

Gentling The Savage Enormity Of Gargantuan Space: Ann Hamilton at the Armory

by Ellen Handler Spitz

The Event of a Thread by Ann Hamilton at the Park Avenue Armory

December 5, 2012 to January 6, 2013

643 Park Avenue, between 66th and 67th streets

New York City, (212) 616-3930

Robert Louis Stevenson's poem 'The Swing' (from *A Child's Garden of Verses*) offers an ebullient summons to Ann Hamilton's wondrous new work at the Park Avenue Armory. A line from Stevenson sails into mind as—in the company of visitors ranging in age from infancy to near dotage, including portly businessmen whose well-cut jacket flaps trail behind them like the tails of flying fish—I ascend weightless, airborne on one of 42 wooden plank swings. Reminiscent of garment workers' benches, these are suspended by chains some 70 feet from the drill hall ceiling. "Up in the air I go flying again,/ Up in the air and down!" These blissful words might well have been known to the artist's grandmother, who is lovingly credited by the artist as a prime source of inspiration for this entrancing piece.

The Gothic Revival Park Avenue Armory, erected just five years before the poem's publication in 1885, provides a perfect venue for Hamilton's swings, her 42 pigeons in miniature, stacked dovecotes, and the immense white silken fabric that billows from on high, responsively rising and falling according to the visitors' velocities as they sway on their swings, pushed often by perfect strangers. And the site irresistibly harks back to that other Armory, the one where in 1913 Modern Art erupted upon America. Like Theodore Roosevelt back then, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith (reviewing this show on December 6) wonders whether what surrounds us inside these Armory walls is *art*. But, oh! It is!

Looming vast and drafty, 250 by 150 feet, the uncanny erstwhile home to military maneuvers, Wade Thompson Drill Hall seems forbidding at first glance. Lit dimly by Hamilton's cunning lighting design, its awe and *tremendum* could easily dwarf anyone cursed with even a trace of agoraphobia. But any initial frisson of anxiety soon dissipates, for one of the triumphs of the art is how it "meets" that presenting enormity of space and—to borrow the verb chosen by the artist herself—"animates" it. She tames it but without completely sacrificing its inherent wildness. Intimations of ambivalence about wildness abound as we enter the hall and try ourselves out in its immensity. Live pigeons, for example, greet our view, but caged, not free (at least most of the time, for there is a plan to release them once each day). Pigeons, moreover, we note, are members of the same genus as doves (*columbidae*), which are symbols of peace; thus concord enters symbolically into a place devoted to the trappings of war. And Emily Dickinson's delicate trembling comes to mind, for, just as she, with her poesy, engages and magnifies the infinitesimal, so Ann Hamilton, artisan and conceptual visual artist, gentles, for us, the savage enormity of gargantuan space.

Hamilton's enigmatic title strings words together that don't at first make sense: for how can there be an event of a thread? But wait! 'Event' denotes not simply a happening but an *outcome*, as it joins the Latin prefix 'ex,' meaning 'out,' with 'venire,' meaning 'to come.' The outcome of a thread, when we parse it, takes us back to weaving, the craft with which Ann Hamilton began her trade as an artist. And the outcome of a thread can be, indeed must be, open, free, undecidable. This realization leads to an astonishing feature of the piece, namely, a large glass window seemingly cut through the exterior wall on the Armory's Lexington side (in fact, this was achieved by rolling up a garage door and inserting glass) expressly as a way to release the work from its confines within the building and expand its metaphoric extension into the city streets.

Quality of attention matters profoundly. Imagine readers in furry capes sitting beside pigeons and reading aloud to them—words of complex texts, which are simultaneously transmitted into paper bag radios scattered about the floor of the Armory, among the swings, so that visitors can pick them up and carry them hither and yon. Through them, we become attuned to the notion that listening intently for individual words so as to catch their meaning only causes us to miss everything else that is going on in the space around us: our driven, unilateral search for logical connection lures us away from greater proto-logical and trans-logical states of mind and of being. Hamilton's dense texts moreover cannot be followed logically, for they mirror woven fabrics, where the warp-and-woof is what matters. We become like pigeons, who attend on a wholly other plane, or like children too young to grasp the intended meaning but not to feel embraced by the warmth of the reading human voice.

The Sufi epic by Farid al-din 'Attar floated into consciousness as I swung through Hamilton's installation. In this work, paradox, reversal and mystery reveal truths inaccessible by the tools of reason and where, as led by the hoopoe bird, feathered creatures of all sorts (Hamilton's pigeons) go in search of the unknown Simorgh. Simorgh is found in the end by means of a mirror, just as one is set up in this piece to reflect the Armory space and its visitors while the transparent window extends it all in another direction. Antimonies unsteadily holds truth, like a swing: large and minute, individual and communal, human and animal, war and peace, inside and out, voice and motion (the rhythm of the spoken words, for example, which reiterate synaesthetically the back-and-forth motion of swinging). And high and low, as the swings are attached by giant pulleys to the billowing white oceans of fabric which, suspended from the ceiling, extend across the entire space of the Armory hall. By the most gossamer of threads— of silk and of sound— connections proliferate.

Gertrude Stein, in her celebrated 1935 essay 'Pictures,' seeks to separate the notion of literary idea from visual one. Ann Hamilton blends these in her work. By so doing, she unwittingly and uncannily evokes Stein; their streams of consciousness mutually establish intricate filaments of connection. And one small wise child, standing at the entrance to the drill hall remarked: This is not like play, but like "wonder!"