BOMB

RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY

Anne Wilson

BY JARED QUINTON
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Anne Wilson, Topologies, 2002–8, lace, thread, cloth, pins, painted wood support, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

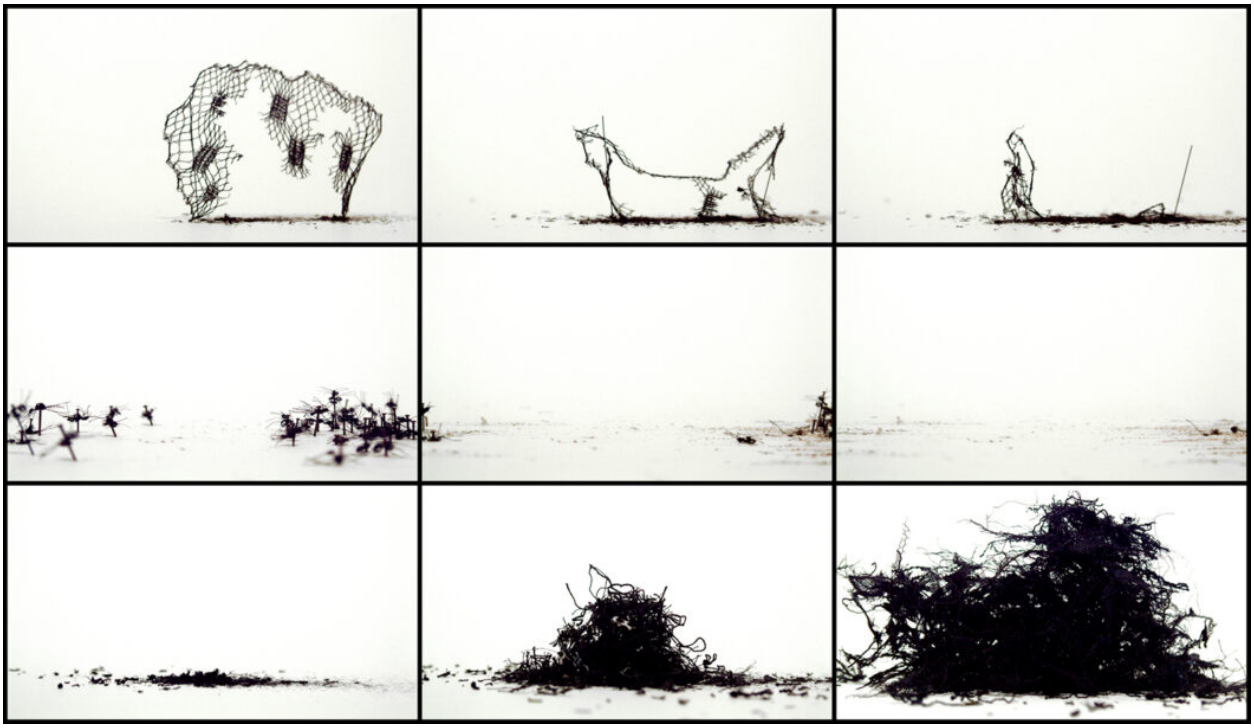
Few figures in the Chicago art world are as beloved as Anne Wilson. A pioneer in the field of textile-based artmaking and teaching, Wilson's practice interweaves research and theory with an experimental and decidedly feminist approach to fiber. She is known for her transformations of commonplace materials like table linens, lace, and human hair through handwork and collaborative labor; she has also embraced new technologies, finding unexpected points of convergence between digital and textile systems. On the occasion of her dual exhibitions at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York City, we reconnected to discuss the iterative approach behind the two major projects on view.

Jared Quinton
As is often the case with your work, this exhibition involves creating something new from something old. You're revisiting and reworking your video work *Errant Behaviors* (2004), which is in turn an extension of the major installation, *Topologies*, that you originally made for the 2002 *Whitney Biennial*. Can you talk about the origins of this project?

Anne Wilson
I first turned to found lace as a source material for making artwork in the late 1990s. As you say: something new out of something old. Often discarded lace fragments were given to me by family or friends, but more often found at flea markets or church rummage sales. Although I was interested in cultural and social histories represented by lace having to do with labor, class, gender, and sexuality, I wanted to explore other ideas. I first understood the found fragments by unraveling threads to find new forms and shapes, by handmaking mesh structures through crochet and netting, and by scanning lace and rematerializing it through stitching—all investigations placed in relationships of like-kinds on the large, horizontal surface of *Topologies*. The digital world has really borrowed the language of lace with words like *web*, *net*, *network*, and *mesh* referencing interconnectivity, interdependence, and relational position. I think textiles —one of the most ancient and often mundane-seeming technological products by nature of their interconnected, expandable, and accumulative structure—can be seen as examples of or metaphors for some of the newest kinds of matrices. A kind of aesthetic exchange is proposed between old and new technologies in *Topologies*.

In exploring the relationships between these different kinds of networks, there are connections with architecture and the organic world; insects and microscopic, specimen-like images of biology can be found within decorative garden motifs and cellular-looking structures of lace. The book A Thousand Plateaus by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which lays out their anti-hierarchical rhizome theory, was an important reference for me in this way of working with high value placed on process and improvisation. The turn of the millennium was a period when artists had new access to computers. The development of the internet felt hopeful, representing positive new potentials for art and society. In retrospect, we were probably naïve to make those projections.

