



The following text is from *ann hamilton at gemini g.e.l.* © Joan Simon 2008

*I made my song a coat . . .*

--W.B. Yeats

Giving voice to materials has been an underlying motor of Ann Hamilton's many bodies of work, and nowhere is this more evident than in her latest Gemini series. These, her fourth body of work with the Gemini studio, include prints made of marks of distressed fabric; variant lined sheets that, like music scores, alone and in their multiplicity, evoke a chorus; objects in the form of devices that aid hearing; and a white felt coat with a black stripe that, for all its singularity, is often displayed multiply as a field of performative presences. With all of these works Hamilton is asking "How do we stand together? How might we form a chorus of speaking and listening? What does a choir need? Just as paper holds notations for what is spoken or sung, cloth is the first house of the body, its shell."<sup>1</sup>

*shell*

To trace the genesis of Hamilton's white felt coat, explicitly titled *shell* (2007) and which the artist also calls "a great white envelope," is to look to many sources, most immediately to the print shop (especially the felt blanket used on the etching presses), her processes there, the close observation of the many tools at hand and her allusive connections between sittings, possibilities, localities, and larger economies. Hamilton recalls the printing felts, although she had initially

---

<sup>1</sup> All Ann Hamilton quotes are from conversations with the author, 2008.



been attracted to the image of a coat she had seen in a magazine clipping affixed to an envelope sent to her by Gemini's Sidney Felsen. This translated into a desire for *that* coat, and more expansively into “a wanting, a desire to make clothing which goes back a long time, even though I don’t know how to sew very well, or pattern-make. I wanted to make very simple, iconic, emblematic forms—to use the coat as a way to begin.” And while it is related, as she says, “to thinking about the felt suit by Joseph Beuys”, Hamilton also links the black line of the coat to the line emitted from two spinning video projectors spilling and redrawing a line drawn on paper within the walls of a room for her installation *ghost—a border act* (2000).

Among other referents for *shell* are the felt coats (as well as veiled felt hats) that participants wore for a performance at Sweden’s Statens Historiska Museum / The Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm, as they generated sounds by hand-cranking wind machines for Hamilton’s *aloud* (2004) while reading from her artist’s book of the same title.<sup>2</sup> All of these body-cloaking “shells” go back to Hamilton’s earliest object, a hand-made toothpick-encrusted suit created in 1984. This was the turning point, in a sense: it was a methodically hand-crafted independent sculpture; it was a “hide”—a shell the artist wore as she became a material in an installation; and it served as a component in one of her performances. As a frame for the body and as a body-object itself, this set the direction for Hamilton's many works that followed.

Most critically, though, the development of *shell* is related to the felt blanket used on the etching presses. As the artist explains, “its density makes it pliable like cloth, but planar and stiff

---

<sup>2</sup> Ann Hamilton, *aloud* (Stockholm: Gothic Hall, Museum of National Antiquities, 2004). Text by Lawrence Raab. Published in association with the National Public Art Council, Sweden.



like paper, it can hold form. It doesn't so much drape over the body as stand around it—like a thing or an idea or a drawing of itself. Because this is Hollywood, and because of Sidney Felsen, we were able to create a prototype with a pattern-maker from the film industry pretty quickly. The writers' strike was on and Joanna Bradley had time. We were working with the coat at the same time we were working with the prints, and the thick, funky line on the paper jumped onto the coat. The piping in the seams made the coat into a drawing, an outline drawing. The prints 'with the dense awkward line around them' became elements of the multi-part *score*, as well as individual prints collected in a series titled *script*. ” For this larger field of expression, “for this imaginary choir,” as Hamilton puts it, “the blank coats became the robes, the blank prints, the score.”

