

Errant Behaviors: Reanimating the Past

Starting from speculations on the beginning of life and from biological parallels, I drew the conclusion that, besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state.

—Sigmund Freud

Errant Behaviors is Anne Wilson’s episodic moving-image rendition of her large-scale fiber installation piece “Topologies,” reimagined through a gesture that directs the viewer’s attention to the latent narratives embedded in the patterns of lace and thread, wires and pins, hair and bristles. Wilson has transformed her installation into two dozen or so tableaux that are projected on two opposing screens and set into motion to the accompaniment of Shawn Decker’s brilliant musical score and jittery soundscapes. Ranging in duration from several seconds to nearly three minutes, the segments reveal an elemental world set into flux: migrations, disintegrations, rallies, battles, as well as more intimate conflicts and liaisons—in short, a choreography that allegorizes the primal forces that shape civilization and the countervailing forms of society’s discontents.¹

A certain hybridity informs the work as Wilson and Decker freely mix old and new media, low-tech with digital high-tech. Much as its source work—Wilson’s expansive, variable, conference-table-sized fiber installation—resists easy assimilation, *Errant Behaviors* is presented as a two-screen video projection that exceeds any single, comprehensive viewing. The juxtaposition of pairs of differing scenes—each with its own narrative logic and aural environment—lends an improvisatory feel to the work and effectively mimics the types of viewing strategies one might deploy in a close encounter with the original installation piece. In making the transition from the third to the fourth dimension, Wilson has enlarged her aesthetic arsenal by embracing change, contingency, and flux.

¹ For Freud a key feature of civilization was “the manner in which the relationships of man to one another, their social relationships, are regulated—the relationships which affect a person as a neighbour, as a source of help, as another person’s sexual object, as a member of a family and a State.” Freud’s inventory could serve as a shot list for the central action in many of the sequences of *Errant Behaviors*. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 94–95.

The impulse to shuttle between material handwork and video installation—an impulse toward the interdisciplinary—is very much of the moment. Yet the resulting work is far from a mere translation across media. Rather, *Errant Behaviors* stands as a medium-specific installation whose meanings and structures are made possible only through the use of video and sound. The work, in fact, opens onto the entire history of artists' embrace of moving images, referencing in interesting ways several far less contemporary forms.

Like some rediscovered version of the late nineteenth-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge's celebrated locomotion studies, *Errant Behaviors* returns the moving image to an early, proto-cinematic point in its evolution. While Muybridge managed the mechanical miracle of freezing discrete temporal segments of animals and humans in motion, Wilson accomplishes the inverse by animating inert matter in a manner that effectively mimics the movement of living organisms. Shot silently in color (but with a nearly monochromatic mise-en-scène) from a fixed camera position in seemingly single unedited takes—an illusion produced by the stop-motion technique—Wilson's imagery emulates the form of two of the earliest modes of cinema: the so-called "actualities" of the Lumière brothers (52-second-long single-shot views capturing everything from domestic scenes to exotic locales) and the penny-arcade peepshow portrayals of novelty acts (a strongman flexing his muscles, a couple kissing, a dancer's butterfly-like performance) produced in the early 1890s in Thomas Edison's Black Maria studio.

This was a cinema able effectively to communicate fundamental aspects of the world through a preliterate, highly visual, kinetic, and even kinesthetic mode capable of reaching, during the early years of the last century, a mass audience. Wilson's work maintains some of the simplicity and directness of the films of that period. Her single-shot segments typically focus on one action, one set of events, a single incident or encounter. In one tableau a twisted strand of wire is pulled tight until it seems to snap as it recoils into a tangle (a reading enhanced by Decker's cartoonlike aural mimicry). In another, a fuzzy creature approaches the foreground, zig-zagging its way from out-of-focus depth into a sharply focused foreground and periodically dropping fecal-like parts of its mass before exiting the frame. A genuinely Chaplinesque moment occurs in a short tableau in which a black-lace creature attempts to arise and propel itself across the frame. Some sequences feature encounters among several of these abstract characters: a pin deploys itself Punch-and-Judy-style to beat into submission a clump of threads; insectlike thread figures balanced atop pins move as if in a cavalry formation; a cluster of gold-headed pins connect themselves with a series of threads that radiate into a network.