"There's also humor and a darker aspect to the work, touching on ideas of unpredictable or uncontrollable growth."
— Anne Wilson



Anne Wilson, *Errant Behaviors*, 2002–4, frames from 3 animation sequences. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery.

JQ
How did you decide to connect the lace work with moving image?

AW
Curator Larry Rinder visited my studio twice to look at the development of *Topologies* and then offered the invitation to present the work in the 2002 *Whitney Biennial*. Because of the reception, I was invited to remake *Topologies* at other venues, including MassArt in Boston (2002), San Diego State University (2003), the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (2004), and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2007–8). The idea of working with moving images came directly from observing responses to the iterative presentations of *Topologies*. Viewers would look at that lace world and project sci-fi scenarios, cityscapes, or futuristic narratives. I wanted to make a new work where some of the latent associations and meanings could be acted out. I collaborated with two young artists, Cat Stolen and Daniel Torrente, along with composer Shawn Decker, a friend, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) professor, and sound artist. His compositions used both recorded and found sounds, like crickets, bed springs, or a squeaky violin string, to create sonic compositions that mirrored the activity of the moving images.

In *Errant Behaviors*, we animated individual lace parts in *Topologies* by taking digital photographs and showing them in stop-motion sequence. The frame-by-frame hand construction of animation is very much like the structural development of lace, which accumulates part by part over time through sequences of motions with the potential to

replicate and expand infinitely. The hand-processing of both the animation and the textile manifest ideas of imperfection, curiosity, and irregularity. There's also humor and a darker aspect to the work, touching on ideas of unpredictable or uncontrollable growth; some of the "actions" of the fragments seem sinister, aggressive, or rude.

JQ
How does this revisiting of past work relate to your Drawing Room project, which you are also reiterating at MAD?

AW
During the height of the pandemic, I cataloged my archives of photographs and texts for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. I next turned to consider the abundant found-material accumulations from my studio practice, which evolved into a new project called the *Davis Street Drawing Room* (2022–23). This was an experimental and public-facing art project. Excavations from years of my artmaking formed an archive, which I displayed over multiple horizontal surfaces and walls in my studio on Davis Street in Evanston, Illinois. The archive included lace fragments, rolled house linens, worn cloth, handmade glass bobbins, and early hair-embroidered cloth studies. I transformed my studio into a site for close material observation. I hosted group drawing sessions, inviting artists, writers, and historians to respond to the assembled parts. Digital microscopes and hand magnifiers were available along with paper and drawing tools, although participants also responded through computer imaging, photography, and writing. Books relating to my art practice, as well as textile structure and history, were integrated throughout the archive. It was a "social practice" project about slow looking, complexity, invention, and critical thinking, connecting textile histories with the everyday and with contemporary art discourse.

A primary topic in discussing the lace fragments with visitors was the history of *Topologies* and *Errant Behaviors*. Curator Elissa Auther visited as she was planning to show *Errant Behaviors* and was interested in the lace source materials. We spent a day together at Davis Street and developed the idea of the *MAD Drawing Room*. The exhibition features a two-channel installation of my video, remastered in 2022, alongside eight study tables of lace and openwork fragments, as well as a participatory component modeled after Davis Street.

JQ
Because of the pedagogical threads to these projects, I want to ask about your work as a long-time professor in the Fiber and Material Studies Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Are there certain ways that the textile pedagogy you've developed has influenced the work that you make or vice versa?

AW
I've always integrated historical and theoretical research and skill-based learning into my own studio practice. I bring these same concerns to my teaching. As I look at the repetitions of movements within the classroom studios—a weaving class, for example, where groups of

Anne Wilson, Dorie drawing from lace in the Davis Street Drawing Room, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

students are winding warps together and then dressing looms—I've always been impressed by the choreography of group movement in performing textile processes. At the same time, we study the historical exploitation of textile labor and the injustices of sweatshops and factory working conditions. I know my experience as a classroom teacher contributed to research in developing public, thread-walking performances in Chicago; Houston; Manchester, England; and New York City.

Another kind of group process that has been a meaningful part of my life is the development of the Fiber and Material Studies Department at SAIC, working together with colleagues and students to create an inclusive department that challenges problematic art-world hierarchies. This experience informed my Drawing Room projects as well as *Local Industry*, a participatory "museum factory" at the Knoxville Museum of Art. In 2010, I invited seventy-nine experienced weavers to work collectively over a three-month period and hand-weave a seventy-five-foot length of striped cloth in the museum. It was important to meet local artists and seek their input about our process, communicate in transparent and honest ways, acknowledge contributors by name, build consensus, and work from a position of care and mutual respect.

Installation view of *Anne Wilson: The MAD Drawing Room*, 2024–25. Museum of Arts and Design, New York City. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Arts and Design.

JQ
How has your field changed over the past few decades? Do you feel that certain hierarchies persist in the discourse around fiber and textile art, or have we finally moved past that?

AW
Textile is a vital medium across many disciplines today. I think the art world has become more globally inclusive, with more room for artists who draw on fiber traditions and other craft histories from their home cultures. At the same time, digital saturation has demanded its opposite. So many students today, thoroughly raised on screens, are seeking more direct sensorial experience and tactile engagement with materials. The physical operates in a complementary relationship to the digital; it's not one or the other. And to a younger generation, handmaking with fiber and other craft materials can actually feel new. There is also now scholarship that contributes to contextualizing textile-making within larger historical, cultural, and social themes. It is an exciting time for the medium!

Anne Wilson: The MAD Drawing Room and *Anne Wilson: Errant Behaviors* are on view at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City.