*score and script*

Three elements constitute *score* (2007). Its overall structure is a small, portable wood writing desk that serves as both platform and container. Gently angled, its topmost surface is a site of writing and, at the same time, a base supporting two horn-shaped objects that recall the hand-held antique tools placed at the ear to funnel and amplify sound—a form also used in other contexts and, in reverse, to transmit sound. (Both of Hamilton's horn-shaped objects are closed at the end, so, as in many other elements in her body of work, function is thwarted.)<sup>3</sup> Within the

---

<sup>3</sup> This thwarting of function may be seen in the water table of Hamilton's 1988 installation, *the capacity of absorption*, at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. There, the open



desk's drawer is a set of prints. Each appears to be a variant of a blank music notation sheet, outlined with a thick hand-made line, which demarks the figure from ground. (Hamilton refers to them as "portrait-like in their scale," indeed figures of speech, for they are not unlike the outlined space-holding 'balloons' in cartoons that isolate fragments of text/speech.)

Hamilton's *score* also alludes in specific ways to her processes at Gemini and those evidenced in other works for eliciting, siting and containing voice. Here, Hamilton recalls "thinking about the choir," which "came from thinking about a collective of spoons with mouths filled and filling" in the Gemini series titled *reach* (2005). In working with Sidney Felsen, "who has so many collections," she also returned to collections of her own. "I had collected blank lined pieces of paper in my studio and I wanted to make prints of their blankness. I was thinking of each of these sheets as a place of possibility for saying." These touched back to other Hamilton works: the eight-story concrete *tower* (1984-2007) at the Oliver Ranch in northern California, characterized by Hamilton as carrying the "potential in the muteness of it's hollow form," and was the site of Meredith Monk's "Songs of Ascension"(2008) and the Kronos Quartet (scheduled for 2009), as well as *corpus* (2003), with the "white pieces of paper" at Mass MOCA, floating down in an enormous gallery space from mechanized, ceiling mounted, paper-dropping devices. She thinks of both architectural structure and sheets of paper as sites "full of space or empty of words."

---

finger holes in the table allowed the visitor access into the table's recesses and its pool of water, yet, according to the artist, the visitor "couldn't reach the water that you could hear."



Hamilton's question for *score* at Gemini became "How does the blank piece of paper become the ground for what it is 'to say'." She experimented with music paper and notepaper, and used textile threads to generate the horizontal lines for the prints. "Flax and different kinds of thread material became the lines of the paper, and these became the prints. The ones that were most literal didn't translate into print very well, and those led me to work more loosely, using a rope from a mop and a piece of wax thread, laying them out in relations that are abstractly reminiscent of musical score sheet paper or lined writing paper, which led to the *score* and *script* series."

As Hamilton characterizes the results, they were "almost blank, I was thinking of how the things we say, the things we write, are a kind of portraiture. I liked the graphicness of these prints. They felt unlabored and unprecious. I liked all the variations—the way each was a cousin to the next. It was very hard for me to cut it down, to choose certain ones for an edition. To make selections and to edit the collection into particular prints has been challenging for me. I am attracted to the collective and my tendency is toward the gigantic."

Within an overall collective field, Hamilton expects her viewers to reckon part to whole as well as to the spaces in between. This may function on a micro level as well as a macro; she has, at times, emphasized the spaces between manuscript letters, or the spaces between tangible increments. In this way her process is derived as much from the act of reading as it is of weaving—a continuum of coming into form and into legibility. It is a process not unlike the one Patricia Crain notes when she writes "learning to read means first and foremost learning how to



look.”<sup>4</sup> The isolated pictorial form of the letter is part of a semantic association of stroke to letter, letter to word, word to sentence, sentence to spacing, and spacing to whole. The dissonance between any of these figures in isolation within a field bears a responsibility on the reader to reckon meanings out of these visual and contextual clues.

Thus, *score* is an orchestration and reading of the relations between all its elements. It is constituted of writing and reading, the written and spoken, the seen and heard; and all these are constituents of its choir. As a ‘shell’ containing other ‘shells,’ the writing desk is the site containing a selection of Hamilton’s line-ruled prints—“the most simple, and most graphic, those go in the drawer.” (Others from this field of prints are published as individual works under the series title *script*.) The two objects that rest on its surface have a contradictory presence and function, recalling Hamilton’s *reach* edition of dysfunctional spoons, whose bowls are punctuated with holes. “In the back are the two ear trumpets—open at the bell end, but sealed over at the end you would listen or speak into; [they are] mute tools for sounding the blank paper.”

