

*whitecloth*

# Ann Hamilton

The 1998 Larry Aldrich Foundation Award Exhibition

January 24 - May 23, 1999

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art

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The Larry Aldrich Foundation Award—which consists of a \$25,000 cash prize and a solo exhibition at The Aldrich Museum—is given annually to a contemporary American artist of exceptional merit. An independent panel of curators, museum directors, artists, critics, collectors, and gallerists selected the 1998 recipient, Ann Hamilton.

Her installation *whitecloth* is housed in the two hundred-year-old section of The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art. From 1783 to 1883 this space served as a general store, post office, and town meeting place. In 1883 the building was remodeled, and served as a private residence until 1929, when it became the First Church of Christ, Scientist. When Larry Aldrich purchased the building in 1964, he converted the interior to exhibition spaces by erecting walls in front of fireplaces and windows and removing most of the remaining domestic architectural details.

Hamilton made a preliminary visit to the Museum to initiate ideas for her exhibition. The dichotomy between the historic building and the contemporary art it housed became a starting point for her project. The following is excerpted from a conversation that took place between the Museum's curator of education, Nina Carlson, and Ann Hamilton when the artist returned to The Aldrich for the installation of *whitecloth*.

**NC** What struck you about your first visit to the Museum?

**AH** I was initially struck by the tension between the building's exterior, which projects one thing, and its interior, which denies it. As you drive on Main Street, you see an exterior façade in harmony with the surrounding early New England architectural proportions and architectural details. This history is partially erased on the inside. Yet there are obvious remnants of the building's earlier functions, most apparent in the floor and the scale of the rooms.

All of my work is, in some way or another, about a threshold or passageway between an

interiorly and an exteriorly. The way that I approach an installation is to try to bring out something already there, but, perhaps, not obvious. When I first walked up to the second floor, I was struck by the compression of the space. The black ceiling made it seem closed and airless. I wondered how to return a sense of wholeness to the space—how to animate it. An initial response was to uncover all thirteen windows and return natural light. Another challenge of this space is its dimensionally-proportioned rooms. Although they flow between each other in and of themselves, they are discrete. This arrangement provided an opportunity to consider those singular objects' relationship to a room, rather than an overall, materially-laden environment.

**NC** This is the first truly domestic space that you have worked in for quite some time. Did this influence the way you approached the exhibition?

**AH** Actually, in the early nineties I did an installation in another space with a domestic history. I worked in a row house next to the Mattress Factory on the north side of Pittsburgh. While both situations led me to research back in time, the two structures elicited different responses. There, I was interested in labor history. Here, I was led in the direction of early Puritan history, toward the more private activities of writing and reading. The individual rooms also caused me to consider those singular objects already part of my visual vocabulary: table, chair, book, window....

**NC** Tables are something you use often and they seem especially appropriate for this domestic space. The butcher-block table on the second floor looks as though it has a rich history. Could you describe your use of that table?

**AH** I found that butcher-block when I was searching for a table to use for the "floating cloth" at the entrance to the show. It wasn't planned. Tables are a site for labor, a site for interior contemplation, and for social gathering. My attitude in using this butcher-block is the same as it is for this space. All I am doing is presenting it.

**NC** Text is also an important part of your vocabulary. In this installation it has been incorporated into the two tables on the third floor.

**AH** What ties these two pieces together is writing, where the line is embodied in the material. Copying words by hand slows the body down to absorb the language in a different way than it is absorbed by eye. By writing out the text in a continuously cursive line the words lose their singularity and dissolve into illegible web. In a sense the text is erased as it is written. The spaces between the letters become more visible than the letters themselves. These pieces try to "oralize" the space of words. One text is a sermon from Cotton Mather.

**NC** Your work in the past often involved a body or a figure actively working within the installation. In *whitecloth* there is an implied human presence, which makes the viewers conscious of their own body or presence and of the presences that have existed here.

**AH** This work is as much about the absence of the body as its presence. While the attendant figure from earlier works is absent here, there is a performative aspect to several of these new works. The spinning floor responds to a viewer's weight. In some ways the mechanical cloth, by actively darting from room to room and floor to floor, traces the presence of a person. The cloth passing a window causes a corresponding ripple in the copper drum of water set into the floor.



**ANN HAMILTON** was born in Lima, Ohio. She graduated from the University of Kansas with a BFA in textile design, and from Yale University with an MFA in sculpture. In 1985 she became assistant professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, a post she held until moving to Columbus, Ohio, in 1991. In 1993 Hamilton was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, which allowed her to work full-time as an artist, producing more than ten major installations within the past five years. Hamilton represented the United States at the 21st International Sao Paulo Bienal (1991) and participated in the 3rd Lyon Biennale of Contemporary Art (1995-96). She is the 1999 United States representative for the Venice Biennale. Hamilton's international catalogue of solo exhibitions includes; *tropos*, DIA Center for the Arts, New York City (1993/94); *Project 48: seam*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (1994); *lumen*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (1995); *reserve*, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Holland (1996); *the body and the object: Ann Hamilton 1984-1996*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (1996), Miami Art Museum (1998), and Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montreal (1998/99); *kaph*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (1997); and *present-past 1984-1997*, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, France (1997).

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Inside: **Ann Hamilton** studio view (detail), 1998  
Photo: Shawn Scully  
Courtesy: Sean Kelly, NY