October 7, 1993 to June 19, 1994. A carpet, made from strands of horsehair, covered an 8,000-square-foot floor in a warehouse-type building in Chelsea. Framed by a bank of milky white windows, a figure sat reading excerpts from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets and a study of literary titled ABC: The Alphabetization of The Popular Mind, carefully burning out each sentence with a pen-like hot wire. The smell of the smoking paper permeated the room, and horsehair became entangled in viewers' shoes when they tried to walk across the floor. Sue Patterson, the Workshop's Project Manager for tropos, said it took 21 12-hour days to complete the first part of Hamilton's vision. Over 40 workers were brought together mostly by word of mouth. Three regular staff members labored with a crew of ad-hoc employees made up of visual artists, dancers, and three Chinese immigrant seamstresses and their families (who worked in a bridal garment shop in the same building), painstakingly sewing and gluing the horsehair to strips of cotton. Meanwhile, at the Dia Center, workers replaced the original windows with translucent ones and poured a concrete floor that undulated like waves of water. Yet another crew laid the carpet.

In a different way, ceramic sculptor Berry Matthews also creates site-specific works using multiple components, small in size. Starting with a given space, Matthews assesses its shape, its walls, ceiling, and available lighting and then draws up structural plans. Using a type of wire fencing that provides a rectanguular grid, she attaches it to a series of welded metal structures jutting at angles from the floors and walls. Then, thousands of tiny ceramic tiles are suspended, one by one into each space.

Over the years, these constructions have taken various forms. Some have been tunnel-like or maze-like; some have resembled columns and arches. Some have been hung with tiles of pure white; others have had gradations in glaze colors ranging from burnt orange to smoky greens. Some have been lit only from above; some have had neon illumination emanating mysteriously from their interiors. Matthews has produced outdoor versions, such as Daniel, constructed in La Napoule, France, in 1993, in which each tile was dipped in wax and fitted with wicks; participants were handed candles and asked to set the sculptures on fire. Matthews says that her forms were initially inspired by experiences.
Scores of Hamilton's volunteers converged on the space to place 750,000 pennies, one by one, onto a 45-by-32-foot bed of honey.

of driving alone cross-country and seeing debris caught in the fences along the miles of highway. Charmingly off-kilter, meticulously structured, and unsettlingly delicate, the slightest air movement sets off a tinkling that sounds like hundreds of wine glasses about to shatter.

When Matthews shows in college and university galleries, it is not unusual for her to involve entire classes of art students in her process. For a recent installation called In/Space at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia, staff members, friends, and other artists pitched in to hang 20,000 tiles. The labyrinth occupied an 18-by-31-foot room. For the opening reception, shards of broken tiles were scattered onto the floor, adding an audible crunch as they were crushed beneath the viewers' feet.

When Liza Lou created her first room-size beaded installation, The Kitchen, she did it by herself. It took nearly five years (1991–95) and caused her to develop tendonitis. When she embarked on the next large project, Backyard (1995–97), she knew enough to get help from others. This installation, commissioned by the Santa Monica Museum of Art, would require one million individually beaded blades of grass. So, Scott Boberg, the museum's Director of Education, announced a “Lawn Party” in the local newspapers. On certain Saturday afternoons each month, the public was invited to help Lou with her project in the community room of the Santa Monica Place shopping mall.

Lou, who studied at the San Francisco Art Institute, became interested in the potential of beads, a medium not usually taken seriously in fine art circles. The repetitive nature of working with strung beads seems to place it more within the realm of crafts such as embroidery, crochet, and knitting. Lou feels that The Kitchen was a way of paying tribute to routine labor. “We don’t have monuments for the simple labors of life,” she says, “and I think that there should be.” She sees Backyard as an extension of The Kitchen. Not only might it be seen outside a kitchen window, but, metaphorically, it is the place where family and friends

gather for recreation—a locus of community.

It made conceptual sense, then, for Lou to involve area residents and to hold the events in the local mall, the modern equivalent of the town square. In the video of the making of Backyard, produced by the Nimoy Foundation, scores of folks can be seen, not only stringing beads, but also talking, joking, and enjoying each other’s company—tapping into the very foundations of what makes a community.

