THIBAULT JENSEN, COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY

Ann Hamilton's *lignum* IN CONTEXT(S)

by Judith Hoos Fox

In 1985, while a graduate student at the Yale School of Art and Architecture, Ann Hamilton created her first installation/performance, *the space between memory*. In this early work, Hamilton introduced speech as an element in the composition: a woman, suspended in a tilted and moving porch swing, spoke quietly in Swedish, recalling her childhood memories, distanced by time and miles. Joan Simon wrote about this work: "Here language becomes a palpable material, a flow of background tone, as subtle and yet as pervasive and multi-dimensional as the water spreading from the melting ice [referring to a 300-pound block of ice that sat on the studio floor]."[1]

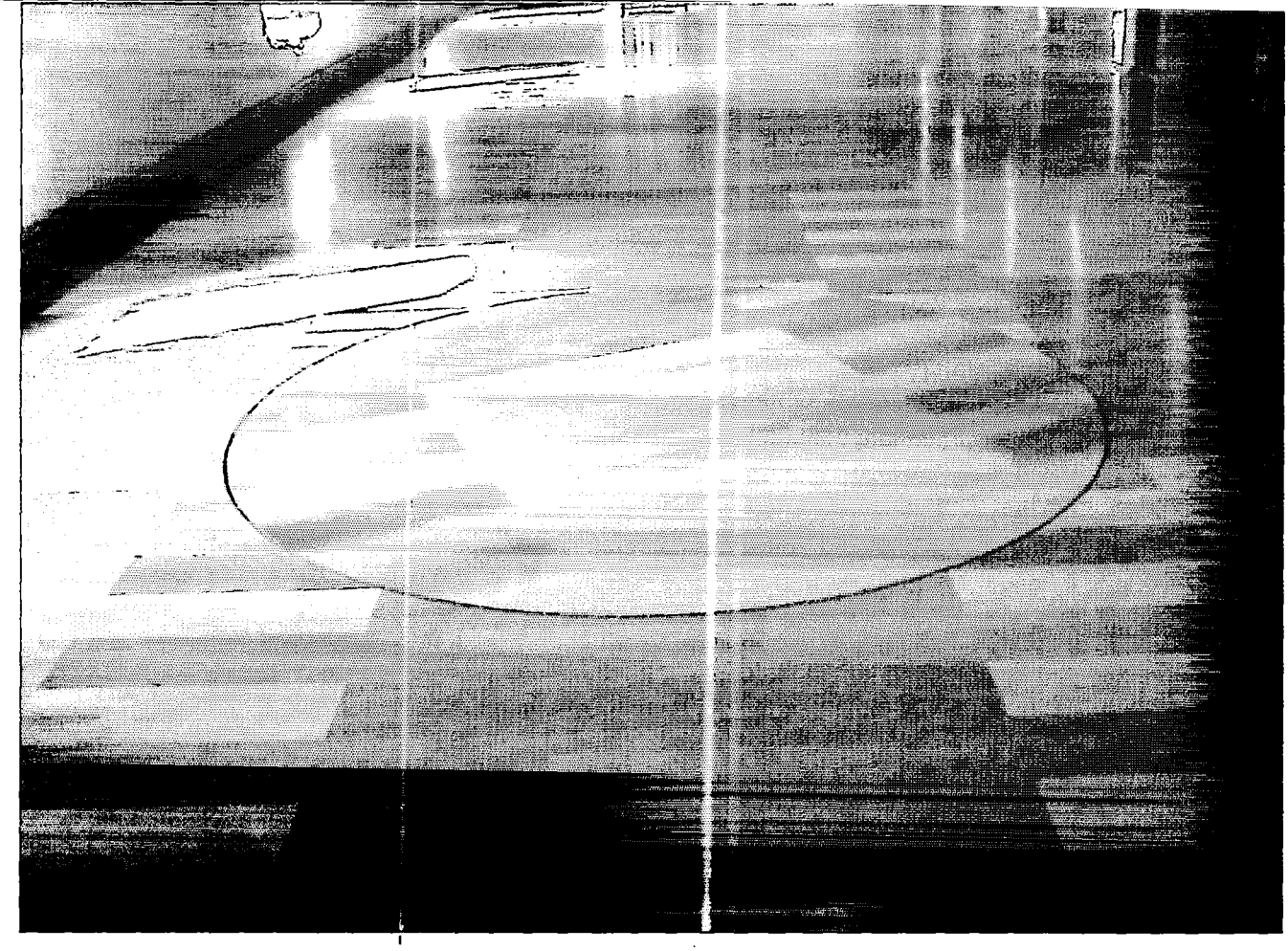
Hamilton was not concerned with the meaning of the Swedish words. It was the cadence of language spoken softly, language as sound, that interested Hamilton. Seventeen years later, in Knislinge, Sweden, Hamilton created a major site-specific piece for an 18th-century storehouse on the estate where the Wanås Foundation is located.[2] In *lignum*, sound emerged from the background to become a central, defining medium of the piece: sonorous, resonant, surrounding, sung, spoken, and hummed tones and words that are heard and felt, that envelop and reverberate through viewer and space.

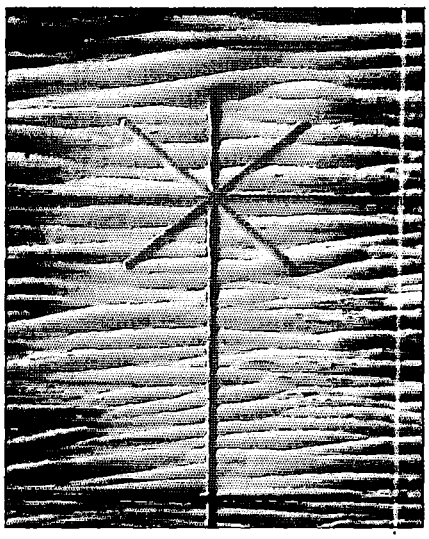
In 1999 Marika Wachmeister, director of Wanås, invited Hamilton to make a single work for the five-floor storehouse. Hamilton had first used an entire building in 1991 when she created *indigo blue* in Charleston, but this was the first time that Wanås dedicated the building to a single artist's work.[3]

The storehouse, built in 1823, is part of this still-active farm. Its walls are the granite and stucco typical of this region of southern Sweden, and its roof is covered with the ubiquitous orange tiles. Outside are paddocks with animals (including Jason Rhoades's fiberglass horse, *Frigidaire [cold wind]*, 1996). Hamilton visited Wanås several times during the development of her piece. After landing at the stylish airport in Copenhagen and crossing the Öresund by the sleek bridge that opened in 2000, she would travel some 120 miles along two-lane roads flanked by gently rolling fields of wheat and through small hamlets, driving northeast toward Knislinge. Stone walls mark the estate boundaries. The grounds of Wanås—an allée of chestnut trees along a gravel drive leading to a 15th-century castle surrounded by formal gardens, pond, stone walls, and 17,000 acres of forest and fields—are immaculately kept. There Hamilton was welcomed by Marika Wachmeister, her husband, and children. As she does in preparation for each new project, the artist walked the site, the buildings, the tilled and forested land; she studied the economy and history of the place and made contact with local and regional craftspeople and suppliers. All these elements are woven into *lignum*.

Hamilton's early training in fiber arts is always present within her installations; indeed, her body of work can be regarded as a complex woven tapestry.

***lignum*, 2002. View of entry room. Site-specific installation in the storehouse at the Wanås Foundation.**





Above: *lignum*, 2002. Detail of the spinning floor. Left: *lignum*, 2002. Detail of carved table top.

That she sees each work as part of a larger whole is reinforced by her use of the lower case in titling her pieces. An element occurs in one work, just as a new color is introduced into a woven pattern, and then recurs in later works, as a color reappears in a design, the thread carried over. At Wanås, the threads of early installations come together to form a singular tapestry that is, as gallery owner Sean Kelly remarked to the artist at the opening, "every piece you ever made."[4] But the achievement of this work is that it is also integrally connected to its remarkable site, so much so that the foundation is planning to extend its duration for another year or more, certainly through summer 2003.

A rectangular room on the ground level of the storehouse, which can be entered only from the outside, is the first entrance to the piece. This room, "cleared" just as Hamilton previously prepared the spaces in which she has worked, is painted white. A revolving projector of the sort she had devised for *ghost—a border act* (2000), at the Bayly Art Museum, the University of Virginia, throws against the rough white walls the continuous and circling text (in both Swedish and English), one line at a time, of *Nils Holgersson*, a Swedish fairytale by Selma Lagerlöf. This segment of the story treats a moral problem with which the protagonist struggles: having been shrunken in punishment for torturing animals, Nils now has to face the situation of a despondent caged mother squirrel who pines for her babies. This defining moment in the fairytale is immediately recognizable to the Scandinavians who visit. For foreign visitors, the words function like the spoken text in *the space between memory*; it implies story time through its blocky serif typeface, evoking the elusive memories of childhood. The other elements in the room are a long moving black cord and a chain hanging through a square opening in the ceiling, a strong vertical bisecting the horizon of text. These accumulate and coil within a fenced-in square area. This shaft once served as a chute for the grain that farmers on the estate brought in from the fields. In her study of the structure Hamilton discovered this opening, which had been sealed for decades. She opened it up and replicated it at each of two levels above, as well as creating four new shafts that channel through the vertical space, some cutting through just one level, others through two or more.

Hamilton had similarly connected floors by making openings in her collaborative work *Ann Hamilton/Patrick David Ireland* (1992), for Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and *whitecloth* (1999), for the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

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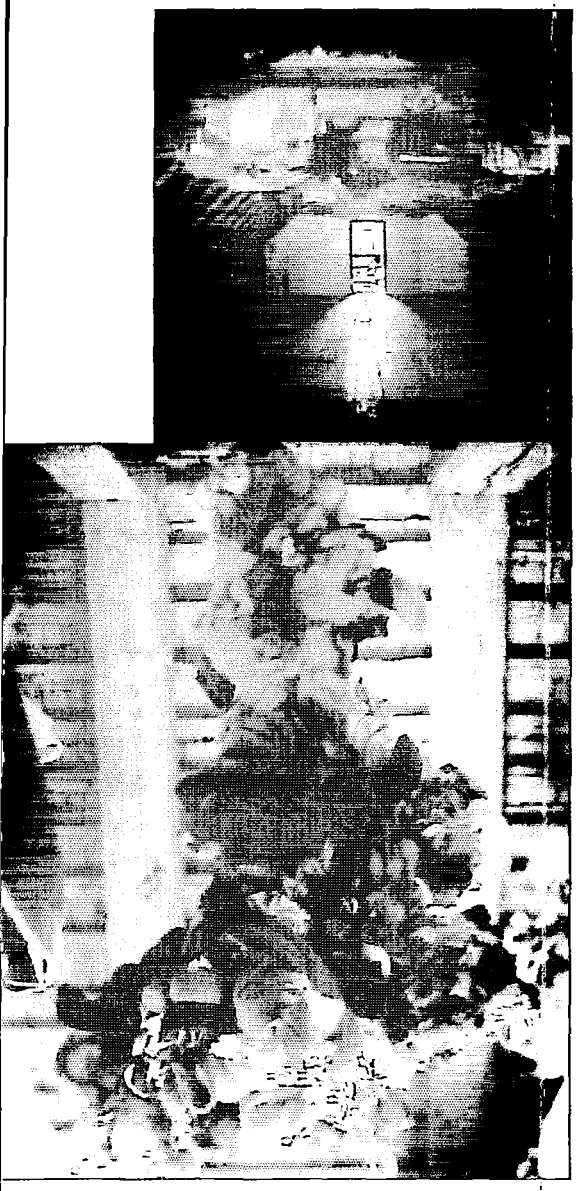
Slowly traveling up and down the shafts at Wanås are reconfigured spinning Leslie speakers, made for the Hammond B-3 organ. These speakers separate the bass from the treble, with the treble issuing from the revolving cones. The bass speaker points downward. The double movement of the speakers creates a haunting tremolo. They project a rich mélange: the voices of singers in a local choir who pass sustained notes among themselves, the artist reading a poem, Charles Wachmeister reading from a 1534 text on computations and later humming, his 12-year-old daughter humming and later playing a counting/clapping game with her cousin, the ambient sounds of the farm (grain pouring into a silo, pheasants just before hatching, cows lowing and being called). Like separate handfuls of wool spun into a single strong thread, these many aural elements projecting from the spinning speakers blend together into a seamless harmony that seems both familiar and eerie, ascending and descending in volume and through space. Hamilton first introduced prerecorded sound into an installation in 1988; previously sound had been the result of actions performed within a piece (foghorn, water, tennis-ball machine). In *still life,* part of the "Home Show" in Santa Barbara, California, selections from *Carmen* and *The Magic Flute* filled the eucalyptus-leafed room.[5]

Ten years earlier, in *malediction* at Louver Gallery in New York, Hamilton incorporated the history of the gallery building, a bakery, into the fabric of the piece, and sound became part of the subject matter: Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" and "Song of Myself" were read softly.[6]

At the Venice Biennale in 1999, the background audio component of Hamilton's *myein* was her voice reading Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, translated, letter by letter, into the international phonetic code.

Top: View of Ann Hamilton wrapping thread. Bottom: *lignum,* 2002. View of fourth floor with beams wrapped in cotton thread.

TOP: ANDERS NORRSELL, COURTESY MARIKA WACHMEISTER / BOTTOM: THIBAULT JENSEN, COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY



Top and detail: *lignum*, 2002. Two views of the fifth floor.

This was the first time she used her own voice. At Wanås, she read again, this time a poem by A.R. Ammons, the contemporary American nature poet referred to in Robert Pogue Harrison's evocative book *Forests*.[7] This book greatly influenced Hamilton as she considered the relationships between the nearby forests, the tilled fields, and the structures of the estate and the nearby hamlet.

After her initial visit to Wanås, the artist knew she wanted to do something about or with the floor as part of her installation. It is an architectural element she had worked with before: the floor was a major focus in *aleph* at the MIT List Art Center in Cambridge in 1992 and in *whitecloth* (1999) at the Aldrich Museum. In *aleph*, a false floor of steel sheets created a harsh environment in a book-lined space, and in *whitecloth*, an eight-foot-diameter circle is cut in the wood floor of the museum and inlaid with a spinning mechanism. Those who dared could step onto this revolving disk and experience a kind of dislocation that was part of Hamilton's investigation of New England Puritanism, the Shakers' bodily expression of spiritualism, and the Spiritualists' beliefs.[8] Hamilton reused this mechanism at Wanås, setting it into a parquet floor of alternating and interpenetrating patterns she designed with cherry and maple milled locally. Once one has stepped on the disk, one stands still and experiences the room circling around, just as on the floor below, the viewer had to spin to follow the revolving text. This floor also pays homage to the remarkable parquet floor of the private library of the castle at Wanås.[9]

After ascending the rough stairway at the end of the storehouse, one enters the second level, looking down its 93-foot length across the polished, reflective floor. The room seems to glow with warmth due to the faintly reddish-tinted filters on the windows—filters that deepen in saturation ascending from floor to floor. Hamilton had previously altered glass to achieve the intended quality of light in *tropos* at Dia Center for the Arts in 1993 and *view* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in 1991. The segment of spinning floor and the majestically rising and falling Leslie speakers—the one first encountered at ground level is joined by another and the harmonic tones increase accordingly—are the other events in this long chamber.

Hamilton has said that each floor addresses another level of the body.[10] As one ascends through the building, one has the paradoxical sensation of traveling deeper into the space of the storehouse, as well as deeper into one's own consciousness. A sea of wooden tables, approximately waist high, fills the third floor. This had been the accounting room, where the records of farmers' production were made. Still evident on the wood columns are tally markings. Tables, with their multiple associations (communal and ritual sites for eating, working and making) are consistent elements in Hamilton's installations, beginning with *lids of unknown positions* (1984) created in her studio at Yale. To use tables in such numbers, like stand-ins for the many farmers and accountants who worked in this space, is new for the artist. Made from beech felled on the Wanås grounds, the tops of these simple long worktables of slightly varied heights and lengths are carved to accentuate the grain and to suggest the trace and rhythm of work. In contrast, carved into the tops of some tables are sharply incised lines and grids, copies of line patterns from medieval accounting tables.

The solid supporting beams of the fourth floor are meticulously wrapped with cotton sewing thread. Hamilton has similarly used flax, a hair-like material, in *the capacity of absorption* (1988), where she twisted the fibers into a giant rope that enveloped a 14-foot-high megaphone. She had activated another large loft space with yarn wrapped around columns in 1993, in Toronto, at the Power Plant. The artist walked miles to wrap the two columns in that space with yarn, which was then knitted throughout the duration of the exhibition. At Wanås the cotton is meticulously wound, threads never overlapping, to separate the room into 10 corridors bounded by floor- to mouth-level fiber walls. The horizon has risen from the one created by the waist-height tables below. These dividers oscillate between opacity and transparency, depending on the viewer's position. Here, on the fourth level, one is almost overwhelmed. The flax threads resemble the woof of a giant loom, the strings of some monumental instrument. The thoughts that this gently darkened and muted space elicits become the warp of the loom, the fingers against the strings.

Arrival at the top level, under the rafters of the steep roof, brings one into the darkest and densest space of the installation. The only source of light is the one window at the far gable end of the space. The saturated red

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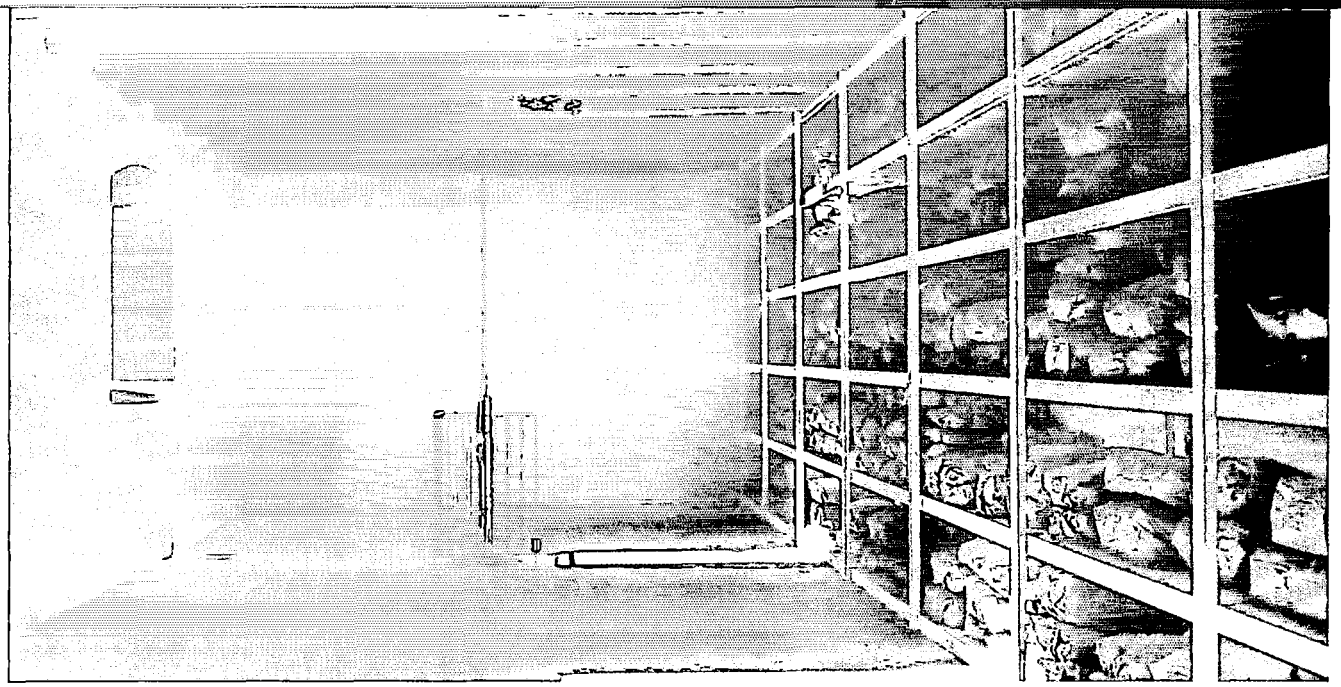

