

Anne Wilson Wind/Rewind/Weave



Stop reading for one second and look down. What are you wearing? I ask this not as a flirtatious come-on, but to invite you to really consider your clothes. Did you buy your socks new? Get your pants secondhand? Sew your own dress? What sorts of hands—and how many hands—might have worked to weave your shirt or knit your sweater? What were the conditions of their making? It might be difficult to envision with any precision such circumstances of production, given the increasingly diminished role that fabrication plays within the contemporary United States.

The outsourcing of labor in this country is a hotly debated issue, especially in relation to textile manufacturing and the low-wage conditions that produce the vast majority of our apparel goods. In response to the waning of fabric manufacturing in the U.S., the last decade or so has witnessed a growing interest in do-it-yourself textile crafting by hobbyists, activists, and artists alike.¹ Although making things by hand has been heralded as a potential means to circumvent the sweatshop economy, contemporary artist Anne Wilson also utilizes material in order to interrogate the connections between intimate handicraft and large-scale industry.

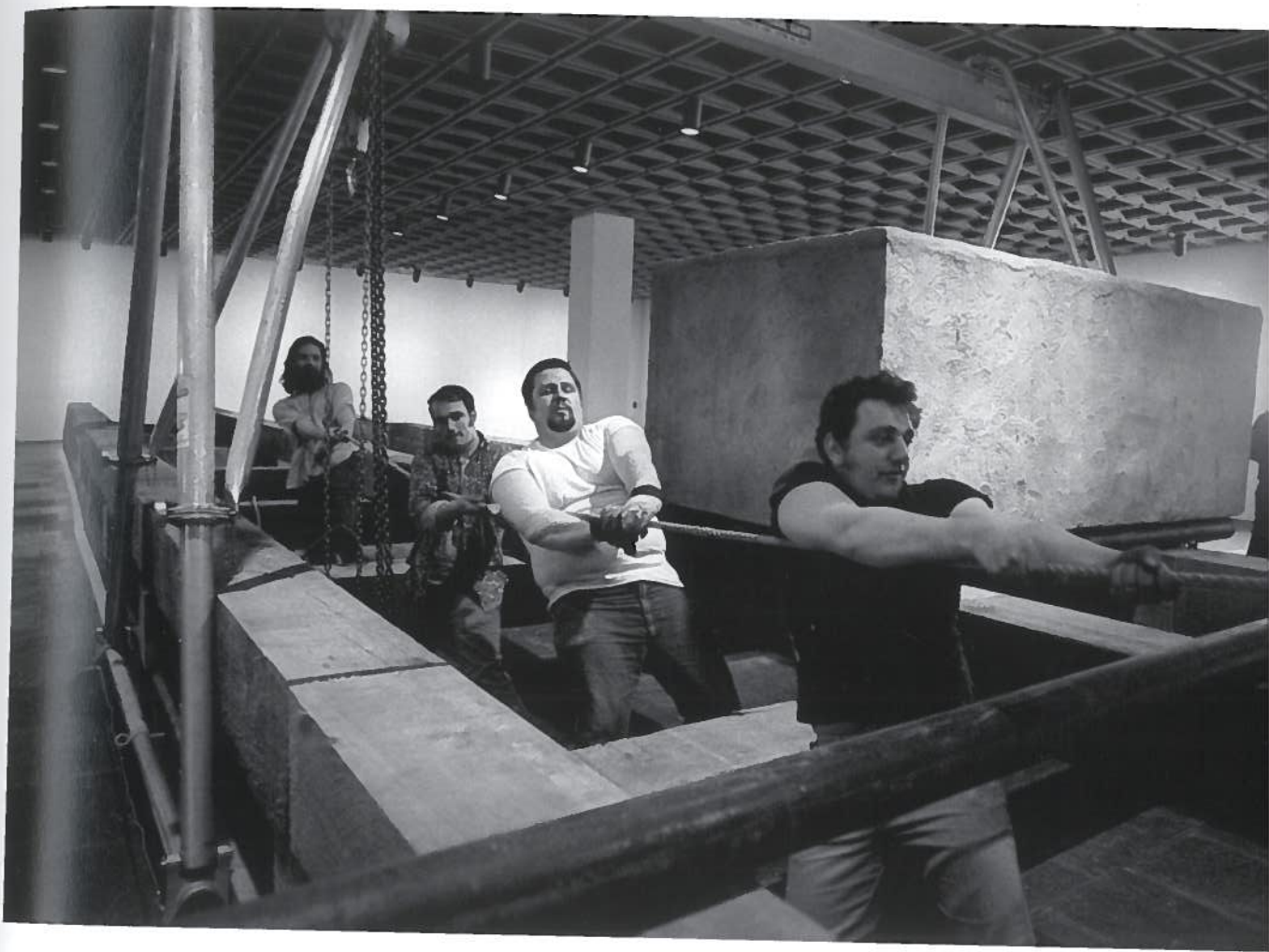
In addition, Wilson foregrounds how the space of art is also, crucially, a site of work. Her project *Local Industry* (2010), developed for the Knoxville Museum of Art, renders the making of cloth visible within a specific place—the museum. Moreover, it is a museum situated in the heart of Appalachia, a region that, although historically renowned for its network of textile mills, has seen its industrial base mostly vanish. In Wilson's performance, local artisans and museumgoers alike collectively create a bolt of striped fabric that grows over the course of the exhibition; experienced weavers from Tennessee and surrounding states take turns at the loom, while visitors wind thread onto paper-quill bobbins. Thus Wilson expands our notions of

