UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: May 1, 2007

I, Laura A. Partridge,
hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:
Master of Arts
in:
Art History
It is entitled:

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair:  Dr. Kimberly Paice
Dr. Theresa Leininger-Miller
Dr. Mikiko Hirayama

A thesis submitted to the

Division of Research and Advanced Studies
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Art History
of the College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning

2007

By Laura Allison Partridge

B.A., Butler University, 2001

Committee chair: Dr. Kimberly Paice, Assistant Professor
This study offers an in-depth analysis of the “altered books” in three installations by Ann Hamilton (b. 1956 Lima, Ohio) from the early 1990s; 1. *indigo blue* (1991), created for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina; 2. *tropos* (1993), which she installed at the Dia: Chelsea in New York; and 3. *lineament* (1994), a work that she created for the Ruth Bloom Gallery in Santa Monica, California. Hamilton’s installations are intended to establish a sensory experience that responds to the sites in which she creates them. She often includes a person who tends the installation, that is, a performer who is called a “tender,” who acts unaware of the presence of spectators, and who is wholly engrossed in the task with which s/he has been charged. The tenders in *indigo blue*, *tropos*, and *lineament* sat at a table systematically removing lines of text from books, that is, they altered the books. In my analysis I will discuss all of the components within each installation, focusing on the altered books and how they played a central role in securing language as a major theme in these works.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project could not have happened without the beautiful work by Ann Hamilton. I would like to thank her for taking the time to speak with me, and for her permission to use the images of the installations I chose to discuss.

I would like to thank Dr. Kim Paice. Throughout this process she was a great help, support, and resource. She recognized my intellectual potential long before I did, and never let me give up on myself. She provided encouragement, but was honest about what would be required of me in my pursuit to understand and effectively apply certain concepts. There were countless moments of doubt, all of which I was able to overcome with her guidance which was and will always be an invaluable part of this experience.

I would like to thank Drs. Theresa Leininger-Miller and Miki Hirayama for agreeing to serve on my committee. I appreciate their time, and willingness to participate. And last but not least, I would like to thank Jesse Dunbar for his love and support, and for telling me that everything will be o.k., about a million times.
CONTENTS

List of Figures 2
Introduction 3
Ch. 1: indigo blue (1991): A Material History 9
Ch. 2: Language as Loss or Absence in tropos (1993-94) 21
Ch. 3: lineament (1994): Words as Material 34
Conclusion 46
Figures 51
Selected Bibliography 60
LIST OF FIGURES

All images of work by Ann Hamilton unless otherwise noted.

1. *indigo blue*, Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, South Carolina, 1991, photo by John McWilliams

2. *indigo blue* (second-story office, view of sacks of soybeans), Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, South Carolina, 1991, photo by John McWilliams

3. *indigo blue* (view of folded-blue work clothes), Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, South Carolina, 1991, photo by John McWilliams

4. Altered Book from *indigo blue*, 1991

5. *tropos*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1993-94, photo by Thibault Jenson

6. *tropos* (view of tender), Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1993-94, photo by Thibault Jenson


8. *lineament*, Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1994, photo by Robert Wedemeyer

9. *lineament* (view of table), Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1994, photo by Robert Wedemeyer
INTRODUCTION

In this study I will offer an in-depth analysis of the “altered books” in three installations by Ann Hamilton (b. 1956 Lima, Ohio) from the early 1990s; 1. *indigo blue* (1991) (Fig. 1), created for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina; 2. *tropos* (1993) (Fig. 5), which she installed at the Dia: Chelsea in New York; and 3. *lineament* (1994) (Fig. 8), a work that she created for the Ruth Bloom Gallery in Santa Monica, California.¹ In my analysis I will discuss all of the components within each installation, focusing on the altered books and how they played a central role in securing language as a major theme in these works.

Hamilton was trained in textile design at the University of Kansas where she earned a B.F.A, and went on to complete an M.F.A. in sculpture at Yale University in 1985. In her career of more than twenty years as a professional artist, Hamilton has shown works widely in both the United States and abroad, and she has worked with photography, video, sound, textiles, performance, and objects to create the large-scale installations for which she is best known. Hamilton’s installations are intended to establish a sensory experience that responds to the sites in which she creates them. She often includes a person who tends the installation, that is, a performer who is called a “tender,” who acts unaware of the presence of spectators, and who is wholly engrossed in the task with which s/he has been charged. This reminds viewers that the work is

¹ In 1992 the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York commissioned Hamilton to produce a limited edition of altered books the sale of which benefited the museum. I will not be discussing this commission, as I would like to focus on the significance of the altered books in the context of Hamilton’s installations.
always in the process of being made and suggests that viewers are also contributing to that making. Hamilton has herself acted as the tender, but she has also enlisted the help of other individuals to play the role. ² Hamilton first began to incorporate human elements into her work while in graduate school at Yale in what she called her studio tableaux, performance tableaux, or installation tableaux, thus invoking more traditional dramatic forms known as *tableaux vivants*, or “living pictures.” ³ These works, or tableaux, often filled Hamilton’s studio, but not always. One work, *the lids of unknown positions* (1984), was created out of doors. Another, *detour*, from the same year, was created in a large warehouse-like space typically used by undergraduates.

In the first monograph on Hamilton’s work titled *Ann Hamilton* (2001), art historian Joan Simon discusses certain artists who have influenced Hamilton. These artists include: Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Robert Smithson (1938-1973), Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Eva Hesse (1936-1970), Ree Morton (1936-1977), Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985), and Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), among others. She refers to Duchamp’s *1,200 bags of coal* (1938), which she says “seemed to appear overnight and from nowhere, suspended from a gallery ceiling (and which may or may not have contained coal).” ⁴ She refers to Smithson’s non-sites, his “glistening salt piles” that were set with mirrors in the corners of a traditional gallery space. ⁵ Hamilton shares

---

² Viewers may not have been aware that the artist was playing the role of the tender, and because the tender remained anonymous it would not necessarily have changed viewers’ experience of the work. When she has discussed the tender in specific works, she uses the personal pronoun “I” even though others played the role of the tender throughout the duration of an installation.
⁴ Simon, 16.
⁵ Ibid.
with these artists an interest in material (both organic and inorganic), as well as an
interest in things inside and outside as it relates to space, to the body, and to objects.
Hamilton is also concerned with a “physical immersion” and, “the relationships
between things in space.” These “things” include the objects and material that
Hamilton incorporates into her installations, but also the human elements, that is, the
tender who is part of the work, and the viewers themselves.

**THE ALTERED BOOKS**

The tenders in *indigo blue*, *tropos*, and *lineament* sat at a table systematically
removing lines of text from books, that is, they altered the books.\(^6\) In *indigo blue* the
tender used a pink eraser and saliva to erase the lines of text. Of the three installations
I will discuss, this is the only one in which the choice of books was significant. Hamilton
erased historical books, a choice upon which I will focus in my discussion of language as
a theme in this work. In *tropos* the tender singed the words from the pages using an
electric stylus which produced a thin line of smoke and the faint smell of burnt paper.
In *lineament* the books were pre-cut so that each line of text could be torn out, and the
strips of paper were then woven into a large ball by the tender.