Horns used for various soundings, and indeed used for muting sounds, have appeared in Hamilton’s works before. For her first large-scale museum installation, *the capacity of absorption* (1988), at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the first of three galleries featured a 14-foot horn entirely covered in twisted flax, which was based on Athanasius

---

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Crain, *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from The New England Primer to The Scarlet Letter* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000): p. 7.



Kircher's 17<sup>th</sup> century megaphone for projecting sound over long distances.<sup>5</sup> The bell end in that monumental horn was also closed, muting any sounds that might be emitted, and yet its surface bore an image of hearing. Set flush into the face of the bell end of the sculpture was a video showing an ear overflowing with water (perhaps referencing both Kircher's creation of a universal language and his studies of caves and underwater currents). Another element of Hamilton's monumental horn served to mute sound in other ways, and depended on the participant's active stance to do so. By speaking into a telephone receiver, which was suspended from the bell end of the sculpture, the sounds emitted from spinning water vortexes mounted on the room's walls were silenced. The louder a participant spoke, the slower the vortexes moved, until the room's voicings were finally silenced, as if the walls, in addition to being 'speakers,' 'had ears' and could, therefore, respond to human speech. While intimations of Kircher's studies of magnetism may also have played a part in Hamilton's speaking/muting machines in *the capacity of absorption* (Hamilton's spinning waters were generated by hidden magnets), the

---

<sup>5</sup> Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680) was a Jesuit, historian, music theorist, creator of a universal language scheme, and inventor. In 1631 he published his first book, which was about magnetism. He was also a curator of collections at the Roman College, and was the inventor of a type of magic lantern device, by which he projected images from glass plates via the light of an oil lamp onto a wall.



form of Hamilton's *score*—its overall housing, as well as its components—has a striking affinity with Kircher's *Organum Mathematicum* [Mathematical Organ] (1668), which was a cabinet that contained written materials, one that could also write messages and literally generate song. In fact, Kircher's wooden box's steeply angled surface opens to reveal the texts within. It is a muted body of knowledge that is to be activated by its user.

*warp & weft / gauge*

To return to the material of cloth by way of the spoons Hamilton created for an earlier edition at Gemini is a creative leap that would make little sense, but for an understanding of Hamilton's processes and the link between extensions of the body and the ways that her own created images can become undone. "The spoon," as Hamilton says, "is a hand extended—a tool we need to eat and satiate ourselves with food or liquid. What are the basic objects that we need? What objects extend the body's primary projections of touch and voice?" Hamilton took hold of the modeling clay she found in the corner of the Gemini studio and started forming it into long, Giacometti-like spoons; but, as she says, "they seemed to need a hole, to have a dual purpose, to both contain a material and frame a view—like the mirrors in the MIT project." Just as Hamilton undid the functionality of the mirrors in *aleph* (1992) at MIT by erasing the silver backing to reveal the clear glass, turning them into instruments for 'seeing through,' so did the holes in the spoons shift their function, becoming something like hand-held optical instruments rather than usable tableware, although Hamilton herself sees the hole (whole) functioning somewhat differently. In fact, she does not think of them as optical instruments, although, as she says, "Yes, you can hold





them up to your eye and see through them. And yes, their lengths are the distance from the eye to the hand. But the whole (hole) is perhaps, for me, a way to think about our capacity to hold, and our desire to consume, and the abundance and voraciousness of each—the inevitable hollow that can never fill, a tool never to satisfy.”

The idea of seeing through, of deconstructing her own material forms, not only played into making the spoons, but led eventually to the bodies of work that became the Gemini series *warp & weft* and *gauge* (both 2007). For these, she worked with distressed organza, pulling apart the structure so that the spaces between the linear marks of thread, the distension between a woven grid of verticals and horizontals would allow that space, that breath, to come forward from among the defining lines. “The left-brain needs some kind of logic to be making something, so when I return to the Gemini studio I am always confronted by drawing in a material way. I hear recurring in my head ‘I don’t draw.’ Making a mark on a plate doesn’t make sense to my hand. The idea of bodily extension and bodily needs became a way for me to describe some logic to myself while freeing me to draw with materials.”

