Exhibition Review

Anne Wilson: Wind/Rewind/Weave

Exhibition Review
Anne Wilson: Wind/Rewind/Weave

Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN, January 22–April 25, 2010

Anne Wilson's wide-ranging exhibit at the Knoxville Museum of Art (KMA), *Wind/Rewind/Weave*,[1] comprised several components, each autonomous yet conceptually linked. The project surrounds the actual weaving of cloth on a loom. Through sculptural translation, performed choreography, local community collaboration, and activated pedagogy, Wilson approached the act of weaving, both directly and as an abstract idea, as culturally determined, historically complicated, and economically and geographically specific to its site of production.

An early, necessary step in making cloth with a loom is to prepare the warp (lengthwise threads placed into tension by the loom's hardware), into which the weft is woven. On view in one gallery of Wilson's show was video documentation of *Wind-Up: Walking the Warp*, a piece performed in 2008 in Chicago. In it, she orchestrated the making of a human-scaled warp, with performers pacing in and out of fixed, steel rods 30 inches high—a sort of dissected and exaggerated warping frame. It is as if Wilson took a microscopic view of the warping process, blowing it up to demonstrate the process to her urban art audience, most of whom are used to buying readymade garments off of the rack (or peg), rarely stopping to consider their actual manufacture. The finished warp, of bright safety-green thread, was made by nine workers walking an accumulated 33 miles over six days. It was carefully removed, and lies in storage awaiting a weft.

After the warp is made, weft thread is prepared for weaving. Threads are wound around small, stiff supports called bobbins. These are thrown back and forth through the warp, as the thread is unwound. Alternating threads of warp are pressed up or down, allowing

REVIEWED BY
KATHRYN HIXSON
Kathryn Hixson was an art critic, historian, teacher, and curator. A longstanding lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she was well-known for mentoring aspiring artists. Between 1993 and 2002, she was the editor of the national, Chicago-based magazine, the *New Art Examiner*. See "In Memoriam" section.

Textile, Volume 9, Issue 2, pp. 220–229
DOI: 10.2752/175183511X13055600095581

bobbins to pass horizontally over and under, thus creating a woven cloth of interlocked threads. In the gallery next to *Wind-Up* was Wilson's new *Rewinds*, which at first glance looks like a weaver's workshop, frozen in mid-bobbin-wind mode (Figures 1 and 2). Scattered across a horizontal base 12 feet by 8 feet, hovering like a flying carpet a few inches off the floor, are scores of half-wound and wound bobbins. Mainly in a muted palette of whites, grays, and black, the bobbins are placed by Wilson in neat rows and piles in some areas; in others they scamper about or coalesce into like-type swirls, or plodding evolutionary paths. Occasionally a pantyhose flesh color, a bright yellow, or a rust-colored family of bobbins punctuate the accumulations of wound thread. Gradually though, the extreme frostiness of most of the materials caught in the dramatically hushed lighting, interrupted by some very shiny bits, causes the viewer to reconsider the materiality of these bobbins. These are not the expected thread and wood, but are made of glass. Wilson developed this process with technicians during residencies at glass studios. Her material translations foil our expectations for both media, offering an elegantly visceral combination. Wilson's *trompe l'oeil* collapses the distance between fiber arts and studio craft.

Across the museum's atrium in a back room was a small vitrine of another category of objects: tools. Differently shaped bobbins, needles, and hooks were carefully arranged, here *under* glass, as if on

Figure 1
Anne Wilson. *Rewinds*, 2010. Glass. 6 × 90 × 136 inches. Photo courtesy the Knoxville Museum of Art.