---

\(^6\) I would like to address the lowercasing of the titles in Hamilton’s work. She has said of the decision to do
this that, “It’s because everything is always part of a larger context. So even though the titles are often solitary
words, they feel they could be lifted out of something else.”
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 1994, Neville Wakefield wrote an essay for the Tate Gallery catalogue, *Ann Hamilton: Mneme* (1994). Wakefield posits that Hamilton’s work returns experiences to the body, that she attempts to disengage her work from language and from the order it seeks to impose. Wakefield is illustrative in his descriptions, but misses the point of what Hamilton is really trying to accomplish in her use of language. In an interview with Robert Enright (2000), Hamilton said, “Words are all we have and they’re never enough.” We cannot disengage anything from language because, as Hamilton says, “words are all we have.” The theories of Jacques Derrida are relevant to this argument and I will use his poststructuralist writings in my analysis of Hamilton’s work, specifically those on deconstruction as well as Martin Heidegger’s concept of *sous rature*, or “under erasure,” which I find particularly relevant to Hamilton’s altered books.

The monograph by Simon, mentioned previously, provides an account of the works that Hamilton created in the period from 1983 to 2000, and offers an epilogue that details projects that Hamilton made in the early part of 2001. A wealth of biographical and stylistic information, this book remains the single-most comprehensive study of Hamilton’s art to date. The majority of the scholarship that deals with Hamilton’s work exists in the form of exhibition catalogue essays. In light of the variety

---

of media that Hamilton uses, writers drawn to performance and fiber, literary, and even scientific themes have been attracted to her work. Thus, there is a great deal of diversity in the commentary on Hamilton’s art and working methods. There are also several important doctoral dissertations that are relevant to this study.

In her dissertation, “Reading in Four Dimensions: The Poetics of the Contemporary Experimental Book” (2004), Mary Alden Schwartzburg studied five artists, all of whom used books in their work. Schwartzburg believes the book appeals to conceptual artists because such publications are vehicles for language itself. In her discussion of *tropos* she describes the relationship between the tender and the book as “contemplative.” She believes that in the course of the installation, the act of reading and the book are rendered as if they were facts.⁹ I agree with these assertions. What I feel Schwartzburg misinterprets is the relationship between the tender and the other components of the installation, a point upon which I will elaborate in my discussion of *tropos* in chapter two. In addition to writers who discuss Hamilton’s work specifically, I will use sources on the theme of reading, such as Alberto Manguel’s *The History of Reading* (1996), and Ezra Pound’s *ABC of Reading* (1951). I will also discuss the writings of Jacques Derrida, as mentioned earlier, in relationship to the altered books in Hamilton’s work.

⁹ Mary Alden Schwartzburg, “Reading in Four Dimensions: The Poetics of the Contemporary Experimental Book” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2004), 44.
CONCLUSION

This study will include three chapters. In the first chapter I will discuss *indigo blue*, in the second chapter I will discuss *tropos*, and the third chapter I will discuss *lineament*. I will examine language as a theme and identify issues that each work raises concerning language. Some issues involve the recording of history, speech versus the written word, and language’s effect on experience. In his book, *The Book Maker’s Desire* (1995), Buzz Spector stated that the effaced volumes from Hamilton’s work are “far from silenced,” that they speak instead to the “mysterious labors of their transformation.”\(^1^0\) With this thesis, I explore the significance of these labors. I will be the first to write an extensive analysis of all three of the installations in which Hamilton altered books. I will also be the first to provide a poststructuralist reading of the books, and how they relate to language, that is, to speech, writing, signification, and its withdrawal.

CHAPTER ONE

*indigo blue* (1991): A Material History

Ann Hamilton traveled to Charleston, South Carolina in February of 1991 upon invitation from Mary Jane Jacobs, an independent curator slated to organize the city-wide exhibition, “Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston,” which she conceived as part of the 1991 Spoleto Festival USA. Jacobs asked Hamilton to participate, having worked with her on two projects previously. This initial trip served as an opportunity for Hamilton to survey the landscape of the city, and absorb some of its rich culture. From this experience, Hamilton would create *indigo blue*. In her notes on the installation, she wrote:

> Responding to my perceptions of the selective memory that the city markets as a tourist industry, and to my concern with a history that is based more in the somatic experience of the body than in the accounting of events and facts, this piece was informed by the experience of living for six weeks in Charleston and by more than a year of readings in American labor history.\(^1\)

Thus, in *indigo blue* Hamilton aimed to remark on the paradoxical silence that emerges from a written history. In this chapter, which is dedicated to the altered books in *indigo blue*, I will highlight the ways in which our understanding of history is mediated by texts or language.

**OVERVIEW OF THE INSTALLATION**

In May of 1991, Hamilton installed *indigo blue* at 45 Pinckney Street, in an abandoned structure that had served previously as an auto repair shop and a carriage

---

house. In the installation, Hamilton piled 14,000 pounds of folded blue work clothes on a 17 x 24 foot steel platform that hung from the ceiling like a swing, and hovered to approximately three feet above the concrete floor (Fig. 1). In front of the platform, the work’s tender sat at a long table erasing, or altering, military manuals with a pink eraser and his/her own saliva.² Originally selected for their blue covers, these manuals concerned the regulation and establishment of boundaries between land and water, and were all found in secondhand bookstores. In a small second-story office, with windows both to the outside and that looked out over the steel platform and the tender seated at the table on the interior of the building, Hamilton hung sixty woven-net sacks filled with soybeans (Fig. 2).

THE PINCKNEY PLANTATION

Pinckney Street in Charleston is named for Eliza Lucas Pinckney (1722-1793). An important figure in the city’s agricultural history, she is credited for pioneering the growth of indigo as a viable export. The leaves of indigo yield a fine and lasting blue dye prized by the cloth industry. Charleston, in the eighteenth century, had relied greatly on the exportation of rice, but when the city was cut off from several of its established rice markets there was a need for a companion crop, a need that the Lucas family was able to fill.³ Pinckney was born in the West Indies in 1722. In 1738 her father, British Army officer George Lucas, moved the family to Charleston where they

² Both men and women served as the tender throughout the duration of the installation.
settled on one of the three Carolina plantations which had been owned by Major Lucas’s father, John Lucas of Antigua, since 1713. When, in 1739, Major Lucas was called to return to his military duties in Antigua, he left the business of running the six-hundred acre Wappoo plantation, and the supervision of the overseers at the other two plantations, to his young daughter Eliza. The following year Eliza began experimenting with indigo seeds sent to her by her father from the West Indies. By 1744 the Lucas family was turning a great profit, sharing their knowledge of the crop with other area plantations, putting Charleston in a position to rival France’s indigo production.

The address, 45 Pinckney Street, can therefore be associated with the use of the word “indigo” in Hamilton’s naming of the installation to recall this significant historical figure, Eliza Pinckney. However, there is another association implied with the name, indigo blue. It is implied by both the gesture of the tender’s hand in the altering of the books, and the obsessive repetition in the piles of folded blue uniforms – that is, labor. In an essay included in her most recent book on Hamilton, Ann Hamilton: An Inventory of Objects, Joan Simon argues, “Hamilton’s installations share an understanding of socioeconomic subtexts that are embedded in consciousness as well as in place but are often lost or effaced from written histories.” Hamilton said it in her notes on the installation, Charleston has a selective memory. Tourists come into the city and relive its past through a lens, a constructed history that romanticizes Charleston

---

4 Ibid., xvi.
5 Ibid, xviii.
as capital of the old south. With *indigo blue* Hamilton rediscovered economic histories that were relevant not only to Charleston, but to the specific place in which she chose to create her installation. Simon describes this as “an invocation of place, of lost collective voices, of communities past and communities of labor present.”\(^7\) This “invitation,” though, is understood somatically, through the experience of the body, through the experience of material, not through written texts or language. While Charleston was at the heart of *indigo blue*, the way in which Hamilton chose to layer meaning, focusing on the singularity of the experience, allowed the work to speak both to the local population and visitors from outside the city.