Hamilton had earlier pulled apart the grid of silk organza for large-scale spinning curtains in *filament* (1996) and *bearings* (1996) and, as she has said, “I came to understand the distension of the cloth’s grid as a way of drawing. [At Gemini] we exposed the distressed cloth onto litho plates and I was excited by the images. I saw something when printed that I had not seen with the cloth in front of me. I experienced the different pressures of the hand tempering the cloth as a way to approach making a printed image. As both a field and a pattern of individual threads, the images came forward into printmaking from a history in the installation work.”



In printing the variant images that these distended lines elicited, Hamilton found that she liked all the fragments and wanted to print on very thin tissue “to return the image to a cloth-like membrane.” She explains, “I didn’t want to assume a frame—that is, images removed from an immediate tactile space. By ironing fusible glue between the printed tissue and the cheesecloth support, the image of the textile is returned to cloth. We pieced these into blanket-size cloths meant to be folded, handled and touched. They were made one by one at my studio, working with Jamie Boyle, my assistant.”

For Hamilton, these elements required their own kind of “shell,” so she worked with bookmaker, artist, and long-time friend Kathryn Clark to make a container for them, creating the box she thought they needed, “a place to be when they were folded up.” The overall process of working with Sidney Felsen and the printers in the shop has given Hamilton permission to return to hand-making at a time in her practice when she is tending more toward the use of sound and voice in architectural spaces. As Hamilton emphasizes, the work at Gemini “gives me a chance to wrestle with making—with making stuff. While I have a very material practice, it hasn’t produced that many objects. The process of manifesting ideas and processes in objects and prints is so different than working in architectural space.”

That the final outcome is both sculpture and a collection of works on paper relates to Hamilton’s method and, importantly, her own self-criticism. “I’ve never had the practice or skill for thinking through drawing, but in some ways working in installation is related. My experience at Alfred, working with the Institute for Electronic Arts, helped me see how my work in space is a form of drawing and, like drawing, is a form of attention. In expanding my material hand to work with Jim Reid and Erik Beehn and the crew at Gemini, [I found] a way to make



objects or prints that are related to the larger terrain of the work. I don't really want to be in a choir, but the choir as a structuring principle between the individual and the collective voice is the structure of thread and cloth. The experience of the textile is the play between the social and individual. I will never be done working within those relations.”

*Hamilton's chorus of choirs*

While known in the past three decades for her large-scale, multi-media installations within grand-scaled architectural spaces, Hamilton has, in recent years, turned to different sorts of makings. At one end of the spectrum are voicings themselves, as heard in chants and song; at the other reach of the spectrum are the objects that bespeak individually and as ensembles—a chorus of voices, as in *shell* and the *script, score, warp & weft* and *gauge* prints at Gemini.

For her exhibition at Gemini in summer 2008, Hamilton composed a choir, creating a polyphonic song using the figurative forms of *shell*, in serial form, with the prints that are the series *script, warp & weft* and *gauge*, and the ensemble that is *score*. For a project in Denver in 2008, on the occasion of the Democratic National Convention, Hamilton orchestrated a chorus of multiple choirs from numerous churches, revealing once again, and in a further extended field, her combine of esthetics, poetics and politics is expansive and inclusive. As Hamilton's overall practice has extended to what is heard—to voice itself, whether a collective voicing of chants, of spirituals sung, of collaged texts spoken, of oral commentaries about a fellow artist's work—so, too, has a different group assisted Hamilton in her continuing return to tactile materials for bodies of work that are visually read.



---

GEMINI G.E.L. <sup>AT</sup> JONI MOISANT WEYL

Just as the blank paper and the white coat are places of possibility of what might be said, so has the Gemini workshop functioned for Hamilton as a site of possibility and another community with whom she works in conversation—in fact, another choir. For Hamilton, the workshop is not simply a place to make prints (or other editions), it is, most importantly, another place of permission, a site of speaking, listening and reading to explore what is not immediately known and to find ways to utter new voicings.

Joan Simon

*Paris, 2008*