

Ann Hamilton's Creativity Secret...rk Comes from Paying Attention

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SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, Ann Hamilton, David Staley

- E** Eva Dale 00:00
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics, and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32
Ann Hamilton is a Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Arts at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. Among her numerous honors, Professor Hamilton has been the recipient of the Heinz Award, MacArthur Fellowship, NEA Visual Arts Fellowship, and the Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. Her work has appeared at the Venice Biennale, and she has exhibited extensively around the world. Her major museum installations include the Park Avenue Armory, Guggenheim Museum, Contemporary Art Museum of Kumamoto, Japan, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Welcome to Voices, Professor Hamilton.
- A** Ann Hamilton 01:17
Great, thank you. Good to be here.
- D** David Staley 01:19
Thank you. So it's difficult, I think, because you're a visual artist and your works need to be

experienced, but I'd like you to talk about your work today, and especially your most current projects.

A

Ann Hamilton 01:31

So, I have two current projects. One is very ephemeral, and is open right now in Guimarães, Portugal, and is a site-responsive or related installation performance work that responds to several institutions there and the kind of community around the museum. And then, more close at hand, the subway project at the World Trade Center is just being completed in New York. So it's the Red Line number 1, if anyone is soon to be in New York City, and it is a public work. It's commissioned by the Arts in Transit, for the MTA, and it all of those projects, they're commissions that are throughout the MTA system, so different subways. And they're almost all... like, they are all mosaic projects. And so, it takes up the history of many of the designs of the subways historically, but then puts those into different kinds of contemporary vocabulary.

D

David Staley 02:42

So describe what we would see in the subway. Describe, describe what a viewer would be experiencing.

A

Ann Hamilton 02:48

Well, I should say first, that is WTC World Trade Center/Cortlandt Station, and so that station has been closed since 9/11. So it was... that whole space was collapsed. It's been a long process of, as everybody knows, that neighborhood being rebuilt, being reclaimed in different levels. And so, I was asked about four or five years ago, one of several artists asked to make proposals for what might go into that subway as it is being rebuilt. And I knew from the beginning that it needed to be mosaic, that has a lot to do with, obviously, durability. And I started thinking a lot about, what is this project asking of me? What does it need? Well, this is obviously such an incredibly potent, important site. And I've never done a mosaic before. So the project, interestingly, perhaps, for OSU listeners is that it's very related to the library project that is here at the Thompson Library. The second story reading room that faces out towards the west is a tactile floor made of cork, of raised letters, and it has a concordance structure that weaves together three different texts.

D

David Staley 04:08

Concordance structure?

A

Ann Hamilton 04:09

Concordance structure.

D

David Staley 04:10

David Staley 04:10

And that's...?

A

Ann Hamilton 04:11

That... a concordance is a very ancient form of organizing a document in a non-narrative way. So, I think some of the first concordances were probably exercised on the Bible. You could look up a certain word, it brings up every passage and the occurrence of that word in its passage, and so it organizes a text alphabetically with its accompanying information. And I find it's a really interesting way to look at it or examine a text, because particularly, like, if you're looking at the articles, it repeats the same sentence, but from a different place. And I found actually, in the OSU library, a copy of, I think a concordance of Darwin's, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal*, and it had a very beautiful typographic layout, because down the middle of each page are the spine words, the selected words alphabetically that are organizing that book, and then the accompanying content. And graphically, it's quite compelling. And I thought it was a very interesting way to read because I actually come from textiles, and there's a thing that's called the supplementary weft. So, a supplementary weft is like the thread that floats free of, but then rejoins the structure. And so as I was first looking at Darwin's book in this concordance structure, I was struck by how I could read a little bit of a phrase to the left of the word and a little bit to the right, and that the act of reading actually becomes then an active act of composition. So I...

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David Staley 05:56

Viewers can't see it, her hand is moving back and forth as if she were weaving.