**THE ALTERED BOOKS**

The books used in *indigo blue* documented the regulation of boundaries between land and water. The tender in the installation was seated with his/her back to the mound of folded clothes, at a long table that Hamilton borrowed from a local market which had previously served as an agricultural exchange and, many years before that, as a site for slave auctions.\(^8\) Working through the books from back to front, the tender wet the page with saliva and, using a Pink Pearl eraser, erased each line of text as s/he read them, collecting the eraser crumbs in a line parallel to the uppermost edge of the

---

\(^7\) Ibid., 2.

book and the front of the desk as s/he went along\(^9\) (Fig. 4). The piles of eraser crumbs that accumulated over time served as a testament to the ongoing nature of the tender’s actions. Viewers who witnessed the act, the altering of the books, became aware of what Jacques Derrida characterized as a gesture of deconstruction, that is, a refusal to naturalize that which is not natural, or assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural.\(^{10}\) With *indigo blue* Hamilton acknowledged that the sphere within which society produces knowledge of historical events is dependent upon language, upon discourse that is conditioned by society and by institutions.

Keith Moxey is an art historian who, in his book *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (1994), posits, “If the use of language is inevitably associated with metaphysical claims its sign systems cannot substantiate, then the writing of historical narratives can be regarded only as an exercise in mythmaking.”\(^{11}\) He goes on to say that, “historians cannot interpret a privileged text against some ‘harder’ reality, for that ‘reality’ is itself constituted by other texts.”\(^{12}\) This last statement is not unlike Derrida’s conception of the trace, which dictates that no element within a system of signs, whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, can exist in and of itself, without referring to another element which itself is not

---

\(^9\) The image of the altered book that I have provided comes from a book of objects, so it is out of its original context, that is, it was not photographed in the installation. Therefore, the eraser crumbs do not form the parallel line as mentioned here in the text.

\(^{10}\) *Derrida*, Jane Doe Films Inc. 80 minutes, 2002, film.


\(^{12}\) Ibid., 4.
present. Thus, the historian’s task is problematized on two levels. Driven by the quest for information, for records, or accounts from witnesses, a documented history can only be conveyed inadequately or be regarded as, as Moxey says, an “exercise in mythmaking,” and social context cannot account for the ways in which individuals will interpret facts. In his book *Of Grammatology*, originally published in France in 1967, Derrida suggests that the trace is:

… not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to a path that we follow it means the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace which thus becomes the origin of the origin.14

History attempts to capture truth, truth from the existence of specific locations, and people, as well as from events that have taken place in times past. However, as a discipline, history will forever depend upon language in the construction of narratives. The historian will rely on things said, or written, and as Derrida says, their origin will never be constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, or an endless string of signifiers. Historical evidence is infinite and can never determine the shape of the narratives it inspires.15

In *indigo blue* Hamilton created a site for understanding through a bodily experience, offering the body knowledge of historical events, specifically the worker, an agricultural economy, and loss. It is doubtless that in her making of the installation some of the choices Hamilton made were inspired by her study of American labor

15 Moxey, 5.
I believe what Hamilton revealed with the altered books is not that documented histories lie or are false, but that our understanding of histories that are mediated only through texts, or language, is restricted. In the installation she made the absence that exists within written documents felt by viewers with the erased pages of the altered books. As Neff stated in the exhibition catalogue:

… the action of erasing history books became not so much destructive as an attempt to get back to a time in the past and recognize those left out, to make room for another story to be told. This gesture took away one mark—the printed word—and replaced it with another mark of the body, and an acknowledgement of individual experience.\(^{16}\)

Hamilton said that she did not think to tell another story, but wanted to find a way to remark upon an erasure and a silence, the mark left by the body became the trace of the thing not in the history told in the book.\(^{17}\) Hamilton provided no social context, no interpretation, no bias, but the silence that emerged from the blank pages of the altered books gave viewers a sense of what is lost in written histories. For example, the role of the worker is one often neglected aspect of written accounts for which Hamilton was able to make a place with her use of the blue work clothes

**THE FOLDED BLUE WORK CLOTHES**

The building that Hamilton chose for the installation had the look and feel of a warehouse. Upon entering the installation viewers were confronted by a large pile of clothes. Hamilton worked with a number of dedicated volunteers to fold and place

---

\(^{16}\) Neff, 76.

each of the 14,000 pounds of blue shirts and pants onto a suspended steel platform (Fig. 3). The task was enacted with great care, through the gesture of many hands, as was implicit in the mound that grew to a height of more than eighteen feet. According to Rebecca Des Marais, a project assistant, the uniforms came from a commercial supplier, and had been worn by individuals who were laid off.

Some have described Hamilton’s indigo blue as an “ode to the worker.” Her juxtaposition of the tender altering history books with the meticulously constructed mound of work clothes implied that the history to which she was referring was that of labor. There are many schools of thought on the historicization of labor. One focuses “scholarly inquiry on the formal institutions of industrial relations,” and recent writers, such as Leon Fink, examine the informal, community basis in labor conflict and, in so doing, emphasize “the pluralistic, immigrant-based culture’s of the nation’s wage-earning population.” The study of labor laws emerged with industrialization, and the abundant growth of factories in the north which was much quicker to embrace commercial enterprise. According to an 1860 census, the south contained 36% of the U.S. population, but contributed less than 11% of the country’s industrial output. It wasn’t until the economic shock of the Civil War, which ended in 1865 that the south

---

18 Neff, 75.
began to promote a “New South,” seeking to lure investors with a wealth of unskilled, but extremely cheap labor.  

The history of labor includes populations or collectives, the millions of individuals who at one time sustained the U.S. economy, but have been stripped of their identities. With the mound of meticulously folded uniforms, Hamilton was able to give viewers a sense of the “body” of labor, or what Hamilton described as “a variably sized choir” that was embodied materially. But she was also able to give viewers a sense of the body. Many of the uniforms bore the first names of their former owner, such as Margaret, Oswaldo, Mike, “adding yet another unspoken element of loss.” The mound’s inescapable presence served as a memorial to those individuals, their identities having been restored.

THE SECOND-STORY OFFICE

The third part of the installation was set in a second-story office with windows to the outside and windows that looked out over the suspended platform and the tender seated at the table in the interior of the building. In this room Hamilton hung sixty woven-net sacks filled with soybeans. While the mound of work clothes and the tender seated below invoked industrial labor, the sacks of soybeans that lined the wall of the second-story office invoked agricultural labor. Being in this room, Hamilton noted that it was a “different experience to look down on them [the pile of folded shirts and pants]

21 Ibid., 89.
22 Simon, Ann Hamilton: an inventory of objects, 2.
23 Simon, Ann Hamilton, 105.
as an army rather than being immersed in them as a body,”24 an experience that was not unlike that of a labor boss overseeing the activities taking place below.

Previously I cited Joan Simon who spoke of the ways that Hamilton’s installations invoke “communities past and communities of labor present.” Traditionally the recording of history privileges chronology, however, while the collection of experiences that Hamilton created in indigo blue informed viewers’ sense of the past, dates and times were of little consequence. This refers back to one of Derrida’s gestures of deconstruction. Conditioned by society or by institutions, history as a discipline is meant to be understood as a sequence of events.25 Hamilton challenged this notion by refusing to prescribe any one element of the installation to a particular moment. However, the eraser crumbs that accumulated while the tender altering the history books, and the sacks of soybeans on the second level, both served as evidence of the passage of time. The tender gathered the crumbs produced from erasing the lines of text along the uppermost edge of the book which attested to the ongoing nature of the act. On the second level, water penetrated the sacks of soybeans from a leak in the ceiling, causing the beans to sprout, so that throughout the course of the installation small plants emerged from the sacks, and the beans that remained began to rot, filling the room with the smell of decay.

