation at the Guggenheim Museum, NY.

THIBAUT JEANSON, COURTESY ANN HAMILTON STUDIO





**Jan Garden Castro:** *Alexandra Munroe, curator of “The Third Mind, American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1890–1989,” said that she chose you to create the only new work for the exhibition based on your previous projects, including mercy with Meredith Monk, corpus at MASS MoCA, and myein at the Venice Biennale.<sup>1</sup> Does spiritual belief or Buddhism play a role in human carriage?*

**Ann Hamilton:** I don’t have a specifically Buddhist practice. When I first met with Alexandra, I tried to

**Above, left and right: two details of *human carriage*, 2009.**

articulate how one accounts for an influence that doesn’t come from a particular discipline or focus of one’s daily life but is absorbed more the way that the atmosphere makes something as-yet-unnamed present to you. How do you become aware of other ways of thinking about relations in the world? Or, what might a spiritual practice be outside of the institutions that one grows up with in a suburban Midwestern landscape? That conversation quickly led to the influence of texts. Through books you can become exposed to something completely untethered from its source. It comes in, initially,



Above and right: two details of *human carriage*, 2009.

almost without context, to make or carve a space for another way of thinking or being in the world. That process of transmission became the basis for the conversation that formed this work. How do you account for that dawning of awareness? Or this thing that's everywhere but nowhere? How do you start to make work that is not only about its materials, but also about how we form our attention? How we listen? The active state of coming to attention? My own meditation, in some ways, is through the space that the work allows.

**JGC:** *How did you find your voice as an artist?*

**AH:** My first making hand is a textile hand. It's more than a sensibility, it's a way of ordering and understanding the relationships between things. Metaphors of cloth come forward. If you look at *human carriage*, the bell carriage coming down and passing through all the levels of the museum is a little bit like the shuttle's unspooling movement as it crosses the raised threads of the warp on the loom. The vertical cables form the system for lifting, as well as all the horizontal ramps that descend—the piece is literally weaving through and stitching through all of that physical space, and in its passage, it becomes a kind of connective tissue. It's not unlike the way a weft thread passes through a warp to structure a whole cloth. Even though I didn't start out thinking, "I'm making some kind of weaving or loom in the museum," those relationships, however different in scale, do come forward, often in the formal relationships that things come to take as I respond to the architecture.

**JGC:** *And the railing was attached to the rotunda as though it were stitched.*

**AH:** Yes. The great crew at the museum, together with my engineer Marty Chafkin, worked on the details of "how" the system would meet the building. The curvature of the bell carriage railing followed the contour, irregularities, and volume of the rotunda. Its structure was completely dependent on the museum's. There's a mutuality—my work has form only as it meets the architecture.

**JGC:** *The guillotined books resemble ancient texts on the thinnest parchment. And they, too, are stitched—deconstructed and then reconstructed. How*



*did you work out the design elements, the process, and the texts that form the whole metaphor of human carriage?*

**AH:** It was a long, circuitous route. We started out thinking how a line or a word or a phrase might literally be carried down the ramp by the bell carriage. Our attempts were based in textiles—we were looking at resist methods and woven words. I was going to work with a bibliography of the show. None of that yielded anything satisfying. It was literal and too concrete. For me, it didn't address the core: how, when one reads, one is always reading in relation to the history of everything else one has read—how a new work enters and changes the landscape of what's already there. As these new texts arrive from varied cultural contexts, it's difficult or impossible to trace



Above and left: *phora*, 2005. 4 spinning speakers, sound, turning video projection, 130 Iris prints, suspended refugee tent, 7 spinning sousaphone ends, clothing, and wood table, 5-room installation at La Maison Rouge, Paris.

something else. At the bottom of the piece, you have the re-made books, but you also have the lines that fall from the pile. Recognitions are “found” because they “fall” out of their original house of context. Think of these cut-up texts as that history. The self-consciousness that I started out with—of selecting lines—was impossible. In fact, you can’t select the lines. The lines have to fall out. Allowing that process, for me, is partly what the piece addresses: to allow myself to not know—to fall open to a process of making that is an act of finding.

**JGC:** Did you come up with the concept before Alexandra found “*The Third Mind*” title (referring to William Burroughs’s cut-up method)?<sup>2</sup>

**AH:** We had many discussions, and I think that the title, for Alexandra, came quite late in the process—as it does for me. I need the conversation. I need to talk about the possibilities to help settle things into relations. It’s abstract until I am in the space responding. So it’s a long process—letting go of my idea about something and responding to its actual presence. The different making processes that went into this allowed me to see and understand it in ways that I could not when I was still outside of it.

I started by asking, “What is the right gesture and question not just for this show and the context of the space but in this moment?” I wanted to do something that could pass through and could be everywhere and yet nowhere. Although there is a mechanism—it has that Rube Goldbergian quality—it has no motors or electronics. I was thinking about the scale of human gesture. Each time, the bell carriage goes down differently. It’s affected by weather; it never behaves exactly the same. It has a kind of repetition that’s not a repetition, and this form of attention relates to much of the work in the show.