Figure 2
Anne Wilson. *Rewinds*, detail, 2010. Glass. 6 × 90 × 136 inches. Photo courtesy the Knoxville Museum of Art.

display at an historical museum. Collectively titled, *to weave/to wind/to knot/to knit/to twist/to push/to pack/to press*, the tools are rendered useless. Some familiar, some strange, they are brittle, crystal-clear glass replicas of real tools used to manufacture cloth and glass objects. Here, Wilson literally mixes references to both processes, then remixes them with Richard Serra's late 1960s process manifesto *Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself*,[2] thereby creating an equivalence between his masculine bravura and historically feminized textile work. As in *Rewinds*, these *trompe l'oeil* are ghostlike, as if the artist has extracted their souls, representing them as essential ideals of tactile, functional objects.

to weave ... was in a small gallery that serves as a reading room, about weaving. A simple table was loaded with books on weaving, from ancient histories to today's relational aesthetics. A large flat-screen monitor displayed dozens of photographs of weavers from seemingly everywhere in the world: Israel, Peru, Romania, Guatemala, Turkistan, Ghana, Thailand, Los Angeles, Tibet, Sweden, China. The tremendous geographical and historic range—from ancient to factory looms—of these documentary pictures was impressive, asserting weaving as a truly universal human activity. Also in the reading room was an audio work by Christy Matson. It, too, is a ghostly abstraction of the material reality of weaving. Matson recorded the sounds of an industrial textile mill, then stretched one minute out to one hour, an eerie slow-down of a frenetic factory.

As universal, formal, and repetitive as weaving may be, it is also always very specific—each

piece of cloth representing a cultural tradition, geographic site, historic technology, generational trend, economic condition, and individual intention. When Wilson began planning for this show, she wanted to appeal directly to the history of weaving in the southeast United States, of Tennessee, Kentucky, and North Carolina. Settlement schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been instrumental in a craft revival there, and had been a great inspiration to Wilson as a young artist.[3] On the table in the KMA reading room was Philis Alvic's *Weavers of the Southern Highlands*, a comprehensive history of the area. Alvic chronicles the settlement schools active from 1880 to 1940, which concentrated on reviving the Appalachian tradition of weaving, as a way to help women, and specifically, to make money through hand production of crafts. "Weaving at home quit after the Civil War, [because] store-cloth [was] so cheap" (Alvic 2003: 56). Loosely modeled after the English settlement schools, in which Oxford University students lived and worked with the poor, mixed with the Arts and Crafts movement's privileging of the handmade over the industrially produced, the American settlement schools revived the tradition of weaving at home. Old looms were rescued from barns, and weaving became an educational tool for a kind of economic self-help. Berea College, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and Penland, each a stone's throw from Knoxville, developed weaving as marketing tools for education, to provide commodities for a burgeoning tourist trade, and to heighten a psychological self-confidence for the Appalachian culture. Most significantly, weaving grew as a true economic force for women. Weaving was, as Mary Hambridge of the Weavers of Rabun, Georgia, declared, "the perfect craft ... beautiful and useful" (144).

These southeastern schools evolved far beyond the spirit of charity and small-scale production in which they began. The weavers forged a renewed and viable continuation of the loom-weaving tradition, which was very influential in the world of textiles, and is alive and well today. Wilson tapped into this strong tradition by designing a collaborative project as another major component of her KMA show. Through personal networking, emails, and word-of-mouth, the artist sent out an invitation to self-defined experienced weavers to come to the museum and weave one cloth. Seventy-nine weavers accepted Wilson's challenge.

For raw material, Wilson procured thousands of yards of thread donated from local textile mills, either from overstock, bankruptcy, or artistic support. These donations were a tribute to the industrial textile tradition in this area, as well as indicative of the implicit fact that American mills are openly suffering from outsourcing of the clothing trade to places like India and China. In the fourth and largest room of Wilson's exhibit, these cones and cylinders of thread were piled up randomly on a table in one corner, a cacophony of color and texture. Throughout the room were simply built wood tables and benches,

where museum visitors—of any age and experience—could wind bobbins with the thread. Wilson supplied clear printed instructions and non-threatening mechanical spinners on which viewers could wind thread of their choice around simple, stiff paper bobbins (Figure 3). The bobbin production, prodigious throughout the show, was collected by museum staff, who attached their string ends high on one wall, letting them fall to the floor, arranged to make a rainbow array of color. Each of the weavers, scheduled to work in two-hour blocks, would choose his or her bobbin and clip it off low, leaving the vertical stings to collect and "get thicker"[4] as the weaving progressed over the three-month run of the show.