There is one major difference that should be noted in the way the sacks of soybeans served as evidence of time passing. Whereas the eraser crumbs were lifeless

24 Ibid., 105.
matter, the soybeans were organic. The room in which the sacks of soybeans were hung was damp. Viewers would have seen the plants that had sprouted to life and at the same time become aware of the pungent smell of decay. Engaging the senses of touch and smell, the sacks of soybeans served to further engage the body in the experience of the installation, but they also gave viewers a sense of life and death.

CONCLUSION

With *indigo blue* Hamilton offered viewers a sense of industrial and agricultural labor, and of the limited understanding offered to us through historical texts, through a bodily experience. The meticulously folded mound of work clothes, and the altered books made the silence that emerges from written documents tactile for viewers. Each folded shirt, laid side by side, piled high, gave viewers a sense of the force of labor, but also of the bodies that used to fill each piece of clothing, and their individual names. The tender, removing each line of text with the use of saliva and an eraser, laboring obsessively over the task with which s/he had been charged, altered the books, clearing each page of its words to make way for the mark of the body. Based on times past, the realities of which can only be expressed through systems of signs, the blank pages came to embody that which is left out of written histories.

Hamilton acknowledged the passage of time but chose not to prescribe elements of the installation to a particular moment, therefore deconstructing the traditional notion of history as taking place in a chronological series of events. Thus, Margo Shermeta has claimed that, “Hamilton gives us a view into the spectrum of societal
complexities, but the peephole is ever that of the individual.” That is, Hamilton does not assume responsibility for how individuals come to experience her work. She does not feel that is her role. Hamilton was inspired by the city of Charleston, her study of labor history, of what is left out of history books, to create indigo blue. Viewers got a sense of loss, of history and its societal complexities, as Shermeta said, but I believe that what Hamilton offers is the experience of material, of a material history.

27 Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.
CHAPTER TWO
Language as Loss or Absence in *tropos* (1993-94)

Ann Hamilton created *tropos* for the Dia Center for the Arts in New York City where it was installed in Chelsea from October 7, 1993 to June 19, 1994. This chapter, which I have dedicated to the altered books in *tropos*, draws heavily on the writings of Jacques Derrida. Never before used in an in-depth study of Hamilton’s work, Derrida’s concepts of deconstruction and, more generally, poststructuralism afford new perspectives on language as a major theme in *tropos*.

OVERVIEW OF THE INSTALLATION

The former warehouse in which Hamilton installed *tropos* measured ninety-four feet wide and ninety feet long. Hamilton exchanged all of the transparent panes of glass in the warehouse windows for translucent ones, modeled the floor with concrete which dried to make its surface irregular, and painted the walls and ceiling white. Upon entering the installation viewers looked out over an expanse of 3,000 pounds of horsetail hair that was sewn into strips of cotton and meticulously spread out to cover the uneven concrete floor beneath it like a carpet (Fig. 5). The faint smell of burnt paper lingered in the air, and emanated from one side of the gallery space where the tender sat at a small desk reading.

The sound of a man’s voice drew visitors to the source of the sound, to motion-sensored speakers that Hamilton hid near the windows and throughout the installation
that were triggered by the movement of bodies in the gallery. According to Hamilton, the title of the work refers to the movement of viewers from the entrance of the installation to the windows, a movement that corresponds to that of a plant bending toward light, this is an action termed “tropism.”¹ For Hamilton, the naming of installations often involves double entendres. For example, the word “trope” is a linguistic term that refers to plays on words that have multiple meanings. Both “tropism” and “trope” come from the Greek *tropos*, meaning “turn,” and thus the feeling of motion is built into the very title of the work. As mentioned in the introduction, Hamilton observed in her interview with Robert Enright that, “The ability to name something differently is to invent the world.”² In *tropos*, installation viewers experience a variety of “tropes” or “turnings,” sensory responses to the unexpected ways in which Hamilton presented material.

The voice in *tropos* that played from speakers was that of Tom Curlew. He is an actor who is afflicted with aphasia, a disorder characterized by a language deficit resulting from brain damage. Aphasiacs present a number of symptoms. They may unintentionally substitute certain words for others, speak with unintentional pauses, and mispronounce words because speech and expressions are difficult for them to control.³ Hamilton recorded Curlew reading from two texts: *Four Quartets* (1971) by

---

T.S. Eliot and *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (1989) by Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders. Hamilton refers to the use of these specific texts as “the interior life of the work.” Although the proper identification of texts by viewers is not crucial to the experience of the installation, Hamilton believes that as with most things, the more you know or recognize in her work, the more the experience can reveal.  

**THE ALTERED BOOKS**

The tender in *tropos* was seated at a desk with one book at a time. S/he first appeared to be diligently reading, perhaps highlighting passages or writing marginalia in the book. Only upon close inspection was it apparent that the tender did not hold a pen or highlighter, but a thin electric stylus that s/he used to burn the lines of text as s/he silently read them (Fig. 6). What then was the relationship between the tender and Curlew’s disembodied voice? The voice could be the inner monologue of the tender or perhaps the tender was responsible for the disordered state of the room and was engaged in altering the books in an effort to erase previously-recorded acts. In a discussion of *tropos* in her doctoral dissertation, “Reading in Four Dimensions: The Poetics of the Contemporary Experimental Book,” Mary Alden Schwartzburg states that “the recording is actually a text that the seated figure is doggedly transcribing with the stylus, reusing the pages of the book before her to produce a surrealistically twisted,

---

6 Enright, 22.
7 Ibid.
8 In all there were forty-eight altered books produced in the duration of the installation. The books are often kept, or displayed in exhibitions of objects from Hamilton’s installations.
9 There was only one tender in the gallery at a time, but both men and women played this part.
hollowed out, reverse palimpsest.” My contention is that it was none of these activities, and that the relationship between the recorded voice and the tender was not so direct. If the tender’s actions were a transcription of the auditory voice, as Schwartzburg suggests, then one must assume that the activity of transcription continued even in the absence of viewers. However, it was viewers who brought speech to the work upon entering the gallery space. The motion-sensed speakers projected the voice of the aphasic man only when there were bodies moving through the gallery. Therefore, I believe that the relationship between the tender and the recorded voice was not a singular one, but that viewers created a necessary tension between the tender and the recorded voice.

In his essay “On a Detour from Language” (1994), included in the exhibition catalogue which accompanied tropos, Bruce Ferguson writes:

There is no space external to language and yet, that language is an eminently suspicious and unreliable measure of reality. Not only should language not be trusted but more simply, it cannot be trusted. Instead, there must be practices that moonlight from the economy of language, acting as offerings of a necessary displacement; practices that generate catastrophes of meaning.

One cannot help but be suspect of the fractured reality that Hamilton created in tropos or want to make sense of it through the use of language because as Ferguson says,

---

10 Mary Alden Schwartzburg, “Reading in Four Dimensions: The Poetics of the Contemporary Experimental Book” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2004), 50.
11 Because the tender was unaware of spectators in the gallery space, one can assume that the tender’s activities would not have been driven by their presence. Therefore, the tender would have continued the transcription whether spectators were there or not.
“there is no space external to language.” To expand on this statement, I will identify how in this work Hamilton functions from within the economy of language.