“The labor itself is part of the message,” Lou said. “These people are coming together from all walks of life to apply themselves to this task. That is really meaningful to me.”

Sculptor Patrick Dougherty has actually called his sculptural installations an “excuse” for community. All of his pieces are designed to engage the participation of volunteers, including children and passersby. Dougherty has created works throughout the United States and Europe. In November 2000, he was artist-in-residence at the Lancaster Museum of Art in Pennsylvania.

Several weeks before the artist’s arrival, Assistant Director Matthew Kale issued a call for volunteers, phoning colleges, schools, and community groups. Dougherty’s technique for constructing his outdoor pieces involves sinking saplings into the ground, pulling them into shapes via ropes attached to scaffolding, and weaving other saplings between them. The rope and scaffolding are then removed leaving only the natural wood. It is a time-consuming and labor-intensive process. The site’s very public, very visible position outside the museum, in a park situated at the intersection of two streets, attracted curious helpers in addition to the ones that Kale had lined up ahead of time. Students from Franklin & Marshall College and Millersville University worked side-by-side with Dougherty, museum employees, and volunteers. High school students and a cross-section of townsmen stopped by. Some stripped leaves and berries from the saplings that had been trucked to the site; others excavated holes with post diggers, pulled the ropes to shape the matrices, and wove in the horizontal branches. The finished sculpture, Tea Time, a giant teapot with three cups, pierced by “doorways” that could be entered, combined a slight tilt with the swirls of the woven saplings to animate the forms, turning them into a sort of postmodern fairytale.

What might turn out to be the most expansive new version of the atelier,
both in sheer numbers of participants and years of duration, is the Joseph Beuys Tree Partnership, a project based on the German artist’s 7,000 Oaks. An example of what Beuys called “social sculpture,” 7,000 Oaks was introduced during Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany. The artwork called for the planting of 7,000 trees throughout the city, each paired with a basalt column about four feet high. On March 16, 1982, several months before the opening of the exhibition, Beuys planted the first tree along with one of these stone markers. Over the next five years, the project continued in conjunction with the Free International University (which Beuys had been instrumental in organizing). The basalt stones, piled in front of the Fredericianum, the main exhibition building of Documenta, disappeared one by one as trees were planted. City residents became involved in placing the trees, which wound up including not only oaks, but 15 other varieties as well. In June 1987, 18 months after the artist’s death, Beuys’s son Wenzel planted the last tree during the opening of Documenta 8.

A teacher and a founding member of the Green Party, Beuys was actively involved in ecological and community issues. He invited people in cities around the globe to restore the environment in their own locales by planting trees. Over the past 13 years Beuys’s initiative has gained momentum worldwide. The first plantings in the United States were coordinated by the Dia Center for the Arts in New York; the Dia was followed by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; the Joslyn Museum in Omaha; the Tweed Museum in Duluth (Minnesota); and the Benedicta Arts Center in St. Joseph (also in Minnesota). Other projects worldwide have included the Island of Malta; Oslo, Norway; and Sydney, Australia. Baltimore is a recent addition to the list of urban centers embracing Beuys’s vision. In the fall of 2000, community volunteers began planting 242 indigenous trees and placing stones in three city parks (Patterson Park, Carroll Park, and Wyman Park Dell) and at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Renée van der Stelt, Projects Coordinator at UMBC’s Fine Arts Gallery, spearheaded the project, gaining support from a variety of funders including the university, nonprofit foundations, and local organizations. She hopes to recruit more co-sponsors for additional plantings, perhaps enough to equal Beuys’s goal for Kassel of 7,000.

This contemporary extension of the atelier Beyond the studio walls probably owes a debt to Dada, Fluxus, and Happenings, the participatory aspects of which all attempted to move fine art out of the salon and into the streets. But it has also developed out of sheer economic and physical necessity. The works of Hamilton, Matthews, Lou, Dougherty—and even Beuys—have been dependent, at times, upon alternative spaces, college galleries, and museums: all nonprofits with limited budgets and limited staffs. The “atelier in the shopping mall,” or in the case of Beuys, the “atelier without the artist,” is a conception of the sculptor’s studio that would have been hard to imagine a mere century ago.

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Notes
3. Ibid.