**JGC:** Would you call this a contrast with an installation like *corpus* where the building was “breathing” as well as dropping and picking up papers?

**AH:** It’s a cousin, but its means are different. *corpus* was a pneumatic, air-powered structure, but, still, when each piece of paper fell, it was indeterminate, and it never fell in the same path, never landed in the same place. Here, Audra, Heather, and Shanti, the three attendants, animated and took care of the structure, along with weekly checks, fiddling, and making sure that everything was OK. The ongoing life of the piece in the space has made me think a lot about acts of care. Audra was here almost every day; the work was alive in the ways that it changed, and she was the registrar of that change and its felt quality in the atmosphere of the space.

**JGC:** *Corpus*, *myein* (1999), and *kaph* (1997, a Sanskrit word referring to the hand’s palm) all involved giving buildings anthropomorphic qualities such

and account for how even the partial reading of a text—words, lines, paragraphs, chapters, or full books—starts to change how we think.

I kept wanting to use the materials of the show’s bibliography in a way that didn’t present them as singular, particular texts. So, with a friend, Kathryn Clark, who has a letterpress studio, I was discussing the question of a particular, quotable line from a book and the book as a field of lines. We began to play around with her guillotine cutter—I had given up on the textile aspect—and we made a cut. The little fan-shaped piece that slices out of the text when you cut through it is like the wing of a bird. It’s completely alive, and the pattern you see is dependent on where the blade slices through the printing on the page. And when you lay that cut surface down, it’s very much like a piece of ikat warp or cloth. So, all of a sudden, in that gesture of cutting through the middle of something, I had both my textile and my text.

In the installation, multiple books, cut and re-joined, function as counterweights in the system. Those texts arriving from different places stitch together to become



Detail of clothes room from *phora*, 2005.

as “breathing,” “bleeding” red dye, and “weeping” tears. Are these ways of humanizing buildings or viewers or both? Did *myein* and *kaph* also permit viewers to experience a sense of loss or grieving?

**AH:** I don’t know if it’s humanizing buildings. I think that the work finds its form as it meets the edge of the building, so the edge of the building is the membrane, the skin. To make that skin animate, in some ways, has long been an interest of mine. Just as clothing is the first architecture for the body, it’s thinking about that membrane of the skin and the cloth and extending it to the next scale.

One thing that ties all of these projects together is the element of descent: the water (in *kaph*) collects into a droplet and rolls down the wall; the powder (in *myein*) falls and is dispersed, the paper (in *corpus*) falls. There’s also horizontality—how, say, the horizontality of reading, of walking, of movement through time intersects with this constant action of descent. It’s in the felt quality of that movement that we acknowledge our own finitude, cultural loss, and amnesia. And yet there’s also something, in this case, quite light about it. While you feel the tug of gravity and the fall of something, the animation of the bells and the journey there can be quite wonderful.

**JGC:** In your installations in other countries, such as *phora* (2005), at *La Maison Rouge* in Paris, and *voce* (2006), at the Contemporary Art Museum in Kumamoto, Japan, you draw on the history and culture of each site to create sound-video-object installations. Could you talk about your processes for creating at each site and whether viewer participation changes?

**AH:** My process is one of response and listening to what comes to my attention when I visit the architecture or spend time in a place. All projects are accompanied by a fair amount of reading and research, but it isn’t exactly scholarly. It’s like going for a walk: you’re casting around for the thing that helps you start to make sense of your perceptions in response to being somewhere. Responding to spaces usually involves understanding their histories, but the pieces never narrate that. For me, it concerns making what’s present, but not necessarily visible, shareable in some sense.

At some level, all work is participatory because we choose to stop and respond whether we’re physically doing something or standing silently. In Japan, I worked with a small theater group whose members stood on tables and made the sounds of bird calls; people were invited to join them and were quite willing to do this thing that normally would make one self-conscious. I hadn’t done anything like that in a while, but in Denver, I worked with a choir and a composer on a reading between the volunteer singers and the audience, which had a spoken part. I’m interested in the experience of standing in a group together and speaking out loud or chanting—what happens when voices blend together to become a larger whole. Again, if

you think about all the threads, it’s another textile metaphor. I’ve been trying to understand my attraction to these forms. We don’t usually gather in public to speak. We’re usually an audience. I don’t think a lot of us are in choirs. But, to me, that structure is interesting.

I was just in Laos filming the boat that we finished for *The Quiet in the Land*. To listen to the chanting and to experience how the speaking voice acts as a connective thread is moving to me. I’m thinking about a place for that kind of experience in secular culture. I think that we have longings to join together, not necessarily in the community, but as strangers, to witness or to make. It will take me a long time to sort out what relationship these things have to the form of the work.

When we were making the books for *human carriage*, I hired students, people volunteered, and the studio was a busy hive of making, which allowed the individuality of everybody’s hand. It was so satisfying to be doing this kind of manual labor quite intensely. If you really look at it, you see how different they all are—every action, every gesture. Yet with the bell carriage, every passage is invisible. So, the way I’ve tended to describe this piece is that the lightness and sound of the bell hand off to the weight and silence of the book. And the visibility of the labor hands off to the invisibility of the movement. The piece is about one thing allowing the other: they’re woven together in a mutual system of one needing and allowing the other.