In their experience of the installation, it seems apparent that viewers are made aware of reading. When they approach the tender, the tender’s position is recognizable. S/he is seated silently with a book, intently reading the words from the pages. However, instead of annotating or underlining the text, the tender burns the lines of text from the pages, and this action is then bound to the smell of the burnt paper. Visitors are also made aware of the voice, not speech so much as the sound of words being shaped by the mouth with strained effort, so the words are at the same time familiar and unfamiliar. All these factors function in relation to the economy of language and can, as Ferguson says, indicate the necessary displacement of meaning. However, I do not think that they generate catastrophes of meaning so much as shift viewers’ awareness of language to loss, or absence. To elaborate on this point, I will now turn to the writings of Derrida. I will begin by introducing one of his best known devices, which he developed from his knowledge of the work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).

**DERRIDA AND SOUS RATURE**

Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher, developed the concept of placing words or concepts *sous rature* (“under erasure”). He brought “Being” into an inarticulatable present, crossing the word out, leaving both the word and its deletion to
He believed in “Being” as the “transcendental signified.” From his work, Derrida adopts the concept of *sous rature* focusing mostly on absence, that is, on the meaning of a sign determined by what the sign is not. For Derrida, the signifier-signified relationship is based on a structure of differences. Likewise, in *tropos*, Hamilton juxtaposes the organic (horsetail hair) with the inorganic (concrete floor) and it is only through this opposition, and what “organic” is not (inorganic), that we come to understand the material’s meaning. In his book *Of Grammatology*, originally published in 1974, Derrida incorporates this idea, a structure of differences, into the concept of *sous rature*, or, placing words under erasure. He explains:

The formal essence of the sign can only be determined in presence. One cannot get around that response, except by challenging the very form of the question and beginning to think the sign is that ill-named thing, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: ‘what is…?’

By putting the words “is” and “thing” under erasure, Derrida emphasizes that the sign is neither a presence nor a thing. It is both and neither the absence of a presence and vice versa. Returning now to *tropos*, I would like to consider how the actions of the tender shift viewers’ awareness of language to loss or, as Derrida says, to the absence of a presence. I believe this shift occurs in three ways.

---

13 Derrida says, “Heidegger occasionally reminds us that ‘being,’ as it is fixed in its general syntactic and lexicological forms within linguistics and Western philosophy, is not a primary and absolutely irreducible signified, that it is still rooted in a system of languages and an historically determined ‘significance’…” Heidegger believed that “being” somehow avoided a fixed origin. Derrida disagrees with this assertion and posits that by crossing the word out Heidegger is essentially creating a new word. He is not summoning the presence of the signified but rather he is creating a new signifier, a signifier that refers to another signifier and so on, and that our understanding of these signifiers is a based on the structure of differences.


15 Ibid., 19.
First, placing the lines of text under erasure rendered them illegible. The pages maintained a degree of their original integrity. In many cases the tops and bottoms of the letterforms remained visible, but with these altered lines of text Hamilton made viewers aware of the ways in which words as signs of meaning are inadequate. There was evidence that the words were there, but they could no longer be read. With this erasure Hamilton, like Derrida, is acknowledging the sign’s failure to effectively embody ideas, objects, or feelings. In her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942) says, “It is indeed an ineluctable nostalgia for presence that makes of this heterogeneity a unity, by declaring that a sign brings forth the presence of the signified.”16 That is, it is nostalgic to suggest that a sign could ever summon the presence of that which it signifies.

Second, in the written word there is the absence of the voice. While the books in the installation were altered, the solitary, contemplative nature of the act of reading was not. The tender sat altering the books as s/he read them, wholly engrossed in the task with which s/he had been charged, but uttered not one word from the book. Historically, texts were read aloud. It was not until around the tenth century in Europe that accounts of a new “silent reader” can be found.17 In 1128, Hugh of St. Victor remarked, “I can read to you, you can read to me, and I can read contemplatively to

---

myself.”¹⁸ Up until this point in the history of Western thought, writing was meant to be written-down speech, letters were signs of sounds meant to be pronounced.¹⁹ Libraries were not places meant for quiet reflection. They were filled with the voices of those engaged with various texts, reading them as they were meant to be read at that time, aloud. I will return the speech-writing opposition later in the chapter in greater detail.

Lastly, whereas Derrida selected specific words, the tender in *tropos* put all the words on each page of the book under erasure (Fig. 7). Therefore, what viewers were made aware of at first was the simple loss of the lines of text. However, I believe this loss was also a metaphor for the inability to achieve signification. In a sense, Hamilton has presented viewers with a deconstructed model of reading. The tender performs this act, which bears a striking resemblance to the silent reader, but the words ceased to be sacred. S/he destroyed them, she violated the page. The words went up in a thin line of smoke. This singular act, and the tender’s silent contemplation, served as a sort of mourning. That is, the tender mourned the ways in which the words on the page fail to sufficiently embody that which they represent. “The marks of erasure acknowledge both the inadequacy of the terms employed—their high provisional status—and the fact that thought simply cannot manage without them.”²⁰

¹⁹ Manguel, 42.
The alteration of the books in *tropos* revealed the absence of presence in language, but the method of erasure was crucial in that, with it Hamilton managed to elicit a somatic response from viewers. In her interview with Enright, Hamilton stressed the importance of coming to know ideas through the body.

I think part of it is we make hierarchies and we privilege certain kinds of information. If something can be said in a discursive manner, then sometimes we’ll elevate that over other ways of being or knowing in the world. I want to bring up perceptions that are felt and emotional…. My work is to always place the body in the experience.  

Smelling the burnt paper, surrounded by horsetail hair, walking through the slight haze of smoke with uneasy footing, Hamilton brought viewers’ bodies into experience using the economy of language. That is, language involves the production, consumption, and distribution of words, or signs. So when I say that Hamilton brings the body into experience from within an economy of language, I mean that by engaging the senses Hamilton presented speech and the written word in a way that allowed viewers to consume language in new ways.

**THE APHASIAC READER**

In his essay on aphasia Roman Jakobson describes two basic types of aphasia which are characterized by deficiencies regarding selection and substitution (selecting words incorrectly, substituting certain words for others) or combination and contexture.

---

21 Enright, 20.
In the case of the recorded voice of Curlew in *tropos*, whose aphasia was the result of a stroke, the major type of deficiency in his speech is unknown. What was apparent in *tropos* was the slow nature of his reading, the unintentional pauses, and the occasional mispronunciation of certain words. Again, Hamilton recorded Curlew reading from two texts: *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot and *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* by Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders. In her monograph on Hamilton, Joan Simon says that the text by Illich and Sanders informs the conceptual framework of *tropos* in the disjunctive juxtaposition of books (and the alphabet therein) and the body as generator of the voice, the contrast between a written culture and the oral culture that preceded it.

The recorded voice engaged viewers upon entering the installation—“Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes./ Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth/ Mirth of those long since under the earth” and “Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle/ With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.” The rhythmic lines of verse have become fragmented and difficult to understand as Curlew reads, but as Eliot says, “The poetry does not matter.” These lines in a way elucidate the experience of navigating through the horsetail hair on the uneven ground, listening to the words of the aphasic reader. Viewers became more conscious of the sound of the letters in his mouth, of the words, and the unnatural cadence of his voice. Loss was embodied in the voice of

---

22 Jakobson, 100.
Curlew, a loss of the access to speech that was felt by viewers upon hearing it. Listening to Curlew’s reading of Eliot’s poems established an atmospheric experience, whereas the text written by Illich and Sanders, as Simon says, inspired much of the conceptual framework of *tropos*. “Only the alphabet has the power to create ‘language’ and ‘words,’ for the word does not emerge until it is written down.”

