

STRING MONUMENTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNETTE LAWRENCE

By Ramona Austin, Curator

There are both abstract and figural qualities in the works on paper, amalgamations of throw-away items and constructions of string that create text in the work of Annette Lawrence. There is always something that is recognizable in her sculpture, drawings and installations that recalls other classes of things quite specific to our communal memory of the mundane rituals of daily life. Yet, in her hands these most ordinary of things achieve a new, often epic and amorphous impact. She conjures unique structures and then invites the viewer to conjure with her by moving in and around the works to complete their meaning. There is a kind of aesthetic alchemy that dresses the space with humble materials manipulated with a rational and spare elegance that is, paradoxically, not devoid of an emotional charge.

In Lawrence's work this has been achieved with mark like notations, lines, free forms of color, out-right portraiture, texts on paper, and postal string in repetitive form and process that gives a sense of time passing and memories made. Her string installations, as in this exhibition, make a geometry that is architecturally monumental and contradictorily transparent and light. These enigmatic and metronomic constructions are clarions to memory. The repetition of action that makes them becomes notations of time, a background of gesture and form within a shared and cooperative experience. They are monuments to community in the way that architecture shapes and contains experience.

Annette Lawrence further comments on the genesis, meaning and place of string installations in her work in the following interview:

Ramona Austin: It is said that your work is related to text and information. What kind of texts are you responding to and what kind of information do you derive from these texts?

Annette Lawrence: My initial interest in text derived from looking to African American Literature for images and representations of my experience that were not available in dominant visual culture. It was through reading about the lives of African American writers, musicians, and visual artists that I understood the possibilities for my life as an artist. I transferred that understanding into works that incorporated text as image as a graduate student in the late 1980's. My interest in text evolved to include mathematical symbols, floor plans, musical notation, sound analysis diagrams, dates, and lists from my daily life. I used text to

address the subjects of identity, power dynamics, current events, personal moments of clarity, and the mundane.

RM: Your string works are related to architecture and respond to physical space. What kind of architecture inspires you, or do you find that your constructions use the same language as architecture and may have some of the same concerns?

AL: *I am most interested in how one experiences a particular space. When I am offered a room in which to make an installation, I pay attention to how I respond to the space, and work to alter the experience in a way that brings attention to the architecture. If there are strong architectural features I use them. When there are few details I pay attention to how one might move through the space, and consider the formal possibilities of what might happen with string, and light, and the transparent visual layers that may occur.*

RM: How has the Changing Gallery specifically shaped your ideas for this installation?

AL: *The curved glass brick wall in The Changing Gallery is a starting point for the circular/cone shaped forms. I am thinking of the space as a stage where lighting will play a very important role in the effect of the installation.*

RM: The string works in the Changing Gallery are put together by a collaborative process—in this instance, students in the art program at Old Dominion University. How do such collaborations influence the final product?

AL: *The collaborative nature of the installation process creates a sense of ownership of the work by those who participate in the making of the piece. The process is very slow and labor intensive. I value the time shared during each installation because invariably stories are told, mistakes are made and corrected, and there is plenty of laughter, punctuated by long stretches of quiet. Each person's energy and attention becomes part of the experience of the audience.*

RM: You have done a number of these string installations, for example at the Dallas Museum of Art and the African American Museum in Dallas, TX; at The Glassell School in Houston, TX; and the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI. How would you describe these as a body of work? How did the context in which they were done influence the interpretation of the work and will you continue with other string installations?

AL: *My string installations are a body in that the string has been recycled from piece to piece in many instances, and the support structure was developed as I learned from the building experience of one to the next. Each invitation has presented its own challenges, and fortunately the work is very adaptive. I have enjoyed*

solving problems as I go along. The act of arriving in a space with balls of string, a roll of paper, packing tape, and glue, and creating a monumental work that will exist for several weeks or months, then disappears, brings me great satisfaction. I will continue with other string installations, as I am able.

An additional note from correspondance between Ramona Austin and Annette Lawrence:

I was thinking about how the string installations relate to time. They are related in that there is always a specific time period in which they materialize, exist, and disappear, leaving only photos and stories behind. The temporal nature of the work is an important aspect of it. It's very much like theater, one has to be there to have the experience. There is also a small irony in the relationship between the time it takes to build the installation, and the length of time it is on display. There is a continuous need to commit and detach when working this way. There is also a celebration of slowness in the making of these pieces. Time in the process of making a string installation is measured by the accumulative effort of everyone involved. The focused attention of each person on the monumental task at hand charges the room. That charge stays with the work for the life of the piece.