



# ART REVIEW: Ann Hamilton Installation Weaves Fabric into Many Realms

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by Anne Sherwood Pundyk

Ann Hamilton's stirring installation "*habitus*" in Philadelphia extends between the [Fabric Workshop and Museum](#) downtown, on view through January 8, 2017, and [Municipal Pier 9](#) on the Delaware River a 20-minute walk away, which closes to the public on October 10, 2016. In this major work, the widely acclaimed, Ohio-based artist deploys with finesse her now recognizable stagecraft, video, film, and performance elements combined with her poetic re-use of handwritten commonplace books of copied passages, collections of fabric and dye samples, blankets, antique dolls and hand-held tools.

Taken together, the work convincingly mines one of [Ann Hamilton's](#) hallmark concepts: the notion that fabric—as an intermediary between the intimate realm of the body and its exposure to society and the elements—carries deeply personal associations of protection, identity and communication.



"*habitus*" by Ann Hamilton, 2016. Installation at Municipal Pier 9, made in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. Photo credit: Thibault Jeanson.

On the one hand, viewers may examine an array of cloth-makers' artifacts from prior centuries selected by the artist and borrowed from six libraries and museums in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., purposefully displayed on shelves and in glass-topped metal carts at the Fabric Workshop and Museum.

Alternatively, they may be wooed by a dozen 20-foot high spinning hoops of pearl-grey fabric suspended just below the clearstory of the 55,000 square-foot open-air structure over the river at Pier 9. Common to many of Hamilton's large-scale projects completed over the last 30 years, visitors to "*habitus*" experience a self-directed multi-sensory engagement with the work's spectrum of components, all centered on the making and use of fabric.

Deep inside the raw cavernous space at Pier 9, Hamilton's immense, swaying, skirt-like forms made of hand-dyed synthetic fabric have a maternal presence. They are activated both intentionally, by manned bell pulls, and serendipitously, by the wind flowing through the space. The swirling hemlines of varying lengths play full-body peekaboo, periodically revealing water and sky. A low

periodic responsive hum of musical instruments attached to the rigging on high accompanies the movement.



“habitus” by Ann Hamilton, 2016. Installation at Municipal Pier 9, made in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia. Photo credit: Thibault Jeanson.

Back at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, a related work is on view in the eighth floor exhibition space. Hanging on a rail above eye level, a horizon line of 23 borrowed, antique bedcovers creates an indoor version of the landscape of swaying protective goddesses on the pier. The two pieces together are like generations connecting present and past.

The loaned objects shown in the Fabric Workshop and Museum exemplify the categories of “fragment,” in the samples of lace and woven materials, and “miniature,” in such objects as the antique dolls. The items thus set up an awareness of the relationship of parts to a whole, much like members of a family. Hamilton selected several dolls representing different nationalities, many of them originally shown in the 1900 “Exposition Universelle” in Paris. The sample books and dolls are lying flat under glass. As replicas of human forms, though, the dolls project a strikingly different, eerie presence, almost as if they are enchanted and waiting to be awoken.



“(habitus • doll) Doll” by Ann Hamilton, 1800–1820. Papier-mâché; Wood; Linen; Cotton; Paint; Silk. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Gift of Katherine Gahagan, Michael H. du Pont, and Christopher T. du Pont in memory of A. Felix du Pont, Jr., 1999.19.1.

In an essay titled “everyone” in the free newsprint publication cataloguing the installation, Hamilton’s discussion moves from a description of the dolls to robots and artificial intelligence as a means of exploring identity. To be sure, robotics and software coding fit with the themes of weaving machines and pattern books as models for how we think, but the artist’s essay surprisingly skips over a deeper examination of the issue of race raised by the inclusion of dolls meant to underscore attributes of “other.”

The dolls are a poignant reminder of the divisiveness in the U.S. as reflected almost daily in

coverage of the current presidential race and in the aftermath of multiple police shootings. They bring to mind tragic social habits based on prejudice that appear to go unexplored in this installation.

Luckily for the viewers of "*habitus*," on view on the first of the three exhibition floors at the Fabric Workshop and Museum are works the artist's canon. Most notable is (*suitably positioned*) (1984/2014), a man's suit painstakingly covered in wooden toothpicks so that its surface resembles porcupine quills. Hamilton made this work as a student at Yale and wore it for a durational performance. Other pieces by the artist are intermingled among the displays of borrowed objects in the two floors above. Their placement sets up the kind of equivalents that are at the core of her thinking, such as the connection between fabric and language.

In "*habitus*," language is further explored through two poems, "MIRROR" and "CHANNEL," contributed by the poet Susan Stewart. The text of her poems is integrated into interactive elements using both fabric and video. The raw materials of cotton and wool are spun into thread, just as letters are spun into words; threads are woven into cloth for blankets and clothing just as words are placed in sequence to become sentences in journals, stories, prayers and poems.

In much of Hamilton's work, she pushes back against digital modes of relating. She allows them in at the edges. For example, an open-submission Tumblr page called, *cloth: a commonplace*, modeling the commonplace books on display is located on the exhibition page of Fabric Workshop and Museum's website. Favorite passages about topics related to "*habitus*" may be submitted online and a selection of these is printed on cream-colored paper and is available to pick up and take home.

There are also several videos and photographic scans, but these were made with earlier technologies and celebrate the role of the hand and the resulting imperfections. The artist's work is an invitation to savor a less pressured, slower pace of living and consider the richer realm of thought this creates.

With its signature look and feel, Hamilton's oeuvre is undeniably original. She is interested in liminal states and intersections—those realms between wake and sleep, thought and word, material and sensation—and has completed more than 25 intricate, site-specific pieces throughout the United States, Europe and the Far East.

The artist developed the multimedia, two-part "*habitus*" installation with the Fabric Workshop and Museum, long known for its unique facilities and collaborative programming, and the nearby loaning institutions. Hamilton seems to be responding here to a pull toward the past, drawing on both her own artworks from prior projects and the kind of heirlooms that are associated with this historically rich city.

Inside the threshold at each of the entrances are stacks of copies of a lush publication of the artist's written reflections and soft-focus photographic scans listing all the components of the installation. With the piece on the pier closing to the public on October 10, 2016, "*habitus*" will feel even more reflective once the large, mysterious spectacle on the pier is down. Indoors, this contemplative tone is maintained even in the low-level illumination in the galleries of the Fabric Workshop and

Museum, bringing to mind the shift in mindset as the seasons change from fall to winter.

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**BASIC FACTS:** “Ann Hamilton: *habitus*” is on view in Philadelphia from September 17, 2016 to January 8, 2017 at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, and September 6 to October 10, 2016 at Municipal Pier 9. The Fabric Museum and Workshop is at 1214 Arch Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107. Municipal Pier 9 is at 121 North Columbus Boulevard Philadelphia, PA 19106.  
[www.fabricworkshopandmuseum.org/](http://www.fabricworkshopandmuseum.org/)

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