The tender seated at the desk reading was silent, but the relationship that developed between the tender, the book, and the viewers was unlike that of the traditional silent reader. The tender was supposedly unaware of the presence of spectators, and developed an intimate knowledge of the book s/he read, but no sooner had the tender read the lines of text in the book than s/he destroyed them. That destruction or altering of the books upset viewers’ perception of what the act of reading was supposed to be. The voice projected through the speakers, with all its broken words, upset perceptions of what speech was supposed to sound like. Hamilton reintroduces us to two systems of knowing through the structuring of differences and opposition. Viewers heard the voice of Curlew and they witnessed the actions of the tender, but it is what these things were not that made them meaningful.

**SPEECH VERSUS WRITING**

Now I would like to consider the speech-writing opposition. In *tropos* Hamilton provided a site for understanding the differences between the written and the oral, but

---

she did not set out to convince viewers that one form of communication is more pure. Historically speech was considered more truthful or spontaneous than writing, by thinkers including Plato (c. 427 - c. 347 BCE), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), all precursors of Derrida. Saussure was a Swiss linguist who considered writing to be phonetic or, as mentioned previously, written-down speech. In Of Grammatology, Derrida quotes Saussure saying, “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.” Saussure goes so far as to regard writing as dangerous. Derrida, in his study of speech versus writing, identifies the need for this opposition. He sets out to subvert the notion that speech comes before writing, believing that in order for spoken words to attain the status of “non-representational truth” they must first be opposed by writing as representation.

Derrida discusses the speech-writing opposition in terms of the inside and the outside of language. From Saussure’s point of view, speech is on the inside. Speech is composed in nature, it is produced without any prosthetic aid like a pencil or computer, and is therefore considered to be closer to the truth, while writing as a sort of “written-down speech” is condemned to the outside of language. But, as Derrida says, any attempt to defend speech as the inside of language is only exemplified by writing as representation. Saussure seeks to locate the origin of language, but his efforts rely on the written sign as a model. Derrida believed that language consists of a string of

---

27 Derrida, 30.
signifiers that all relate to one another within an instituted system. “Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than a shadow or reflection of the representer.”30 What Derrida finds dangerous is not writing, but the speculation over origin. He says there are reflecting pools, but that there is no longer an original spring, no simple origin. That what is reflected is split, referencing opposition, or the structure of differences.

CONCLUSION

So in tropos, in this site that Hamilton created for viewers, what are the differences between speech and the written word that come to be understood? Witnessing the tender altering books and listening to the broken words of the aphasic man, what is reflected for viewers in their experience of the installation is language’s limitations. Hamilton seems to accept that neither the written nor the spoken word can ever come to fully represent the signified. Hamilton makes the loss of meaning, the absence of a presence in language, tactile for viewers. She says that if something can be said in a discursive manner, we tend to elevate that over other ways of being or knowing in the world. Thus, the tendency is to elevate mind over body. The disordered reality in tropos heightens viewers’ bodily awareness and heightens viewers’ awareness to the ways in which language fails us.

30 Derrida, 36.
Ann Hamilton created *lineament* for the Ruth Bloom Gallery in Santa Monica, California where it was installed from June 4 to July 17, 1994. The title of the installation was derived from the fourth stanza of “The Planet on the Table,” a poem written by Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). In this chapter I will perform a detailed analysis of the poem and the installation in order to exemplify the fundamental qualities that I believe they both share, with a focus on the altered books, and language’s inability to sufficiently embody poetic concepts.

OVERVIEW OF THE INSTALLATION

Hamilton’s *lineament* was contained by a long, self-enclosed, rectangular plywood structure built within the gallery. With the structure Hamilton was experimenting with “systems of things in and out.” Viewers entered through a door, and inside they witnessed the tender unwinding precut lines of text from a book, that is, she altered the book. Sitting on a swing at a suspended, plywood table she faced a small, three-paneled, folding screen. (Fig. 8) The lines of text were cut in such a way so that as they were pulled from the page, they created one long strand of paper which the

---

1 The plywood came from an art crating company, and after the installation was broken down, the wood was returned for later use.

2 Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.
tender then wove into a ball, or “planet.”3 Continuing to add to the ball until she felt it was finished, the tender then pushed the paper ball through a slit cut into the center panel of the screen where it came to rest on the other side of the table. Once a book was emptied of all its pages, the tender placed it inside a plywood box upon which her feet rested. She would pause from her labor, open the box, place the excised volume inside, close the lid, and begin again.

Viewers could also hear the soft click of a film projector. Hidden behind one of the plywood walls so that only the lens was visible from inside the room, the projector was running, but was not loaded with film. The beam of light cast the tender’s silhouette on the wall facing opposite the projector.

“THE PLANET ON THE TABLE”

Ariel was glad he had written his poems.  
They were of a remembered time  
Or of something seen that he liked.

Other makings of the sun  
Were waste and welter  
And the ripe shrub writhed.

His self and the sun were one  
And his poems, although makings of his self,  
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive  
What mattered was that they should bear

---

3 Joan Simon, in her monograph on Hamilton’s work, refers to the woven balls of paper as “planets.” In her entry on lineament she puts “planets” in quotations but does not cite it, so it is unclear whether it was Hamilton who called the balls of paper as such or whether it was something that Simon formulated on her own. This is an obvious reference back to the Stevens poem.
Some lineament or character,
Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.⁴

- by Wallace Stevens, 1923

This poem has always been a favorite of artist Michael Mercil, Hamilton’s husband.⁵ It was not included in the installation in any way, was not available to viewers in their experience of the installation. However, I believe that an analysis of “The Planet on the Table” affords an enriched understanding of the installation itself.

In the poem, Stevens does not tell us who Ariel is, although we know he is a poet.⁶ Stevens may be referring to William Shakespeare’s Ariel, a character in his play *The Tempest*. In the play Ariel is not explicitly called a poet, but is given some of the more poetic lines. By alluding to a literary character with the first word of the poem, Stevens is acknowledging a fiction. These are words, and ideas, not truth.

What we understand about Ariel is that he is satisfied with his work, because with his poetry he has solidified a moment in time. It was “something seen that he liked.” In this case his poems are about the sun, they are “makings of the sun.” As Stevens considers other makings of the sun, like a bush, he uses words like “ripe” and “waste.” A bush will grow and be nurtured by the sun but will die. Stevens does not

⁵ Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.
⁶ I refer to Ariel as male here, because I believe Stevens is referring to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In the play it is not said explicitly that Ariel is male, but the character is widely accepted as such.
claim that the poet’s words are immortal. He does not glorify the poet. He focuses on that moment of making, on that moment when the sun inspires the poet to create. It is not important that the poems survive, as he says, but for the poet to seek out inspiration. However, words are the only tools available to the poet, and so while the hope is that the poem might bear some resemblance to that original moment, it can only do so “in the poverty” of its words. Therefore, I believe that moment of making, when the sun, the poet, and the poem become one, can serve as both a birth and a death. The birth of an idea, but the words will never come to fully signify that which they are meant to represent. The essence of the moment of inspiration will be lost. Therefore, it is also a death.

In a brief essay on the poem, literary critic Michael Trammel discusses how “The Planet on the Table” incorporates themes of deconstruction. He says that the “words fall into nothingness,” that they become interchangeable and that a deconstruction occurs with the collapse of identity.\(^7\) Trammel believes that this breaking down of categories occurs because words are insufficient, calling the words themselves meaningless.\(^8\) This is a danger of deconstruction, because while I agree that the words are insufficient, by saying that they are meaningless Trammel strips the poem down to nothing, this reading fails to grasp the way Stevens chose each word, and with these words I believe he manages to challenge notions of determinate meaning.