A

Ann Hamilton 06:01

It's like this stitching, you know, so that as a form of organizing and reading or rereading something is a form I've worked with in several projects. It's in cork form in the library here, with raised text, and that came forward into my thinking for the World Trade Center. So there, I'm working with two collectively authored documents, one international, the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and the other national, the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence. And so, there are phrases from the Preamble, "We hold these truths to be self evident," etc, there are six phrases, those are vertically set along the length of the platform, on the northbound side of the subway, and the occurrence of those words in the UN document forms the horizontal texts. So the whole wall is made out of white marble mosaic, and then what we do is we waterjet cut the letter, each letter, there's thousands of letters, characters, from the ground and rhythm of that handling mosaic. And then we reset each letter and grout it back into place so that it's just proud of the surface. And so, it's a white on white text that really becomes legible to you through the drop shadow. And so, that extends the full length of the southbound platform. And then the other side of the platform, which has an elliptical opening that opens up into the Calatrava space that was rebuilt, and is that like kind of massive whale like volume, that is structured by the occurrence of the word "everyone" in the UN Declarations. So it's, I think, all but two occurrences of that word in the document, each wall is made up of 24 or 12 lines, from top to bottom. So it goes from the floor to the ceiling. And what is I think, for me, really important is that the text is of the material. It's not carved in, it's not set on, but it's in stone, and it lifts from the ground. And this language, which you experience as you walk along

the length of the platform and which then repeats the language of rights, is kind of read at the pace of your eye wandering, but it's really recomposed by every person that walks by, depending on where your attention catches. And obviously, it's also tactile. So, we know things through touch, we affirm things often by extending our hand and that's a... the haptic tactile experience is something that runs through all my work.

D

David Staley 09:10

You described the project in Portugal as a site-responsive installation. What do you mean, tell us what you mean by site-responsive installation?

A

Ann Hamilton 09:19

Well, there's a term, site-specific, that is, I think, something people are familiar with, especially if you think about the siting of a sculpture work, or that it can only exist in that place.

D

David Staley 09:34

The site is part of the work.

A

Ann Hamilton 09:36

The site is part of the work, yeah. And I think for me, I use... I sort of use the word site-responsive because the work is really generated in response to the conditions that I find in the place, and that can be social, historical, architectural. It's the collaboration with the people and working with the institutions. It's broad and so one is always, because we're, I suppose people's habits, bringing, I bring my issues I'm interested or form habits that I have. But, they're shaped and molded and refound through the condition of working in response to the place. So what that means is that often, it's been very important for me process-wise, that the thinking really happens by being there, by letting the questions or the experience of one aspect of a project working, then lead you or lead me to the next. And this summer, I was there with four graduate students from the OSU MFA program who were helping make the project and also watch the process, which I think is really maybe really crucial to see that, you know, you arrive with a plan, but that plan has to be very flexible, and it has to respond to what is possible. It has to respond to a lot of external conditions, but also that it has to remain open so that it continues to grow. And so, it's really being made as we're there, and lots of decisions are changing constantly. And one of the graduate students that I was talking to afterwards said that for him, perhaps that was one of the most important things to really be part of, and to witness, which - he's a student who's just graduated from the glass program - but he accompanied me to Portugal, and also a couple of years earlier, I had done a project in China. And so, you know, I think that, that as a practitioner, you're also trying to be an example that gives permission, and helps students actually trust their own processes that in art, we work from what we know often to what we don't know, but we live in a world of, you know, where we're uncomfortable with things that aren't very certain, or the form is not very clear. And so, you know, how do you cultivate an atmosphere that's really allowing of that?

D David Staley 12:16

You say, you said earlier that you come from textiles. Describe your work in textiles and how's it influenced, how's it influenced your work overall?

A Ann Hamilton 12:25

Oh, I think it's like my being.

D David Staley 12:29

Textiles are?

