

mattering

“An undulating canopy of red-orange silk hovered above a vast gallery space, empty but for a restricted number of visitors, who shared the territory with five male peacocks walking about or sitting on any of the six wall-mounted perches. The space was more theirs than the visitors’.

Barely heard were the recorded sounds of an opera singer giving lessons to a student – and the student mimicking the teacher – amid the rhythmic billowing of air as waves of fabric passed overhead. (The sounds were from speakers mounted above the ceiling.) More audible were the swishing, dragging sounds of peacock feathers and the clicking of the birds’ feet as they moved and sometimes slid across the polished wooden floor, punctuated at times by their vocal screeches. A wooden utility pole ascended from the floor like an isolated tree trunk and penetrated a large circular hole in the silk drift of color.

Approaching this zone, one soon found above the red horizon a figure sitting in a perchlike seat attached to the pole. He methodically drew up from the ground, out of a small white porcelain inkpot embedded in the wood, a seemingly endless thin blue line. This turned out to be an inked typewriter ribbon, which he wrapped around one hand with the other, “using his fingers,” as Hamilton says, as “warp, the typewriter ribbon as the weft.” In winding it, he was “defining and marking the negative space of the hand.” As he continuously wrapped one hand in the blue ribbon, he saturated the skin of the other hand with blue. When the binding had created a dense mitt, he cut it free from its tether, slid the glovelike mass off his hand, and let it drop to the floor. Then he began to wrap again. Over the course of the exhibition, these bundles accumulated at the pole’s base, as did the blue moltings and other droppings of the birds – which, by contrast, were collected daily.

The word *mattering* is not readily found in a desktop dictionary, and Hamilton’s use of it derives from her reading of Elaine Scarry. “The notion of consequence,’ of ‘mattering,’ is nearly inseparable from the substantive fact of ‘matter.’ Or, phrased in the opposite direction, when ‘matter’ goes from being a noun to being an active verb – when we go from saying of something that ‘it is matter’ to saying ‘it matters’ – then substance has tilted

forward into consequence. What matters (what signifies, what has standing, what counts) has substance: mattering is the impingement of a thing’s substance on whatever surrounds it.”

The gallery used for *mattering* is large, 105 feet long by 58 feet wide. Hamilton extended across this expanse a single horizontal membrane measuring 90 by 54 feet – a red/orange silk horizon that divided the 16-foot-high gallery almost in half laterally. A mechanical drive raised and lowered the fabric at one end, causing a continuous billowing drift. The forming of the blue-inked mitts was also repetitive. Hamilton had returned this room to the original proportions designed by architect Renzo Piano in 1995. She removed all interior walls, and also flooded the space with natural light by fully opening the louvered fabric panels in the ceiling. Light was then diffused through the red-orange silk to the space below. In a setting that was remarkably spare, visitors were bathed in a blush of glowing light.

The solo performer sat above this abstracted landscape. In this piece, as in others, the performer was effectively distanced from any of the other living presences in the room. More curiously, the hand-wrapping worker was doubly removed from the source of the seemingly endless inked ribbon. Sometime during or after viewing the complete show, most visitors probably figured out the relationship between the almost immaterial, thin blue line on the museum’s second floor – extending from floor to ceiling – and the dark blue length extracted through the small porcelain ring on the third floor by the man working from his perch. This continuous line was a small gesture but an important one. An element that appeared only marginally interesting suddenly assumed significance when it was fully understood, causing our attention to take off on a flight through the building. Thus, in recognizing the totality of an individual work, the viewer also became aware of an exchange between the program of an architect and the reach of an artist.”

- Joan Simon, *Ann Hamilton* (p 193-198)