Teena Tuenge weaving
on *Local Industry* loom, 2010
Knoxville Museum of Art

artistic labor, as she moves away from conventional understandings of such work as a private, solitary act that occurs primarily within the confines of the studio, and turns it into a collaborative, transparent activity that occurs in full view of the public. By moving physical, bodily effort into the museum, she transforms it from a container of objects to an active zone of production.

Within postwar art history, there are precedents to converting the gallery into a kind of construction site. In Robert Morris's 1970 solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, for instance, the artist recruited dozens of forklift drivers, installers, and other workmen to arrange his massive assemblages of wood, concrete, and steel.² More recently, Spanish artist Santiago Sierra hired day laborers to perform repetitive tasks in the gallery, such as having one worker paint the walls white while another paints them black, as a brutal reminder of the Sisyphean endlessness of some types of menial labor. In *Local Industry*, by contrast, Wilson honors long-standing craft techniques, dignifying the all-too-often marginalized tradition of weaving into the sanctified art museum. She uses weaving and winding not only to dismantle the hierarchy between low craft and high art, but also to activate a meditative space. Her invitation to participate does not mirror exploitation, as Sierra's does, but seeks an alternative to it.

Furthermore, Wilson charges her materials with meaning within the context of the gendered division of labor. Any serious account of craft in contemporary art must acknowledge the important legacy of the feminist movement and its incorporation of so-called "women's work."³ Projects from the 1970s such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979) and *Womanhouse*, created under the auspices of CalArt's Feminist Art Program (1971–1972), established the legitimacy of previously devalued forms of primarily domestic labor, like embroidery and crocheting. In addition to their radical embrace of traditional handicraft within the realm of fine art, feminist artists utilized collective methods, asserting that the participatory process of outreach to various makers was just as important as the final product. Wilson's work similarly brings together skilled craftspeople, hobby makers, and untrained visitors to create a tangible record of their labor—the bolt of fabric will remain at the Knoxville Museum of Art as a palpable,



Robert Morris installing his exhibition
at the Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York City, 1970

weighty trace of the performance — within a landscape marked by the disappearance of manufacturing. Further, the artist has created an Archive of Production, as she has installed a log on the wall shelf outside the *Local Industry* “factory,” in which all winders, weavers, and researchers are documented. This long list of names is included in this volume, and it is never to be separated from the woven cloth bolt.



Indeed, *Local Industry* ties together two strands of artistic practice that are usually understood as quite disparate: feminist textiles and institutional critique.⁴ Institutional critique, which focuses on *how* art is exhibited by training a lens on the procedures and policies of museum economics, educational structures, and exhibition conventions, insists that the museum gallery functions not as a neutral “white cube,” but ideologically shapes how art is valued, exhibited, and circulated. Wilson’s work is part of this larger fabric of artistic practice that seeks to untangle the knotty politics of display, yet she is equally concerned with the liminal position of handicraft within the art institution. Hence, Wilson exemplifies a new brand of conceptually oriented craft, one that might be termed *craft critique*, in which artists question the false dichotomy between handmaking and conceptual art. Conceptual art, which privileges ideas over specialized skills, is ostensibly objectless — or, to use the more common phrase, “dematerialized.”⁵ Craft critique, with its texturally dense fabrics and specific invocations of regional making, *rematerializes* art by using literal material.

