Ann Hamilton’s installation for the Venice Biennale, like her previous installations around the world, is made from her deeply personal and visceral response to the specifics of the site itself. In the case of the American Pavilion, a neoclassical structure designed in 1929, she responded to the plan of the building, its central courtyard and domed rotunda and symmetrically flanking galleries, as a footprint emblematic of a body’s two embracing arms, and in its resemblance to a scaled-down version of Monticello, its symbolic ties to American social theory and Jefferson’s philosophy of democratic social space.

The installation will bring together a number of the artist’s ongoing concerns: how do we know what we know and what are we blind to; the interplay between learning through sight and learning through touch; the relationship between seeing and hearing; the revelation of that which is invisible and the veiling of that which is seen; the longing to be alone and the simultaneous desire to be part of a larger social unit.

Her project will engage the exterior and the interior of the pavilion through several unifying gestures that will alternately reveal and veil the structure and render it as both image and object. The approach to the pavilion will be visually distorted and physically blocked six feet in front of the building by a steel and glass grid that spans its entire 90 foot width and extends up from the ground to the stone pediment at 18 feet. From the exterior the regular division of a one-foot grid will frame and section the architecture while the horizontal rippling in the transparent water glass will distort or veil the view of the pavilion, transforming this authoritative civic building into a virtual mirage. Alternatively, from the interior of the pavilion’s L-shaped wings, the view back toward the Giardini Park will be similarly obscured and liquefied by the distortions of the water glass.

The material marking and veiling of the pavilion’s interior is first encountered in the rotunda through the image and reflection of light and mirror which are set into its membrane. The interior is conceived as a daylight work where the existing skylights in all four galleries, covered for more than a decade, will be revealed to allow natural light to illuminate the space. By removing the existing dropped ceilings, the original volume and verticality will be returned to the architecture. Illuminated by the shifting light of day the walls of each of the four galleries will be encrusted with the texture of an enlarged Braille text translated from Charles Reznikoff’s Testimony: The United States 1885-1915, a selection of poems that collectively constitute a litany for a multitude of past lives. A deep red powder will slowly sift from the perimeter of the rooms, collecting on the Braille characters, dusting the walls, both marking and veiling the text while revealing the air movement and currents within the space.

Hamilton’s signature accumulation of individual acts and the passage of time are embodied in these multiple marks. Subtle changes in the density and color of the powder will occur throughout the space. Braille, the system of writing for the blind made up of raised dots and intended to be read by the fingertips makes language tactile or physical, yet inaccessible to a reader in a traditional sense. Our desire to comprehend is frustrated – the visible ultimately remains invisible, understanding is perpetually beyond our grasp.

The final unifying element will be a whispering voice circulating through the galleries like currents of air. Whispering, a tone and manner of address that is private, here inverts the nature of the space as a public hall, both including the visitor and deliberately excluding him or her from comprehension. In Meyin meaning hovers in the elusive terrain between seeing and hearing, between seeing and touching, between what is known to be present and what is felt to be absent.

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