



# TEXTILE

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## Anne Wilson, a hand well trained

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# Exhibition Review

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**Anne Wilson, *a hand well trained*, Chicago: Rhona Hoffman Gallery, July 7 – August 11, 2017.**

In *a hand well trained*, Anne Wilson's poetic and provocative exhibition recently on view at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, the artist returns to the more private, domestic world of her earlier works, while continuing her investigations of the social conditions of labor that have defined handwork and sexual difference. Revealed throughout is the subversive potential of material practices in light of cultural histories that have devalued textiles and women's work, and against the renewed challenges to women that plague our current political epoch. The 16 fabric works and installation that comprised *a hand well trained* (all 2017) offered intimate engagement with a material world where meaning is derived through precise transformations of cloth, hair, and thread, and the feminine becomes a site of resistance and self-agency.

The title of Wilson's exhibition is an excerpt from *The Encyclopedia of Needlework*, a nineteenth-century reference manual written by Thérèse de Dillmont, "with the hope that diligent female workers of all ages, may be able, by its means to instruct themselves in every branch of plain and fancy needlework (2017)." Wilson's research-based practice acknowledges the impor-

tance of this seminal text at the same it questions the implied rules of conformity suggested by the exhibition's titular passage, which appears scripted in black thread in two of the artist's "material drawings." Constructed from horizontal strips of white cotton and linen, the edges of which are meticulously sewn together with strands of black hair and thread, these intricate works read as pages or ledgers, some blank, others inscribed by the artist's hand. In *Scribble*, for instance, a patch of small stitches and knotted threads evokes either a mistake or a doodle; while in *Proper Behaviors*, the quoted passage is rendered nearly illegible by an overlay of cross stitches, as if to defy the laws of both etiquette and proper needlework (Figures 1 and 2).

The material and abstract nature of language is likewise explored in the related *Practice (No. 1)* and *Practice (No. 2)*, two textile drawings individually placed, as if pages from a book, on top of two wooden tables painted white. The installation recalled a small reading room, as well as Wilson's *Topologies* (2002–2008), horizontal fields populated by quasi-architectural forms hand built from lace fragments, albeit here on a much lesser scale. Made from

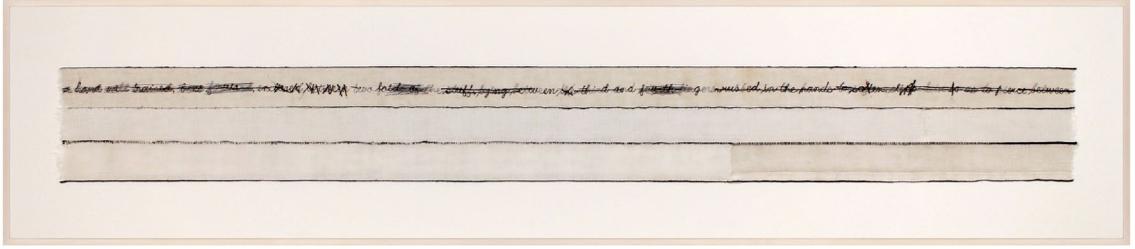
REVIEWED BY SUSAN SNODGRASS

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*Textile*

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**Figure 1**

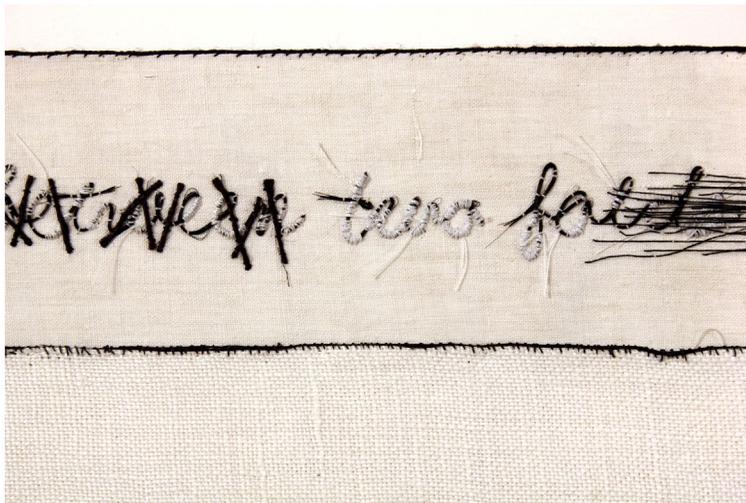
Anne Wilson, *Proper Behaviors*, 2017. Cloth, hair, thread. 12.5 x 59.5 x 2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.