The single borrowed loom was in the back corner of this room, and the weaving was always done in full public view (Figure 4). Museum staff, students, docents, and the weavers themselves interacted with visitors, often speaking about the historical contexts within which Wilson's show was sited. Each bobbin-winder, and each weaver, left their names and comments in logs, which will remain with the finished cloth as a document integral to the whole project. This section of the exhibition was titled *Local Industry*, efficiently describing what was actually happening, as well as a reference to the historical tradition of weaving in this area. The weavers' instructions seemed straightforward enough: "Weave stripes of any width in any color, with two black lines between colors. React only to the few visible stripes woven before you. No signature styles, please."[5] The weavers seemed liberated by these simple guidelines. Some who had moved away from weaving to other artistic practices, exclaimed, "It's just like riding a bike!"[6] Many clearly enjoyed the aesthetic experience of weaving: "How wonderful to only think of color!"[7]

Wilson's instructions allowed for a weaving version of the French Surrealist game of *exquisite corps*, in which an artist would draw on the top portion of a page, fold it over and pass it to the next artist, who would continue, seeing only the ends of the first artist's gestures. The second would draw, fold to hide, and pass it to a third, fourth, fifth. What the *exquisite corps* allows for is a suspension of any one artist's understanding more than his or her part, and the whole remains mysterious until the drawing is completed. This is exactly what happened when Wilson unwound the final cloth (Figure 5).

The choice of the stripe as a structural device seemed benign at first, until I picked up another book from the reading room: Michel Pastoureau's *The Devil's Cloth: The History of Stripes and Striped Fabric*. This French scholar reveals that the humble stripe has a rich, and diabolical, history. He begins with the Catholic Carmelite Order's mythic founder Elijah, who supposedly threw off his cloak to his successor as he ascended into heaven, the white garment marked by the accompanying whirlwind of fire. The white cloak broken by brown stripes became the Carmelites' signature, and soon forbidden, two-tone habit (Pastoureau 2001: 7). Pastoureau goes on to chronicle stripes in ancient and medieval literature, which are always associated with the outcast, heretic, reprobate, bastards, serfs, the condemned. Sumptuary laws demanded that people wear stripes if they

Figure 3
Bobbin winding and weaving in *Local Industry*, 2010. Photo courtesy the Knoxville Museum of Art.

Figure 4
Teena Tuenge weaving on the *Local Industry* loom, 2010. Photo courtesy the Knoxville Museum of Art.

challenged the normal order of society—either criminal, sickly, or the entertainers: clowns, musicians, jugglers (13). In feudal times, two- or three-colored motifs were used in heraldry "to articulate links of kinship" (29), to identify who belongs to, or is excluded from, a family heritage. Stripes later migrated to the domestic servile class "worn by domestic staff of Lords: ... serfs, kitchen and stable boys, table waiters, later men of arms and the hunt, grooms ... chambermaids ... falconers, heralds, clowns, musicians" (37).

Perhaps Wilson's choice of stripes as structure for the collaborative cloth refers also to stripes as the marker of difference, subservience, of powerlessness. The craft of weaving is itself forced to the margins by industrial production, as well as Modernist fine art's rejection of craft and traditional handwork. The Appalachian weavers are often characterized as outside of the

Figure 5
Weavers Tommye Scanlin and Gery Forkner finishing the *Local Industry Cloth*, 2010. Photo courtesy the Knoxville Museum of Art.

mainstream, marked by geography and economics. The stripe as a marker for the outsider was turned into a mark of inclusion in the servile class. This shift could be mapped onto weaving as woman's craft, herself marked by absence and inferiority, consigned to the domestic sphere, able only to participate in "fireside industries," those handmade literally by the family hearth (Alvic 2003: 60). In this sense, Wilson reversed the mark of homebound subservience to one of power, visible and museum-ratified. Her exhibition revives the power of the earlier craft revival, in which "women felt more self-worth as they earned money and controlled its distribution" (Pastoureau 2001: 141). The weavers in Wilson's project communicated sincere pride in their skill and work ethic, and were unfailingly enthusiastic regarding their willingness to participate.[8]

After the American Revolution, and then the French, there came "the beginning of the romantic and revolutionary stripe" (Pastoureau 2001: 141), in which "the aristocratic and the peasant stripe merge" (48). The revolutionary use of the red, white, and blue still carries with it the scent of the outsider, the challenger to the status quo, providing Wilson's stripes another context, becoming emblems of unity, and through unity, power.