A Ann Hamilton 12:30

Well, yeah, I grew up, I think like a lot of women in my generation, you know, like, I grew up really elbow to elbow with my grandmother and my mother, you know, making things, sewing. It was a... there's something incredibly magical about watching a two-dimensional thing become a three-dimensional form, it's like the first act of making and transformation. And so, you know, I grew up knitting and embroidering, and doing all that. And I think that you don't even know at the time, it's only kind of maybe retrospectively you look back and see, I can see that all of not only the material acts of making that come through textiles, but also our work with language, we use textile metaphors, all our social metaphors are replete with references to textiles.

D David Staley 13:26

Such as?

A Ann Hamilton 13:27

The web.

D David Staley 13:28

Okay.

A Ann Hamilton 13:29

It's a way of structuring relationships. So, you know, is there a time in your life, there's very few moments, for example, when we're not touching cloth. And cloth is one of like the first, it's not the first, I would never claim that, but it's certainly one of the first manifestations of culture,

like two blades of grass, whatever, being crossed. And so, I think that both in the language of textiles, and the kind of analogies and metaphors, as well as the material acts. I draw on them, but I'm not necessarily sitting at a loom. I'm more responding - and this is the site-responsive part - I'm more responding to the entirety of an architecture. And so, because what I do mostly is called installation for lack of a better word, it means that everything that is there is part of the project.

D David Staley 14:33

Not even a metaphorical loom?

A Ann Hamilton 14:36

Yes, definitely a metaphorical loom. I did a project in Sweden where we had Leslie speakers being mechanically lifted.

D David Staley 14:46

A Leslie speaker is...?

A Ann Hamilton 14:47

Is a speaker that, out of the Hammond B3 organ in it, it has those treble cones that turn and a bass that goes out the bottom and we cannibalize those, and then there on these mechanical lifts that raised and lowered through a five storey former grain barn. In Sweden, I think we had four or five mechanisms and they lift and lower through the horizons of each of the five floors of the barn. And so I think of that, quite literally, as a weaving. So the horizontal is the, maybe the warp and the vertical voice crossing, it is the weft.

D David Staley 15:29

I feel like we're already there in some ways, but I would like to peer into, explore more about your creative process. You've said, for instance, earlier that the thinking happens by being there. I wonder, where do your ideas come from? What's the genesis of the ideas for your projects?

A Ann Hamilton 15:52

Well, that's like the million dollar question, isn't it?

D David Staley 15:56

That's why I'm the interviewer.

A

Ann Hamilton 15:59

That's how... I don't know, you know, it's, I think that work comes from paying attention.

D

David Staley 16:07

Paying attention.

A

Ann Hamilton 16:07

Paying attention to what comes to your attention. So for me, that gets me off the hook as an artist, because that means like, I'm always working, right. But, you know, how do we cultivate, I don't know, like a contemplative space, or an internal spaciousness, that allows us to be very responsive to where we find ourselves? And so, my practice is developed around first doing a site visit. So if I'm invited to make a project, I'll use Portugal as an example, then I go, and I'm, I'm really like a tourist. I've never been to this particular medieval city, historic city. And I'm looking at the contemporary economies, I'm looking at the, actually, textile production, the history of actually shoe production, in that case, and cutlery that were central to the development of the history of that area. And I'm touring the spaces, I'm also looking at the traditional craft that is still tied to earlier kind of forms of production. And I'm looking for a space where I might work. And that ends up - I mean, it's wide open at the beginning. And I suppose the weaving part of it is that there are these impressions, and there's this associative thinking, relative to each of those experiences that then over time with research, returning, actually forms the project. So one of the really potent experiences there, when I first visited is that we visited a former tannery, that had recently closed and that had been a huge part of the history very early on in the development of the city, and you can walk through the medieval center, and you can really see the basins where different stages of that process took place as the water flowed through, and in how the city was then built around the flow of that water through that industry. Now that industry is largely closed, but there was this factory that until recently was still processing skins, and I walked in and it was really just such an extraordinary space, with this kind of filtered light and, and these pallets stacked with skins that were half processed, so like, not a mountain, but it felt like a mountain. And they're there, they don't really look like animal anymore. They're kind of this blue color because of the chemicals they use. But the shape of them is still like pelt-like and I mean, I was just like, oh, well the piece is already here, I really don't need to do anything at all. And we started thinking that maybe the project would happen there and I would, was going to work with a local choir, and just kind of dreaming up what might be possible in this two story space. In the end, that space was not available to us, but the materials were. So the research then starts to go towards the history of skin, it's the largest organ of our body, and the relationship obviously between human skin and animal skin and, and then came forward and became actually a lot of the the skins were stitched together and they became the floor in one component of this project.