\(^7\) Michael Trammel, “Stevens’s ‘The Planet on the Table.’” *Explicator* 49 (Winter 1991): 112.
\(^8\) Ibid., 112.
A system by its nature is meant to have structure. With a poem, a poet is essentially creating a world, or a fiction, suspended within a system of language. In *Writing and Difference* Derrida discusses the center. He says:

This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere.9

Derrida is saying that there is no center as a critique of structuralism, that the center is not the center. This idea could be applied to the Stevens poem. Poetry seems to be at the center of the poem, but as Stevens attempts to locate that center it is destroyed. The sun becomes the poem becomes the self. The poem is the product, but is not the center. The center is that moment of inspiration which is un-locatable, or is outside the totality as Derrida says. In his book titled *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*, Paul Bové discusses this notion of a center in Stevens’ work. He says, “It is by virtue of the awareness that there is no center that Stevens is able to rethink specific centered myths and metaphors and show them to be fiction in a radical sense in the early poetry.”10 I believe, in *The Planet on the Table*, Stevens rethinks the status of the poet, and also the status of the poem itself. While the poem printed on the page is what survives, it is not the words but the making that truly matters. Or, as Trammel says, “It is not important a poem lies on the table before us; it is only important that the

---

planet itself is made manifest on the table.”¹¹ That is, in his poem Stevens does not presume that Ariel summons the presence of the sun, and he does not place value on that which can be held in the hand, or printed in a book. What he values is the instinct to create. As time passes, in our experience of the world, there are moments that one is inspired to capture, even if what results only represents the absence of that original moment.

THE “PLANETS” ON THE TABLE

In lineament, the tender sat on a swing at a suspended table. Hamilton wanted to draw from the idea that reading involves a sort of immersion, that to read is to suspend the mind.¹² The tender altered the books in the installation by pulling precut lines of text from the page, which she then wove into a ball or “planet.” According to Hamilton, the running of the text “word-by-word, line-by-line, front-to-back into a ball of yarn transformed the plane of the book page into a body object.”¹³ In other words, the flat, two-dimensional page was transformed into a dimensional object. The tender determined when she felt each ball was complete or ready to be pushed through the screen based on how it felt in the hand. With this gesture Hamilton asked, what is the voice of the hand? Can the hand articulate?¹⁴ I believe the tender in lineament represented the poet, or artist. The act of altering the books invoked the creative

¹¹ Trammel, 112.
¹² Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.
¹³ Simon, Ann Hamilton, 151.
¹⁴ Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.
process, or making, and language’s inability to sufficiently embody determinate meaning.

The installation was contained within a rectangular plywood structure, which I would like to consider in relationship to the space of the mind. The installation would have served as a retreat from the outside world. In it, the tender, like Ariel in the Stevens poem, was making. The soft click of the projector and the beam of light cast the tender’s silhouette onto the wall, representing the illumination of ideas. Engaged in a process of making, the tender turned words into material, that is, she used words as tools. Viewers witnessed this making, and the woven paper balls that she pushed through the screen (Fig. 9). There was a skylight cut into the ceiling of the plywood structure. The light from this opening fell on the side of the table upon which the paper balls came to rest, bringing the makings into the light of the outside world. That is, the light shone down on the makings as they came into being. In my view, this side of the table can be considered a sort of cemetery. In my earlier discussion on “The Planet on the Table,” I posited that the birth of ideas is also a death. The poem will come to represent a moment of inspiration embodied within a system of language and exist, as Stevens said, “in the poverty” of its words. That is, ideas are inspired, or illuminated, and compel the poet or artist to create, but words will only bear some resemblance, or offer “some lineament or character.” Therefore, in the installation as the ideas come into being, in the form of woven paper balls, and are pushed through the screen, they are left to accumulate there.
So what of the experience of poetry, and art? Can it not also be said that subsequent to its creation art continues to live on as it is experienced and interpreted by others? The paper balls were deposited, or left to lie on the table, but viewers also found them lying there, and interpreted their meaning as they saw fit. That is, they were makings but also findings.\(^{15}\) However, the manner in which the ideas go on to live differs from that of the original moment of inspiration, through the eyes of an individual other than the artist. By referring to an “original moment” I do not want to imply that there is an origin or a center because, as mentioned earlier, there is no origin. That moment is un-locatable. I also do not want to advocate that the way ideas go on to live as they are interpreted by others should be considered less. For, as mentioned in chapter one, as the artist, Hamilton does not presume to dictate the experience of her work. She does not claim that her work can be interpreted in one way only, she encourages individual experience.

**THE PROJECTOR**

Now I would like to shift the focus back to viewers’ experience of the work. The way in which I have chosen to analyze *lineament* speaks more to the “interior life of the work.”\(^{16}\) Upon entering the installation viewers saw the tender working at the suspended table, and they were able to study the woven balls of paper, or planets, as

---

\(^{15}\) Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.

\(^{16}\) As mentioned in chapter two, in the Enright interview, Hamilton said that it is not crucial for viewers to understand the interior life of the work, or be able to identify specific texts or ideas, but said that like with anything, the more you know, the richer the experience.
they lay on the table. Regardless of any knowledge of the Stevens poem, viewers would have witnessed the making of a three-dimensional object from the pages of a book. They would have sensed that the space within the plywood structure was separate from, more intimate than, the gallery space outside. They would have seen and heard the soft click, and seen the silhouette cast up onto the wall from the projector. The use of the projector transformed the role of the tender. The tender was charged with the task of altering the books, but I believe the projected silhouette plays a distinct part in viewers’ experience. While the tender is always somewhat anonymous in Hamilton’s installations, the projected silhouette provided viewers the opportunity to identify with the tender, to feel as though they were part of the installation in a way other than just participating in the space.

Susan Stewart is a poet, professor, and literary critic with whom Hamilton has collaborated on a number of projects. Stewart discusses how the image constitutes the self in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. She says:

> Since we know our body only in parts, the image is what constitutes the self for us; it is what constitutes our subjectivity. By a process of projection and introjection of the image, the body comes to have the abstract ‘form’ the abstract totality, by which we know it. Anthropomorphism, for example, tells us much more about the shape of the human body than it tells us about an animal other. We continually project the body into world in order that its image might return to us: onto the other, the mirror, the animal, and the machine, and onto the artistic image.

---

Thus, the projected silhouette of the tender in lineament allowed viewers to see themselves in the installation, figuratively, and then as they navigated the space of the installation, perhaps breaking the beam of light with their own bodies, projecting their own image up onto the wall, they saw themselves in the installation quite literally.

Considering this experience and its relationship to reading, I’d like to refer back to Hamilton’s comment, that reading is a kind of immersion, or that to read is to suspend the mind.\(^{18}\) Identifying with a text requires some degree of recognition. We recognize parts of ourselves, what we know, or elements of our own lives, in it. Identifying with a work contributes to a new sort of making, the making of ones’ own experience, or individual experience.

**A BOOK WITHOUT ITS WORDS IS?**

Hamilton said that she was experimenting with “systems of things in and out” with the plywood structure.\(^{19}\) I would like to extend this notion to other elements within the installation. Viewers placed themselves inside the installation, that is, they were contained by it. There was the plywood box at the tender’s feet, into which she placed the books once they had been emptied of their pages. The box contained the altered books. One question that I would like to consider is what the books became without their words? The books and the woven paper balls can be viewed through their relationship to language, but they can also be viewed as objects. The books provided

\(^{18}\) Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.

\(^{19}\) Ann Hamilton, interview with the author by telephone, 28 February 2007.
the tender with the material she needed to create. A book is something that is touched, is held in the lap, or in the hands, and the pages are turned. The books in lineament can be considered containers in their own right. The books contained pages and words, but were excised of their contents, and left empty. They were empty containers that were placed inside a box, that is, they were put away, no longer of any use. The book tends to be elevated in status because of the knowledge it is thought to contain. By altering the books, Hamilton invoked the creative process symbolically, as was discussed earlier, but she also transformed the books into pure material. Again, it is not the words printed on the page, but the making or transforming that matters most.