**JGC:** You collaborated with Meredith Monk on *mercy*, and those sounds were also part of *corpus*. How do you calibrate sounds, words, and rhythms?

**AH:** Meredith can hear in ways that I can’t. I’m very moved by her work, and I’m a better listener for having worked with her. The rhythms that I pay attention to are often physical rhythms. Here, for example, I spent a lot of time talking about and thinking about the speed of the bell carriage with Marty: if it’s at this speed, it’s going to do this—you can imagine all the



*voce*, 2006. Wood tables, tube radios, desk lamps, kimono, plastic wrapping, 8 spinning speakers, 2 spinning video projections, performers, and sound, 3 views of multimedia installation at the Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan.

possibilities. What is the sound made by the bells? We brought all sorts of bells in here and tested them in this space. I'm not working so much in composition; the sound is found, sometimes, by what is at hand and by paying attention.

**JGC:** I'm struck by how you use the body in your work. In *mercy*, when Monk has a camera in her mouth, the mouth is performing the function of the eye, and that's like synesthesia—switching sensory signals.

**AH:** Many simple moves in my work take one sense and place it in the physical location of another. It's partly that I'm motivated so much by the tactile sense: How does seeing become tactile, and how does touching become a form of seeing? Or how does the mouth, which is this place of speaking and eating and every-

thing else, become an eye? And how is the mouth a room? It's almost a Surrealist displacement, but thinking about that physical shift as a shift of category, the imaginative base of the work then can shift.

**JGC:** In a similar way, in *reach* (2005), you created seven long-handled, rusted spoons with various-sized holes in their bowls. Is this a cautionary tale?

**AH:** Many things are tied up in simple objects. A spoon is one of the first tools that extends our reach. Yes, each has a hole because, in some ways, we're never filled. We have such insatiable desire, which is something that Buddhism addresses. How do we live with and how do we change that voracious appetite to consume things, material, time, and experience? It's acknowledging that dilemma. We can reach and touch and hold, but we can't ever really have.

**JGC:** As *Joan Simon points out* in *An Inventory of Objects*, the book first became an image in your 1987 piece, the earth never gets flat.<sup>3</sup> You frequently allude to memory, records, acts of reading. What are you working on now?



*meditation boat*, 2009. 3 views of 36-meter-long boat with 19.6-meter-long meditation hall. Work produced in Luang Prabang, Laos.

**AH:** We live, obviously, in a culture where literacy and the amount of time we spend using words is enormous. We are text-based. It's one of the central ways that culture has been recorded. For me, textiles is another. What I love about active reading, and the process of reading, is being immersed, falling into the fold between two pages, completely in the "somewhere else" that is the book. This recognition of the ability to simultaneously be inside and outside is parallel to the experience of being a body. We're always both an inside and an outside. The book mimics the body. So it's not a surprise that the book is a central cultural artifact. And while reading something might forever change us, it doesn't leave a physical mark. The immersiveness of reading and the broadly associational kind of thinking that is engendered by the solitary, silent act of reading are analogous, for me, to a "making" space. For years, I've been wondering if the experience and process of reading could be like an act of drawing. How might that come forward in terms of form? I'm still in that question. It's one thread that continues to be drawn forward into different projects. The relationship between a line of thread and a line of text is one of those central, structuring aspects in my work. They come forward together.

I just came back from Luang Prabang, probably my final visit to The Quiet in the Land project. We built a boat based on walking meditation halls in the forest. I was back to film it and also to make a gift of it to a particular monastery.

I'm beginning to look at that video footage and other video from over the years. I'm also working on a project for the Pulitzer Foundation that involves word and image, which are part of the foundation's history and what people associate with the name and with newspapers. The Tadao Ando building is such a sculptural container—the outside sculpts the inside. A class that I taught at Washington University with my husband Michael Mercil, looking at the Cahokia Mounds, the Arch, and the Pulitzer building as important St. Louis places and cultural monuments, began the research on the project. It takes me a long time to research and find the form. Then there is a fury of making at the end.

**JGC:** *Dave Hickey called you "a mythic archaeologist of the everyday," investigating "invisible states of being."* Why should art concern itself with the immaterial?

**AH:** Because it's everything.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Ann Hamilton, to Hamilton's studio head Jamie Boyle, to Alexandra Munroe, and to the Guggenheim PR team for facilitating this interview.

<sup>2</sup> On March 25, 2009, Alexandra Munroe sent an e-mail response to this question: "This is an interesting connection which, though obvious and poetic, has never occurred to me. Ann's work came first; the selection of the title came much later in the process."

<sup>3</sup> Joan Simon, *Ann Hamilton: An Inventory of Objects 1984–2006* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2006), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Dave Hickey, "Ann Hamilton's Spoons," in *Ann Hamilton at Gemini 2004–2005, reach*, (New York: Gemini G.E.L. at Joni Moisant Weyl, 2006), p. 1–2.