D

David Staley 19:44

And so, research is part of your creative process?

A

Ann Hamilton 19:47

Oh, yeah, definitely. A lot of reading, a lot of, like, everyone looking around on Google.

D

David Staley 19:55

You use the term associative thinking a few minutes ago. How do you define associative thinking? Is it different from logic? How are you defining it?

A

Ann Hamilton 20:07

It's my logic, I suppose.

D

David Staley 20:08

Okay.

A

Ann Hamilton 20:10

I think associatively when I like think, okay, we'd like I have these materials, what are all the ways I can think about this material? What are all the processes it can be put through? And, it's almost like you make lists of possibilities, and each of those possibilities takes you into either a related process or research. So it's researching, and then seeing where that research takes you. And then the footnote in one of the books you're reading about the history of skin takes you then to another vocabulary, and you kind of follow it down a rabbit hole, because I think I trust that over time, it does all connect up. But, you don't necessarily know at the time because you're gathering, you're just gathering a lot of input, and much of it, you're going to let go of, but I think I mean - I do now have white hair, I've been doing this for a while - that I do implicitly trust the process. I don't know necessarily what the project is going to become, or all of its forms. But I know that if I keep my attention in this process, which has multiple facets, that it will hopefully get me there. I think you referenced the Park Avenue Armory, in the introduction. And that was a project that developed over several years and many site visits, visiting this vast volumetric cavernous space, a former drill hall, that's the size of a block in New York City. And it really wasn't until the show came down that it really was fully there. So I think I've also cultivated a process that allows it to keep changing to some degree or growing and that the process of meeting its public life, it still has some flexibility, because it isn't like an object that's like finished and has edges around it. It's an ongoing process. And so, how it has its public life is also part of my coming to understand what it is. And I can give you an example, when we were working on that project, you enter through this really very elaborate foyer into the drill hall, it's, you know, fine paneling and paintings, and it's the public part of the armory. But then you open up into this vast volume, that's the drill hall with its original wood floor. And I happened to be walking through that door, and Marty Chafkin, who is an engineer that I've worked with on many projects, he was coming through at the very far end where they deliver things into the building. So, it's a big garage door, and it opens up to Lexington Avenue, I'm coming in from

Park Avenue. And when that door opened and his car drove into the space, I understood that, oh my gosh, this piece is not complete until that spine of light connecting from Park Avenue to Lexington Avenue is present, it actually helped structure the whole piece. This was two weeks before the opening. And it's a massive project. And so immediately I go into conversation with the technical director there, Phil, and we're in we're talking about, he's like, okay, I think we can do this, we can put- there's a system of access we put in when people have to have a fire exit. And we can put Plexiglas in there, and we can make the view from Lexington Avenue visible into the armory and you can bring that natural light in. So, you think about the history of this building that has never had a public view into its interior, in its entire life. And for the first time you're introducing that light, but I didn't plan that. A part of the project is you have to cultivate it, again, it's that responsiveness to seeing something and going, aha, that's what we need. And so I think every project in different ways is full of those gifts, but you have to be open to recognizing them.

D

David Staley 24:33

Maybe call it serendipity?

