view

ann hamilton / kathryn clark

WORKS
March 20 – June 23, 1991
HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN
Smithsonian Institution
Our conversations form the basis of our friendship and are what allow us to work together. For us, the interest in collaboration extends from an emotional need to be part of a community. Because we don’t always work together, our decision to collaborate on a specific project occurs when the challenge of a situation brings up issues we are already talking about. We share an interest in how meaning is exemplified by materials and in re-examining the ways we know things cerebrally versus the kind of knowledge that comes through the senses. Certain issues that circulate again and again in our discussions always come back to a shared concern for how the value of individual experience and voice is lost in institutional processes. Our conversations follow a loose associative pattern... sometimes painfully slow. Every thought gets turned over and scrutinized by two. But we are patient, pursuing a meandering thread that doesn’t seem immediately related to the larger conversation. That patience follows from our interest in the interdependence of systems that somehow makes any idea relevant. Issues get more refined, and there is the benefit of being able to check your own impulses within a larger context.

Collaboration, in its diffusion of individual authorship, places the emphasis less on the who and more on the what. For us, working together makes public a commitment to a process of exchange that goes on whether it is an individual or group effort. Most important, collaborating is more satisfying than working alone.

washington/birshhorn

Our earliest conversations focused on Washington as the nation’s capital, and we discussed the difficulty of locating points of access if you want to engage or confront the governmental bureaucracy. Everyone has had the experience of trying to fit a description of private life into generic government forms, where everything with emotional value is reduced to a statistical list. Likewise, when you do participate in a public political demonstration you often come away feeling that, although it is a media event, no one in the government is home to listen. Although we have access to more and more information, it is difficult to perceive ways in which to act on that information, and the attempt can be like entering some Kafka-esque maze.

So, rather than a site of public involvement, Washington has become a site where one takes pictures and gathers souvenirs. That shift from active participation to passive looking involves a loss that became central to our discussions of the project and eventually led us in a direction very different from that of our original conversation. In palimpsests, the installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, we drew upon published and private memoirs that, copied by hand, lined the walls with fragments of human memory. With the Hirshhorn WORKS project, we again had the opportunity to draw on printed
material, taking advantage of the various archives of Washington. We thought our interest in re-evaluating historical information would lead to working in a more overtly political manner. Finally, though, in the face of our response to the Hirshhorn’s architecture, that direction dropped from our conversation.

The circular form of the Hirshhorn Museum building presents the image of a vault or a militaristic fortress. It has a hard exterior that protects and isolates its own belly. But the core of the museum is windows — it looks in on itself. As we walked round and round the hallways, with no external points of reference, we experienced the museum as a system impervious to the outside. One is fixed in a repeating course circling the fountain that sits off-center in the interior court, echoing the elliptical path of the Earth around the Sun. A sense of timelessness and disorientation were our first and primary experiences. The fortress-like exterior and its façade of permanence in the face of the flux and change of time seemed to encapsulate two irreconcilable desires: the desire to collect, contain, and preserve and the desire to participate in the impermanence of the world outside the collection.

*collecting*

The Hirshhorn cannot be considered apart from its relationship to the Smithsonian, a vast institution that is charged with collecting and classifying objects and disseminating knowledge. A museum acts as a framing device to sanction and display the accumulations of the various urges and motivations to collect. We are both avid collectors who take great pleasure in finding something special and housing it among other treasures. Yet our impulse to collect is in many ways childish, with a motivation somewhat akin to that of a pack rat whose attention is snared by the gleam of a silver thread. In the end, our collections are diverse and eclectic rather than categorical and striving toward completeness. In contrast, when collections are built and institutionalized, what is collected and what is ignored become political issues. Whether contemporary Western art or artifacts in a natural history museum, those aspects of culture that are designated as valuable for collection are often at odds with what is actually valuable in daily life. A museum makes it possible for viewers to return to its collections again and again, but it also sets things apart from the continuum of life — takes them out of circulation and places them in the stasis of a perpetual past.

Making site-related work — work that is ephemeral and constituted of organic materials — is part of retracing the path back toward art that is among the living and therefore among the dying. Such materials as water, wax, and paprika, which can change form and mark or be marked by time, reflect our view of art as more an ongoing process than a product. Introducing living systems — the snails that devoured cabbage heads in *palimpsests* or the moths that lived, reproduced, and died in Ann’s recent installation at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio — is a way of extending the process of making into the public life of the work. It raises issues of tending and offers a more active relationship with the work on the part of the institution and the viewer. If collecting is about the removal of objects to a hermetic context, then art that exists in the seams can introduce and remind us of all that cannot be preserved.
The challenge of the Hirshhorn WORKS project was to place work in or with a site that didn’t isolate it but let it interact with the museum. Outside or tangential to our discussions about the site was a desire to create something that was emotional, as a contrast to our perception of the coldness in the building. The tactile warmth of our previous installation depended on completely surrounding and enveloping the viewer in the relationships of the work. Initially, it was difficult to see a way to create the experience we wanted by affecting a wall or portion of the Hirshhorn’s architecture. When we explored what kind of emotion we wanted, we kept returning to a need to acknowledge a sense of loss... whether personal, cultural, or specifically the loss we have talked about when objects are collected. Not only objects collected within the context of art but all the myriad artifacts and data that are the remnants of the plants, animals, and cultures that are becoming extinct in giving way to the demands of the industrial world. With the acknowledgment of loss came the use of water, with not only its reference to tears but its ability to wear down and mark over time. Our discussions about the loss of active involvement in the shift from participant to viewer led to our masking the windows, an act that limited the view and amplified the interior, self-referential aspect of the museum. Ironically, the loss that we were exploring metaphorically parallels a very real sense of loss that we both feel when the process of making a piece is finished and it becomes public.

