Ann Hamilton wanted to see what the UC Santa Barbara library could offer her on longing, a topic that kept returning to her mind.

When the university had hired her, fresh out of the Yale School of Art with an MFA, she’d been thinking specifically about the relationship between words and “things we know viscerally but which are very hard to express with language.” At Yale, she’d joined other artists of her generation in regarding the body as a sculptural ingredient, a visceral object to be seen in relation to other objects. For her unforgettible Toothpick Suit from 1984, Hamilton wore literal and metaphorical armor fashioned from a thrift-shop suit covered with thousands of spray-painted toothpicks protruding like quills. At once a sculpture, a performance and a photograph, the work signaled her emergence as a major talent.

Thumbing through the card catalogue that day in 1986, Hamilton came across an entry for a book published only a year earlier, called On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, by the poet and literary theorist Susan Stewart. Both the enigmatic title and the opening sentence, expressing Stewart’s intent to concentrate “on certain motifs and metaphors” that arise whenever we talk about the relation of language to experience, captured Hamilton’s interest immediately. “Reading Susan,” she recalls now, “was like an enormous gift of vocabulary.”

In the 35 years since its publication, On Longing has quietly established itself as a revered resource and a kind of linguistic catalyst for many artists, stimulating their work or, at the very least, helping them to articulate it more effectively to themselves. A book whose brevity belies its density (some say outright thorniness), On Longing has never gone out of print, though it remains something like a passed-secret even in the world of letters—and has been mentioned prominently, for example, only twice in The New York Times, once in the context of Hamilton and once in a review of the work of the celebrated playwright and performer Taylor Mac, who is a fan. Though Stewart didn’t aim the book primarily toward the art world, it has seemed to migrate there anyway. “It spoke to me. It still does,” she says. “There’s so much there. Besides, it felt good to read a book by a woman.”

Stewart chose the tantalizing noun “longing” for its title, a word that she wrote connotated “a kind of ache.” Nostalgia, our “yearning desire” for the past and for things, is central to her examination—through a semiotic-feminist-Marxist lens—of the problems that arise when we try to describe things in the world and to make sense of our experience through narrative. She emphasizes the primacy of the body as “our mode of perceiving scale,” which leads to her unusual focus on the interrelated conventions of the miniature (toys, dollhouses, micrographic writings) and the gigantic (landscapes, cities, earth art, fictional giants). “The miniature,” she writes, “represents a mental world of proportion, control and balance; the gigantic presents a physical world of disorder and disproportion.” This then leads Stewart to two additional ways of thinking about people and their representations of the physical world: the souvenir, whose purpose is to remember its original context, and the collection, which “replaces origin with classification,” reconceptualizing objects within a world of attention.

The University of Pennsylvania’s Folklore and Folklife program was a mecca for the kind of unconventional thinking that Stewart offered up in the ’70s, a breakthrough era of rapid change as the field of folklore responded to new streams of thought in linguistics and critical theory. Stewart says she started graduate school at Penn already fascinated “by the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic methods we use to derive meaning from culture.” A summa cum laude English major who earned her BA in three years at Dickinson College, she was particularly drawn, she says, to “anthropology’s assumption that underlying cultural structures and rules, tacit as well as expressed, could be understood.”

Her professors at Penn were irreverent scholars with broad interests, remarkable intellects like Dell Hymes, one of the first sociolinguists; John Swed, an anthropologist, jazz scholar and pioneer of cultural studies; and the literary critic and theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith, one of the only women in the field. Stewart took a year off to earn an MA in poetry at Johns Hopkins, another locus for innovative theorists like her teacher Stanley Fish, who taught that the reader creates rather than discovers meaning. Thinking back to her early, intense interest in how we describe things, and how human beings are “the makers or creators” of themselves, Stewart has said she now sees that such questions “could come to a book by a woman.”

Stewart’s friend and former classmate at Penn, the poet Edward Hirsch, the president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, says of that time, “We were terrifically stimulated by the cross-disciplinary approach. Susan is one of our most original thinkers. She put things together in ways that they have never been put together before.”

Stewart, now a professor of English at Princeton who is renowned for her poetry as well as her literary criticism, has privileges her creative work ahead of her critical work by alternating the publication of six books of poetry with six of criticism. She was still in her twenties when she wrote On Longing, which followed a book of poems and her doctoral dissertation, Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature (1979). “I wrote my dissertation on ‘nonsense,’” she said to Ives, “out of an intuition about the hyper-rational systems on the border of rationality, and my study on Longing grew from consequent concerns with issues of scale, memory and value.” Nonsense spanned the fields of folklore, literary theory, anthropology and sociology, and covered a far-ranging selection of subjects, from Egyptian papyrus to knock-knock jokes, Gertrude Stein and skipping rhymes.