A

Ann Hamilton 24:35

Definitely, it's serendipitous. And, but it's also like, I think in the process, you're waiting for it to happen. You know, like I knew that there was something not working in terms of how all the relationships were setting into place. But day by day, you try to trust the process that it will reveal itself. So it's partly directed and it's partly, what would we say, Lewis Hyde might say cultivating, you know, the possibility for chance, or for the gift to arrive.

D

David Staley 25:08

Tell us about what's next, your next project.

A

Ann Hamilton 25:12

Well, I am... actually, something that might possibly involve OSU but most immediately this month, I'm spending a week at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. And we are actually scanning Mesopotamian funerary figures that they are taking off display, and -

D

David Staley 25:33

Scanning them?

A

Ann Hamilton 25:34

We're scanning them, not high-tech, not like a lot of the things that go on the university, I have... I mean, it's almost laughable, but I have these very early generation flatbed scanners

and I have very inexpensive wand scanners from Staples.

D David Staley 25:49

Okay.

A Ann Hamilton 25:50

But what interests me about both of those is this shallow depth of field, so that if a light passes, or in some cases if my hand draws light over the object, is only what hits that surfaces in focus, and everything else is out of focus. And so that gives the objects a quality that's very different than HD, you know, where you see everything, and so much imaging is really geared towards making smaller and smaller bits of information visible. But I'm very interested in the kind of presence of these objects that comes through the tactility of light, which draws across it and it makes a different quality of image. It's not so much about strain information as it is about presence. And I'm also beginning to look at and sending out, I'm working with a few graduate students to send out inquiries to different departments, thinking about what objects we might find, or scan or put through this process here at OSU. So I can maybe, I can make a plug for that. There are those obvious collections, like the incredible geology library, and the Polar Research has these rocks there that have incredible history right in there from long time ago. There is the OSU archive, but I know that in different departments, there are objects that are part of pedagogy or are part of the history of the development of the field, that maybe even are no longer used, but still speak to way of learning in the world. I'm interested in those, the... obviously Special Collections in the library, I've been, I found some amazing things in the Theater Research Collection. And so it's very interesting as an artist to say, like, I'm not missing making an installation, I'm not working to meet an architecture, like I did at the armory, but it's responsive to thinking about the campus as a studio, and that the main materials for my project come from what is here. And so I'm thinking about how I might make a kind of phonebook of these images that might circulate in paper form.


D David Staley 28:17

An actual Yellow Pages phonebook?

A Ann Hamilton 28:18

Like an actual Yellow Pages phonebook, but of images, and possibly also with people. I had developed a couple of years ago, I was working with Bayer material sciences in Pittsburgh. And there was a project where the Warhol Museum partnered artists with businesses in Pittsburgh and I was partnered with Bayer. Mostly it's chemical chemistry, their engineering surface performances of a lot of different things, like your raincoat, and they put a material into my hand that is kind of thermoplastic that is very tough, and can withstand a lot of pressure, but it's very flexible. And when they put it in my hand, I knew I wasn't going to use it for their application that they were developing it for. But I was interested in the fact that only my fingertips were in focus, and everything went soft, just like the scanning mechanism. And I started a series of projects where I've been photographing people standing behind this

material. So you stand behind it, the cameras on the other side of the material, and I ask you to step forward and let your eyebrow or your cheek or your hand touch and then I kind of direct, but you can't see the camera. And so fundamentally, that condition of I, what I would call this self-consciousness that we all bring to standing in front of a camera is... you know it's there intellectually, but it's not there in some funny way, experientially. And so the images that result from the condition of that exchange in that process, I think what they record is a kind of privacy, which is maybe interesting to think about in you know, age of the selfie. And so I'm thinking can these two processes, the scanning project and the photographing, setting up this condition for photographing, it's from those that a particular kind of image is made. And then, you know, one of the questions I always ask myself is like, well, how can these things then have a life? How do they extend into a material form? And that's another kind of making.

 David Staley 30:40
Ann Hamilton, thank you.

 Ann Hamilton 30:42
Thank you.

 David Staley 30:43
Voices is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler.