

Adam Butac

Observations of: Ann Hamilton's Indigo Blue (1991 / 2007)

Thesis in a nutshell:

Indigo Blue gives voice to the history of a towns working class.

Contrast:

In the original installation set up in Carolina, Hamilton used bright focused ceiling lights to create a strong contrast in color between the blue of the clothes, and the dim gray of the buildings walls. By making the clothes seem brighter she delivers the clothes to the viewer in a way that seems to glorify them; sort of like you would display a trophy in a trophy case. The dark gray of the walls gave the building the aura of being old and authentic (because the building was indeed very old) and ties together well with the clothes, as that is a very similar location that the people wearing these garments would be working. The setup in San Francisco was very similar, however the surrounding walls were much brighter compared with the original, and the contrast was more focused on the difference in the color than the vibrancy. Bright surroundings did make the clothes seem more dull than the original giving the clothes more of a feeling of being tattered and old, emphasizing to me, the theme that they are from the past, since I associate dim or faded colors with age.

Large Scale:

The scale of the installation is what I would consider to be learning on the large side of installations. If not in the physical dimensions, then certainly the mass required to make a pile of clothes that large. Hamilton used literally tons of clothes to create a massive pile of blue, in order to draw attention - to give a voice - to the people who labored unnoticed in the background day after day to help make their town a better place to raise their children. "In the center of the space, a 17'x24' steel platform was piled with 14,000 pounds of blue work clothing. Built layer by layer, the pile was formed by smoothing successive strata of pants and shirts until a volume of clothing the size of a semi truck was formed." -

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Density:

The clothes are layered methodically with the collars of the shirts pointing towards what one could designate as the front of the installation. By layering the clothes Hamilton formed a densely packed mound of blue clothes, packed together by their own weight. I feel like this may be a loose relation to how well knit the community was to each other.

Weight:

The platform on which the clothes are layered appears to be suspended, most likely supported at the center by hidden pillars. The platform is only a few inches off the ground, however, giving the platform the illusion that it is floating forces the viewer to try to "lift" the platform in their mind. It begs the question "How much?". It forces the viewer to quantify in some way, what they are viewing.

Scent:

Ann Hamilton's Indigo Blue featured a sack of fermenting soybeans. If you have ever experienced the side dish called "Natto," you know that the back of beans reeked of foul odor. This accentuated the atmosphere of "hard working" by encapsulating the viewer in the scent. Scent has been known to have strong links to memory, and by exposing the viewer to the scent of what essentially smells like body odor, she unlocks all the memories and feelings of hard work in the minds of the viewers.

Collars first:

The front of the pile consists completely of collars. This could be to emphasize the "blue collar worker" idiom, or it could signify something completely different. This one has me slightly stumped and could possibly reference some of her older work that I am not aware of. If anything it gives me a sense of order, and in some ways, a sense of respect.

Surroundings:

Indigo Blue was originally set up in a former auto repair shop which had previously served as a

carriage house. It is now displayed in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The two areas are very different from each other. The original installation had a very rustic energy to it. It basically looked like an old run down mill. Grayed wooden walls which felt to be on the colder side of the color spectrum(if I remember correctly).

However, at what appears to be the museum, the surrounding enclosure is given a much more modern look with bright warmer colored floors of yellow like bamboo, and white painted walls. This gave the installation a contrast between what was in the room and the room itself. This contrast is what brought my attention to the actor and how they were dressed, and how they presented themselves.

Actor:

A lot can be said about the actor in the installation, but the main point I want to get across right now is that they are clearly the representation of the modern day's blue collar worker. The middle class no longer has to toil for hours bailing hay or hammering iron. With the help of our ancestors we now live much different lives from what they had experienced. Whether it is better or worse I couldn't say for sure, but I feel it is much better to sit at a desk and work with my mind than it is to have to literally grind my joints to the bone.

A few formal points on the actor:

The woman in the picture I saw was wearing a white button-down shirt, khaki pants and brown leather shoes. I feel that she was there to depict today's working class. In my memory, I associate dark tanned shoes with business. The collared button-down shirt and khaki pants are also a strong reminder to me of someone who is professional and or working in an office. She sat quietly as she erased a book from back to front with a dab of spit at the end of a rubber eraser to show an "undoing" as explained by Hamilton. The actor also has her back turned to the pile of blue clothes, perhaps showing how that is "the past" and how she is in the present. The furniture that the actor works on is clearly not from the present, making the actor (and the enclosure in San Francisco) the only object that is from the present time.