CONCLUSION

In lineament, Hamilton referred explicitly to poetry in the naming of the installation. As she has observed previously, the process of naming provides an opportunity, believing that to name something differently is to invent the world. Using the poem to which she refers, “The Planet on the Table,” as a lens through which to interpret this installation offers new understandings of how themes of language function within lineament. In his poem, Stevens places the greatest value on the process of making, and he rethinks “specific centered myths and metaphors” like the elevated status of the immortal word and of the poet. In lineament, Hamilton subverted the

---

20 Enright, 26.
21 Bové, 186.
notion that books are somehow sacred by altering the books, turning the pages into material, material that was incorporated into a process of making.

Considering the “interior life” of the installation further, it is possible to view the unwinding of the lines of text, the weaving of the strips of paper into balls, and the deposition of the balls onto the other side of the three-paneled screen that sat in front of the tender as symbolic of the creative process. Creative production yields thoughts and ideas regardless of their form. I believe the poem and the installation consider what is lost in that process of making. Language can never come to fully represent that which inspired the poet or artist to create. The ideas are born and then die, but go on to live as they are interpreted by individuals other than the artist. They go on to further creation in the development of their own experience of the work. Hamilton embraces this idea in the interpretation of her own work, advocating for the experience of the individual.
CONCLUSION
Language as Place

Ann Hamilton constructed environments that engaged the senses with the installations *indigo blue, tropos,* and *lineament.* It was an experience of material, but one that was underscored thematically by language. Language seems finite, but in reality it is only a system of signs that, as Derrida argued with the development of his theories of deconstruction, is unstable, and can be tested. Hamilton, not unlike Derrida, looked to unravel staid notions of meaning. We might accept that words in a book are meant to be read, but they can also be singed from the page, erased or pulled away line by line, thought of as acoustic images, or as material objects as conceived by Russian avant-garde poets, making viewers aware of language’s limitations.

Hamilton carefully chose the materials incorporated into each of these three installations. Each component, whether the carpet of horsehair, or the sacks of rotting soybeans, added a new layer, yet Hamilton never presumed to know how viewers might experience the works. In this study I examined these installations to grasp what would have been available to viewers in their experience. It is my belief that in each work, the altered books played a central role. As mentioned in chapter two, in her interview with Enright, Hamilton stated that we construct hierarchies. Things that can be spoken or written down tend to be elevated over other ways of being or knowing.\(^1\) Her goal with these three installations was to bring the body into that experience of knowing.

\(^1\) Enright, 20.
With the altered texts in *indigo blue*, Hamilton made viewers aware of how our understanding of history is mediated by texts. She also offered viewers a sense of industrial and agricultural labor with the meticulously folded mound of work clothes that, in combination with the altered books, made the silence that emerges from written histories tactile for viewers. The participant performer, called the tender, removed each line of text with the use of saliva and an eraser, clearing each page of its words, making way for the mark of the body. The blank pages came to embody that which is left out of written documents.

In *tropos*, Hamilton reintroduced viewers to speech and writing through a structuring of differences. Viewers witnessed the tender altering books and listened to the broken words of the aphasic, while navigating the uneven terrain of the concrete floor and the horsehair beneath their feet. Through this unique combination of sights, sounds, of felt sensations, Hamilton reflected how neither the written nor the spoken word can ever come to fully represent that which it is meant to signify. As the tender in the installation altered each book, all that remained was the charred line on the page where the words were once printed, and smoke. As the words of the aphasic man were projected through the speakers hidden throughout the installation, what viewers heard were only broken words, muffled speech. They would have been more conscious of raw sound, a human voice, than any meaning. In her handling of language as a theme in *tropos*, Hamilton managed to exemplify loss, and the absence of the presence in language.
In *lineament*, Hamilton focused on the process of making, and in the naming of the installation referred explicitly to the poem “The Planet on the Table,” by Wallace Stevens. In the poem, Stevens remarks on the creative process, on making. In this installation the method of book alteration constituted a making. The act of unwinding the precut lines of text, of weaving the strips of paper into balls and depositing them onto the other side of the three-paneled screen that sat in front of the tender, was symbolic of the creative process. Both the poem and the installation consider what is lost in that process of making in that language can never come to fully represent that which inspired the poet or artist to create. In *lineament*, Hamilton also subverted the notion that books are somehow sacred by altering the books, turning the pages into material, material that was incorporated into a process of making.

Language is a constant theme in Hamilton’s work. In this study I focused on how the altered books exemplified language’s limitations, and I have consistently used words, such as limitation, failure, or absence, as I refer to the ways in which Hamilton handles language in *indigo blue*, *tropos*, and *lineament*. In so doing, the purpose is not to suggest that Hamilton distrusts or feels any contempt toward language. On the contrary, Hamilton’s work has often exposed weaknesses in language as a system of signs, in the relationship between the signifier and the signified, but she has also fashioned new and quite poetic ways of understanding in her manipulation of that system. Hamilton has also discussed how she loves words, but that she doesn’t know
that she has ever come to “some ultimate reconciliation of materials and words,” but that she has “been inside them in different ways.”

David Hickey writes:

She is comfortable in these places, in the atmosphere of language; and I realized that while, for me, language is nearly always sensual transportation, for Hamilton it is a place. It is the physical presence of language that beguiles her, not the absence that it signifies or the transportation it provides. She loves the physical page, the book, the way it smells—the voice, its timbre, the atmosphere that it activates and fulfills.

So, for Hamilton, language is sensory and materialist. It is the tactile nature of the book, of the spoken word, the ways they activate space, the mind, our sense of the book as we hold it, the sound of the human voice as it is heard, etc. In these works Hamilton attempted to inhabit language, and I believe she was successful in this regard because she at the same time accepted what language is not able to accomplish. In Hamilton’s work language is both flawed and beautiful. She exposes its weaknesses in order to create new possibilities. Hickey says that language is a place for Hamilton. This “place” manifested itself in a variety of ways in indigo blue, tropos, and lineament.

When Hamilton was in graduate school at Yale, she began to study performance art, reading the writings of Roselee Goldberg. Considering how she might incorporate performance into her work she said, “I knew I wasn’t interested in ‘I’m the performer and you’re the audience looking at me.’ I was very clear on trying to dissolve those distinctions, and that I wanted the audience to somehow join me.” The tender served as the performer, but in their experience of these installations, viewers were

---

2 Enright, 21.
participants. In this regard, viewers were also able to inhabit language in that place, whether that place was a warehouse in New York City, or in Charleston, or a gallery in Santa Monica, California.
Fig. 1 *indigo blue*, Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, South Carolina, 1991, photo by John McWilliams
Fig. 2 *indigo blue* (second-story office, view of sacks of soybeans), Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, South Carolina, 1991, photo by John McWilliams
Fig. 3 *indigo blue* (view of folded-blue work clothes), Spoleto Festival USA, Charleston, South Carolina, 1991, photo by John McWilliams
Fig. 4 Altered Book from *indigo blue*, 1991
Fig. 5 *tropos*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1993-94, photo by Thibault Jenson
Fig. 6 *tropos* (view of tender), Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1993-94, photo by Thibault Jenson
Fig. 7 *tropos* (altered book), Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 1993-94, photo by Thibault Jenson
Fig. 8 lineament, Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1994, photo by Robert Wedemeyer
Fig. 9 *lineament* (view of table), Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, California, 1994, photo by Robert Wedemeyer
Selected Bibliography

Books


Dissertations


Catalogues


Articles