The formal affinity of Wilson's videographic imagery with early cinema, in particular its flatness and frontality, seems enhanced by the technical tentativeness of its animation. The movement of her figures is jerky; portions of each sequence seem to hover between movement and complete stasis. This

partial motion and limited action impairs the illusionism of *Errant Behaviors*, and in so doing moves us beyond the intent of those earliest films, which aimed to create a continuous reality, and into the realm of a destabilized cinema. In this regard the film is reminiscent of Chris Marker's celebrated science-fiction short *La jetée* (1962), whose apocalyptic narrative, set in the ruins of Europe following World War III, appears to have migrated onto its technical mode of realization—rendered as it is in a pre-cinematic series of still black-and-white photographs. These are mutant forms of cinema that seem to have been cast in the caldron of a global catastrophe (an atomic blast occurs early in Marker's tale) and are in turn populated by fragmented, damaged figures struggling for existence in a realm like the one that critic Kathryn Hixson, in characterizing Wilson's world, describes as "ominous, foreboding, as if things have gone awry."²

The impaired motion, the damaged agonists, the depopulated world bereft of the signs of civilization—all of these connect *Errant Behaviors* in turn to the highly resonant work of another set of filmmaking brothers, the Quays. The world that emerges in their films is one fraught with a distinctly Middle European paranoia of the interwar years of the last century through narratives of fractured dreams and crushed spirits enacted by a cast of broken dolls and machine-age detritus. While Wilson's moving-image tableaux are by contrast less focused on a particular past, one senses a sociopolitical subtext in the uneasy relationships negotiated between the hard and the soft, the biomorphic and the geometric, the upright and the recumbent, the machined and the handmade. Without unduly burdening these slender tales, *Errant Behaviors* subtly opens onto issues of gender and class that have preoccupied Wilson in a broad array of media throughout the past two decades of her work.³

Anne Wilson has entered the moving-image arena after nearly a century's worth of aesthetic appropriation by artists who in embracing the cinema's populist appeal accessed both its anti-social potential (particularly in its comic assaults on middle-class values) and its capacity to activate the fine arts through the introduction of temporality. As early as 1916, for example, the Italian Futurists issued a manifesto that advocated a cinema filled with "CONGRESSES, FLIRTS, FIGHTS AND MARRIAGES OF FUNNY FACES, MIMICRY, ETC."⁴ Such avant-garde approaches became relatively commonplace in the 1920s with the Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy proposing a multi-screen, "polykino" display for film, the Dadaist Man Ray experimenting with moving-image photograms, and the Cubist painter Fernand Léger completing the avant-garde short film *Ballet*

² Kathryn Hixson, "The Topography of Anne Wilson's *Topologies*," in *Anne Wilson Unfoldings*, exh. cat. (Boston: Massachusetts College of Art, 2002), p. 41.

³ For an excellent account of this aspect of Wilson's work, see Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Anne Wilson: Fragmented Territories," in *Prospectives 140: Anne Wilson*, exh. cat. (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2004), pp. 3–5.

⁴ Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1981), p.12.

mécanique (1924), in which he animated (among other elements) an array of kitchen utensils and cooking vessels to an experimental score by Georges Antheil.

Anne Wilson has joined the ranks of such artists who have picked up cameras in order to see the world, and their own art, in a new way. In the early 1950s the young American painter Robert Breer turned to film to experiment with compositional variations; a not dissimilar transition occurred a decade later when Andy Warhol set his movie camera on a tripod to begin making his “screen tests.” Breer’s work revealed the importance of temporality, a dimension which in turn has allowed Wilson not only to explore variation but, more significantly, to uncover the lived histories of her tattered characters—the uses and abuses that have rendered them threadbare and abandoned. Warhol’s lesson has proven no less instructive in its reductive return to the origins of the medium and the primal power of the image. Like these visual artists, Wilson has enlarged her aesthetic arsenal and in the process added a new chapter to the discontinuous history of artists’ engagement with the moving image.

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