horizontal bands of found cloth, the *Practice* drawings were displayed on their backsides to reveal the reverse stitching made by Wilson and her studio assistants, whose sewn gestures resemble calligraphy or wordless writing (Figure 3). Such works extend the metaphoric and physical relationship between textiles and text (their shared root being the Latin *texere*, to weave), with textiles as the material trace of lives lived and writing as “a trace beyond the life of the body” (Stewart 1984, 31). Also

revealed is the individual handwork and labor of those who participated in the works’ construction, alongside the shared process of learning that has become central to the artist’s many collaborative projects, including her *Walking* series (2008–2014). For these performance-based works, which have been recast for various exhibitions, Wilson and other performers fabricate a sculptural warp through walking and other choreographed movements using lines of colored threads and the infrastruc-

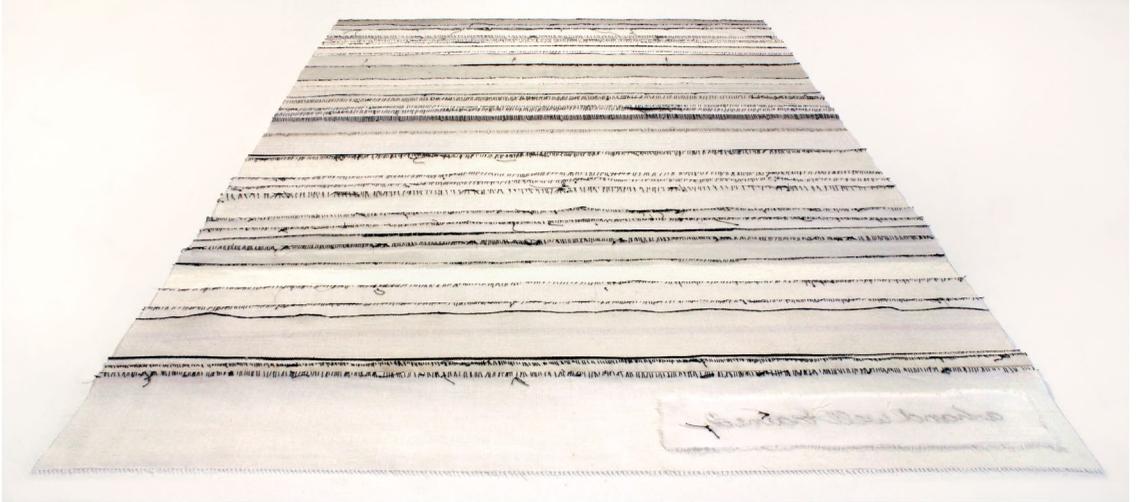
ture of her respective sites. According to the artist, the four *Draw Out* works included here—related in format to the other horizontal drawings although sewn with bright orange, yellow and blue thread—function as two-dimensional documents or scores of these works, their parallel lines emulating the back-and-forth motion of the performers (Figures 4–5).