A few years after Hamilton’s serendipitous discovery of On Longing, she and Stewart became correspondents and, in time, collaborators. “Intuitively, we have a thing,” Hamilton tells me. “I’ll be working on something, and it’ll be something she’s thinking about too. That’s what’s
been really interesting to me over the years.” In 2016, the year Stewart’s poem “Channel” appeared in The Paris Review, Hamilton gave it concrete form in laduca, an immense installation at a Philadelphia pier and other sites, commissioned by the Fabric Workshop and Museum and featuring towering, spinning wheels of billowing cloth. “These are two ways of reading: the page’s turn and the turning wheel,” Stewart wrote of the twinned works, “but beneath them both is the possibility of reading a river, which is one of nature’s gifts for reading time.”

Photographer and author Rosamond Purcell, who has an eye for natural history collections and macabre medical specimens, experienced On Longing as an act of recognition, finding herself saying, “Oh, right. Yes, of course,” as she read. Stewart’s insight that miniatures trigger feelings of melancholy and desire, of wanting to hold and not being able to hold, resonated with Purcell, whose 1997 book Special Cases: Natural Anomalies and Historical Monsters includes passages from Stewart that seemed to speak directly to contemporary art: “Often referred to as a ‘freak of nature,’ the freak, it must be emphasized, is a ‘freak of culture.’”

There are kindred spirits in the art world whose practice predates On Longing or who never read it, yet whose work is enriched when examined through its lens. Sculptor Charles Simonds has worked on a minute scale since 1970, with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship, helping him “to think about the power of objects and the collection.” He has amassed a material diaspora of Thomas Eakins’s body object series #13, 1984, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio, David Schutter © 2017, chalk and pen on chroma colored paper, 10⅞ × 11⅞″. Courtesy the artist and Ronia Hoffman Gallery.


On Longing has served as an intellectual resource not only for artists but also for curators, art writers, scholars and so many specialists in subgenres of cultural exploration that it has become difficult to track. Ralph Rugoff’s 1997–98 traveling exhibition on miniscule and small-scale art, “At the Threshold of the Visible,” and to puzzle out “the erratic qualities of things that are bound to each other in one way or another. It is a seminal text that rocked me when I read it and has continued to influence me.”

For Documenta 14, Schutter engaged with the notorious trove of art seized in 2015 from Cornelius Gurlitt. The elderly son of an art dealer for the Nazis, Gurlitt had squirreled away more than a thousand works of art—many with problematic provenance—mostly in his small Munich apartment, among them works by Matisse, Courbet and Monet, stored in a cabinet, under the bed, in a suitcase. Sifting through high-resolution files of the art, Schutter became intrigued by 36 drawings by Max Liebermann (1847–1935). After a forensic investigation that combined intense scrutiny, intuition and luck, he came to the conclusion that Gurlitt’s Liebermanns had most likely once been bound together in a sketchbook. Drawing from memory, Schutter then re-rendered Liebermann’s images, working on paper that he recreated, with help from a master papermaker, from the same components as the original. With the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Schutter will dive next into the collected material: “on Thomas Eakins’s world of art and teaching. All of this, he says, “started with Susan.”

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Recently a blogger, irked by the seemingly “endless references” to On Longing, went so far as to exhort writers to “stop quoting Susan Stewart.” It’s a wish unlikely to be heeded any time soon, especially in the art world.

Ruppersberg: What One Loves About Life Are the Things That Fade,” and then he quotes from On Longing: “While the point of the souvenirs may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting—starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie.”

A new edition of On Longing, projected to appear in 2020, promises a preface that will “acknowledge the way the book has shaped the cultural landscape since it was published.” Stewart’s ideas about the elegiac implications of the miniature as “a constant daydream” conducive to narrative unlimited by reality, enhance understanding of the tiny, crumbling, dwelling places he’s built for an imaginary civilization of migratory Little People. (One of the best-known examples of this body of work resides partially hidden, permanently, in the stairwell of Manhattan’s Breuer building, now the Met Breuer and formerly the home of the Whitney Museum.) Today Simonds esteems Stewart “as an admired fellow traveler as well before critical theory became required in most art schools say that