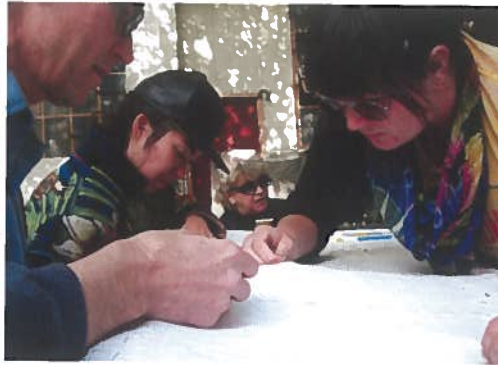
Wilson also works among (and has exerted tremendous influence on) a younger generation of feminist artists in the U.S. who make participatory textile-based performances, including Liz Collins, Sabrina Gschwandtner, and Ginger Brooks Takahashi.

Views of Liz Collins, *Knitting Nation Phase 1: Knitting During Wartime*, 2005

Each of these women use handicraft as a flexible, but potent metaphor to touch on issues as diverse as patriotism, war, and queer desire. For Collins's *Knitting Nation Phase 1: Knitting During Wartime*, performed as a part of Allison Smith's public art project "The Muster" on New York's Governors Island in 2005, a female squadron used hand-cranked knitting machines to produce a large, abstract American flag that could be trod



Left: Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Wartime Knitting Circle*, 2007



Center and right: Views of Ginger Brooks Takahashi, *An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail*, 2004–ongoing quilting forum

upon. An orator read texts about protectionist American trade policies and the legacy of women knitting for soldiers on the frontlines.

In a related vein, Gschwandtner's *Wartime Knitting Circle* (2007), installed at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, was an interactive space for conversation where visitors could sit together, knit from provided patterns, discuss the ongoing war in Iraq, and learn about historical links between handicrafts and war-time thrift. Also gesturing towards textiles as culturally loaded and collaboratively produced, Takahashi has organized group-sewing events both within institutions, such as New York's New Museum, as well as in informal, private spaces like the backyards of friends. For this ongoing project, entitled *An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail*, Takahashi creates dialogue around the act of stitching together a large quilt-in-progress, and thus pays homage to her far-flung, pieced-together feminist and queer community.

Each of these artists, including Wilson, is forging a distinctly feminist brand of what has been termed "relational aesthetics."⁶ French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has proposed that "relational" art takes the sphere of social interaction as its primary concern; this work has significant roots in the group ethos of feminist craft, though this precedent has not been fully acknowledged.

Wilson draws from both the 1990s trend that Bourriaud outlines and from 1970s feminism that receives short shrift as a major influence in his text. Weaving together activism and aesthetics, conceptualism and handiwork, Wilson redefines relationality in terms of gender critique, regional concerns, and community.

It is vital that *Local Industry* focuses on the creation of a piece of fabric, and not only because of its reference to the region's legacy of textile production — for material is central to Wilson's work and to our daily lives. Cloth is the stuff of contemporary culture. As the editors of the anthology *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* write:

The physical and intimate qualities of fabric allow it to embody memory and sensation and become a quintessential metaphor for the human condition. Crossing between arenas of function, craft, art, and ritual, the meaning of cloth from its most banal to its most splendid form affects our daily lives and welfare in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, invention and technology, commerce and work.⁷

Wilson's work insists on the bodies that still accompany the labor of manufacture, even when primarily machine-made — hands still work those machines. To come back to the questions that I posed at the very beginning of this essay: How might we keep in mind the essential role of handiwork in an era of outsourcing? In *Local Industry*, the constant activity within the museum and the unspooling fabric are reminders of the connections between all of us as we set out to work every day, whether it be housework, factory work, or intellectual work. Wilson's elaborate choreography helps us re-envision the clothes on our own backs, the rugs under our feet, and the threads that pull us together in this global world.

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1. There is an extensive literature on the upsurge of crafting since the mid-1990s. The most comprehensive examination of this trend within the U.S. context is Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl, *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).
2. For more on this exhibit, see my "Hard Hats and Art Strikes: Robert Morris in 1970," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 89, no. 2 (June 2007), pp. 333–59.
3. A rich body of scholarship has explored this history, including Rozsika Parker's seminal *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1989); and, more recently, Elissa Auther's *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
4. For one excellent essay that attempts to reconcile the duality between feminist craft and conceptual art, see Helen Molesworth, "Cleaning Up in the 1970s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles," in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), pp. 107–22.
5. Dematerialization was circulated as a key word in conceptual art in the late 1960s, beginning with Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International*, vol. 12, no. 2 (February 1968), pp. 31–36. The play between dematerialization and materialization in craft is also addressed in Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2007), pp. 58–65.
6. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 1998). English edition, *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), translated Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the assistance of Mathieu Copeland.
7. Joan Livingstone and John Ploof, *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* (Chicago and Cambridge, MA: SAIC and MIT Press, 2007), p. vii.



View of Local Industry, 2010
Knoxville Museum of Art