For the similarly executed *Inventory Drawings*, Wilson uses selvages from hotel tablecloths



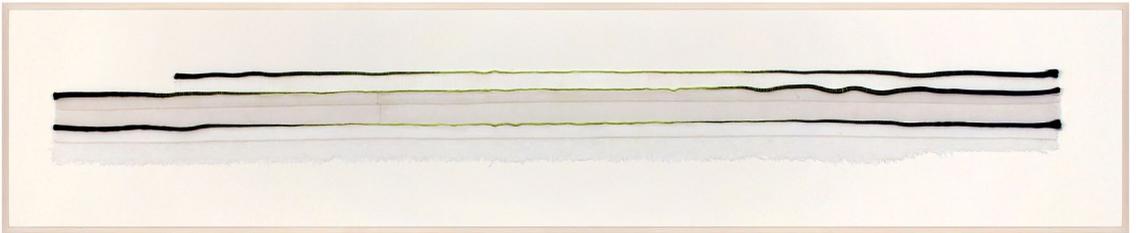
**Figure 2**

Anne Wilson, *Proper Behaviors* (detail), 2017. Cloth, hair, thread. 12.5 x 59.5 x 2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.



**Figure 3**

Anne Wilson, *Practice (No. 1)*, 2017. Cloth, hair, thread. 29.75 19.5 x .25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.



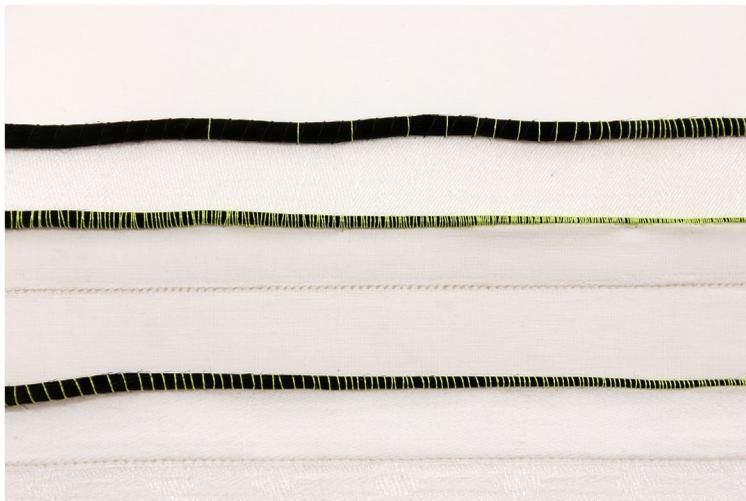
**Figure 4**

Anne Wilson, *Draw Out (yellow)*, 2017. Cloth, hair, thread. 11 x 60.75 x 2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.

and bed linens—some marked with the name of the hotel, others with laundry and inventory numbers—to question notions of ownership and provenance, reclaimed by the artist through her own handwork and material reuse. At the same time, she makes visible the gendered workforce within the hotel industry, while also conflating the spaces of labor and leisure, intimacy, and taboo (Figure 6).

Throughout her prodigious work, Wilson employs human hair and found cloth (damask fabrics, table linens, family heirlooms, remnants of clothing), as stand-ins for the body and as fragments of memory imbued with their own personal and collective histories. While one might equate the artist's use of border textile elements, which also includes plackets and hems, with domesticity and marginality, in Wilson's hands

they become a material means by which to reconfigure the relationship between private and public, parts to wholes. These concerns play out in grand scale in the installation *Body into Culture*, 14 “edge drawings” that filled the main wall of the lower-level gallery (Figure 7). Here, the horizontality of the exhibition's other works give way to a strong verticality in this series of rope-like structures and cut cloth fields



**Figure 5**

Anne Wilson, *Draw Out (yellow)* (detail), 2017. Cloth, hair, thread. 11 x 60.75 x 2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.



**Figure 6**

Anne Wilson, *Inventory Drawing Continental Motel*, 2017. Found cloth, hair and thread. 12.4 x 15.4 x 1.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.

realized at a more human scale. As with the artist's earlier *Dispersions* (2013), fragments of white damask

punctured by sewn circular holes suggestive of gunshots or wounds, these drawings also exude a bodily

presence, one that is decidedly female, with their elongated ovals and vertical slits embellished with



**Figure 7**

Anne Wilson, *Body Into Culture*, 2017. 14 material drawings; cloth, hair and thread. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. Photo credit: Michael Tropea.

hair and colored thread to emphasize their severed edges. For Wilson, a hand well trained is skilled and feminist, asserting the primacy of women's work and handcraft against the forces of social control.

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