With James Hargreaves' spinning machine, Samuel Crompton's mule jenny, and Joseph-Marie Jacquard's loom, Pastoureau boldly declares that "the ideology of the stripe fully benefited from the progress of the Industrial Revolution" (54). By returning the stripe to the human-powered loom, Wilson ironically comments on this claim, and challenges the benefit of that progress. Stripes also designate areas of danger—traffic indications to SLOW, DETOUR, STOP, OBEY (84), to avoid, stay out, not enter. The accumulation of Wilson's stripes also makes them dangerous as

a massive, frighteningly large, interlocked collection. How would one display this collaborative *Local Industry* cloth—75 feet 9 inches long and 24 inches wide—to help viewers negotiate around it?[9]

Stripes aren't a natural mark, but a cultural mark (Pastoureau 2001: 88). Within this context, Wilson and her collaborators' stripes position the deep historical use of weaving as an ancient, universal, basic human activity that produces order (beneficial to humans) in the chaos of nature. The stripe is a structure that infinitely repeats. French artist Daniel Buren adopted the stripe as both his material and his composition. He places his stripes in a myriad of locales, using the stripe's infinite repeatability to highlight the context of that locale, be it museum, sailboat, or city square. Wilson's stripes do not repeat into infinity, but the variation between the stripes reveals that the stripe itself can be striped—that it can undo its own ordering with a disorder of difference.

Wilson's *Wind/Rewind/Weave* was an exceptional combination of contemporary practice, a combination of her own artistic practice, process, and resulting objects, merged with a complicated array of pedagogy, and a wide-ranging collaboration. *Local Industry* was successful, first, because Wilson refused to collapse her potential audience into a commonly assumed low-skilled denominator, calling out to people of all levels of knowledge from the novice to the expert. Second, through protracted planning, she managed the task of forming a working interrelationship between museum staff, amiably led by curator Chris Molinski, and audience collaborators through the development of an efficient system with a clear goal. *Local Industry*, unlike many other interactive projects, will not float off into oblivion, as a collection of memories of the participants. Wilson's system created what is dramatically and decidedly a very substantial art object, full of beauty, skill, and grace. It is aesthetically stalwart, with considered color, form, and scale, brimming with content, pointing to many contexts, bound together in a strong conceptual cohesion. Glenn Adamson suggested that Wilson's most generous gesture here was to allow so many viewers to be generous to her.[10]

The cloth produced by *Local Industry* will now embark on a life of its own. From the beginning, Wilson wanted it to remain in Knoxville, near the hearth, as part of the KMA's permanent collection. Wilson asks only that whenever, and however, it is shown, the cloth will be accompanied by acknowledgement of all of its collaborators.

In Memoriam

Sadly, Kathryn Hixson who wrote this review died in the fall of 2010. This extended review is one of her last writings to be published. Kathryn was an internationally recognized art critic, writer, and scholar. Her publications include: *New Art Examiner, Arts Magazine*, *Atelier*, *Flash Art*, *Journal of Art*, and *P-form*. She was the senior editor of the *New Art Examiner* and an Adjunct Professor in the departments of Art History, Theory, and Criticism, New Arts Journalism, and Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Kathryn's voice and insights about contemporary art will be sorely missed by so many.

Notes

1. See also http://www.windrewindweave.com/exhibition.html
2. "to roll/to crease/to fold/to store/to bend/to twist/to chip/to split ..." http://www.ubu.com/concept/serra_verb.html
3. In conversation with the artist, April 2010.
4. Conversation with KMA staff, April 2010.
5. Paraphrase of Wilson's weaving instructions.
6. Joan Livingstone, weaving on April 6, 2010 in the KMA.
7. Weavers' log, 2010.
8. Anne Wilson in conversation, April 2010.
9. KMA staff were already worrying about the possibility of display long before the cloth was finished. In conversation, April 2010.
10. Glenn Adamson, "The End of the Line: Art at the Margins of Industry," lecture, KMA, April 5, 2010.

References

Alvic, Philis. 2003. *Weavers of the Southern Highlands*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.

Pastoureau, Michel. 2001. *The Devil's Cloth: The History of Stripes and Striped Fabric*. New York: Columbia University Press.