We both have established a history of working with a community of people to create art. The intensive labor of Ann’s installations necessitates the efforts of many hands. A community forms out of working together, and the spirit of the continuing hive situation imbues the work with the felt presence of that collectivity. The accumulation of individual hand gestures visibly marks the work. In this, the work is both the labor and the thing. Over the past few years, Kathryn has worked as artist or artistic administrator on projects that linked artists with community activist groups. An important aspect of these collaborations has been that the work produced was only one part of a multiple agenda that included lobbying, education, and direct relief or services. Naming Names, an installation that included the names of 12,000 civilians killed in Guatemala and El Salvador, acknowledged the continuing labor of the human rights groups that collect the names and the local community that commits to remembering the loss through the activity of transcribing the lists by hand. The work is part of the process of involvement, not the object.

Both of us were raised in the Midwest and with an ethic that placed a high value on all forms of work. Making art is a process of affirming work’s pleasure.
This is the twelfth project in the Hirshhorn WORKS series — a special exhibition program in which artists are invited to choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create temporary works of art. The Hirshhorn believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, enlivens and transforms this environment and enables an exploration of some of the motivations and issues underlying site-specific art — a significant aspect of contemporary artistic expression.

Ann Hamilton and Kathryn Clark collaborated previously in 1989 to create palimpsests, an installation for Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos, an exhibition organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. The piece was conceived in two parts, the museum’s storefront window facing Broadway in the Soho section of downtown Manhattan and a room, 12 x 22 x 14 feet, inside the museum. The latter involved pinning to the walls hundreds of statements or quotations containing “remembrances, memories, and oral histories” hand-written by fifty or so friends on small pieces of paper. These verbal reflections also appeared on the floor, imbedded in contiguous beeswax tablets that obscured the messages. Viewers were required to remove their shoes before entering the space. Also part of the installation was a large aquarium-like vitrine containing a group of snails who were feasting on two large heads of cabbage. A gentle breeze from a house fan animated the small pieces of paper on the walls, evoking a touch of melancholy for the chorus of voices represented by the writings.

Kathryn Clark (b. Kendrick, Idaho, 1950) earned an undergraduate degree in 1984 at the University of Kansas studying American history and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1986. Clark has taught both book arts and photography in the Art Department at the University of California at Santa Barbara. She has had recent solo exhibitions in New York, California, and Stockholm and has dedicated much of her creative energy to collaborative community-based projects. Clark lives and works in New York City.

Ann Hamilton (b. Lima, Ohio, 1956) graduated from the University of Kansas in 1979 with a degree in textile design before attending Yale University School of Art where she received a Master of Fine Arts in sculpture in 1985. Since that time, she has been teaching in the Art Department at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her work has been the subject of solo museum exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the La Jolla (now San Diego) Museum of Contemporary Art. Among her honors are a Bessie Award from the Dance Theatre Workshop of New York for her installation at the Philip Morris Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art (1985), John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (1989), Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award (1989), and Awards in the Visual Arts (1989–90). Most recently, she was selected to represent the United States at the 1991 São Paulo Bienale. Hamilton lives and works in Santa Barbara.

Because the two collaborating artists do not always work together, the usual interview format between artist and coordinating curator has been superseded by statements generated by Hamilton and Clark for this brochure, which they also designed.

Ned Rifkin
Chief Curator for Exhibitions
There is an often-told story of a wealthy English collector who long believed that he owned a unique copy of a book. He was devastated when he learned of a collector in Paris who also owned one. He immediately traveled to France and, on finding the collector, offered him 1,000 francs for his copy. The man did not want to sell. The offer was increased until, at 25,000 francs, the Parisian finally agreed to the transaction. On acquisition of the book, the English collector threw it into the fire. The Frenchman in horror tried to retrieve it, exclaiming, "Are you crazy?"

"Nay," returned the Englishman, stopping him. "I, too, possess a copy, and I deemed it unique."

— adapted from Douglas Rigby, Lock Stock and Barrel: The Story of Collecting

Samuel Pepys, book collector and keeper of the famous diary, arranged and rearranged his library. Finally, the logic of order by subject or reference convenience gave way to a need for visual order. The library was arranged by size, in double rows with the taller volumes behind so that the lettering on all could be seen. Wooden stilts were built under shorter books and painted to match the bindings. The diary, which was written in notebooks of varying sizes, was bound into matching volumes so it could be kept together.

— adapted from William Walsh, Handy-book of Literary Curiosities

In 1920 Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin presented a model for The Monument to the Third International. The tower, which would house the legislative, executive, and information branches of the revolutionary government, was designed as a double spiral. The chambers of government were meant to rotate at different speeds, metaphorically linking the evolution of society to the movement of celestial bodies. Made of glass, the tower symbolically made the workings of the government visible to the people.

— adapted from John Milner, Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-garde

Selected Bibliography

Kathryn Clark


Ann Hamilton


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