***lignum*, 2002. View of the package room on the basement level.**

light, a beacon of sorts, draws one to the end of the room. Turning, with the window now at one's back, one discerns through the dim air the piles of clothing and quilts folded over the joists overhead. And, hanging down from the roof ridge, even more difficult to make out above the heaped clothes and linens, are fabrics twisted to become almost anthropomorphic in form. These effigies bring back the suppressed bad dreams of childhood, the dark memories omitted from the softly uttered Swedish words in *the space between memory.* Only two Leslie speakers reach this constricted top level. The sound is so much a part of us by now that it seems as though we are not hearing it, but creating it. It is inside our heads.

When Hamilton first encountered the exit space on the ground level of the storehouse, she knew instantly that she wanted shelves erected along its 45-foot wall. Only later did she learn that she was replicating the original furnishings and function of this space. Stacked on these floor-to-ceiling shelves are bundles wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. If we feel that we have opened ourselves up to dig deep within, this is the place where we can pull ourselves together, recompose our façade. But perhaps our interiors are somehow reordered: like Nils in the fairytale, we have experienced some kind of determining moment.

The success of the sound component in *lignum* signals Hamilton's arrival at a pivotal place in her work: she has brought together the visual, tactile, olfactory, and aural, composing with equal attention to each sense. At Wanås, Hamilton strode into an area new to her. Before, sound had been environmental or had taken the form of a single voice.[11] Here, with the resources and support of the Wanås Foundation and the Wachmeister family, she had the confidence to move into unfamiliar territory.

Lignum means timber in Latin, wood in the form of trees or building. Its second meaning is a wooden writing-table, and the plural form, *ligni*, means firewood. The economy and history of the Wanås estate are embedded in timber—its ornamental trees, forests, forestry industry, and neighboring sawmills.[12] Wood has appeared in all its states in Hamilton's 20 years of work, from the wooden toothpicks that coated a wool suit in *suitably positioned* (1984) to the Seattle Public Library commission slated to be completed next year. There Hamilton is working with the wood floor of the Lew Collection—the department of world languages, English as a second language and literacy—and the concept of typesetting.[13]

Wood is at the core of her work: a loom is made of wood; paper, books, and text are organically connected to wood. The Wanås installation brings together two fundamental elements—wood, which provides the framework for a loom, for architecture, for shelter; and, metaphorically, weaving, the activity that animates the framework, that creates the tapestry and another essential need, clothing. The elements in *lignum* form a grid, horizontals bisected by verticals. The matrix for creating Ann Hamilton's work, however, extends far beyond this essential duality; it embraces how we read experience, recall memory, and understand culture and history.

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Notes

[1] Joan Simon, *Ann Hamilton* (New York: Abrams, 2002): p. 44. This carefully researched book was essential in the research for this article.

[2] Gregory Volk, "The Wanås Foundation: Patronage and Partnership," *Sculpture* January/February, 2001: p. 31–35. This article provides a full description of the foundation, its history and activities.

[3] Marika Wachmeister and Elisabeth Alsheimer. *Wanås 2000* (Knislinge: The Wanås Foundation, 2000). Janine Antoni, Miroslaw Balka, Monika Larsen Dennis, Paul Ramirez Jonas, Susan Weil, and Robert Wilson all created works for various parts of the storehouse.

[4] Conversations with Ann Hamilton and Elisabeth Alsheimer, curator at the Wanås Foundation, November 8 and 9, 2002.

[5] Simon, op. cit., p. 63.

[6] Ibid., p. 121–125.

[7] Robert Pogue Harrison. *Forests* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[8] Simon, op. cit., p. 214, 218.

[9] Hamilton treated the ceiling inversely in *volumen* (1995), at the Art Institute of Chicago, where circular tracks attached to the ceiling allowed for curtains to swirl in a dislocating way.

[10] Conversation with Hamilton and Alsheimer, op. cit.

[11] Simon, op. cit., p. 82.

[12] The original plan of the grounds was marked by a cruciform of elms in line with the points of a compass.

[13] Conversation with Hamilton and Alsheimer, op. cit.