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CHAPTER SIX

DOMESTIC RITUAL IN THE ART OF ANNE WILSON

ELIZABETH A. RICHARDS

In "Housework and Art Work," Helen Molesworth explored the relationship between private and public through the work of several feminist artists, each dealing with domestic labor. For Molesworth, by displacing the private aspects of women's lives in the form of domestic labor, these artists challenged the duality of women's roles in society as both private and public.[1] Domestic labor was only one form of maintenance referred to in the article; maintenance labor in general was emphasized as a necessary part of society to forward the ideals of modernity (progress, change, individual creation). The necessity to maintain the myth that the public sphere was self contained and independent required that this maintenance labor remained hidden and unrecognizable. When an artist made maintenance labor visible, Molesworth claimed, it arrested the social function it was designed to maintain.

Anne Wilson explored this premise as it related directly to domestic labor: sewing and mending specifically. For Molesworth, the public space was the white cube, but while Wilson's artwork was showcased in this forum, it was the home as a public sphere that was foremost questioned in her art. As a public space, the home was a self contained and independent site, the maintenance of which was hidden from the public eye. She equated the private sphere of women's lives with the invisible housework that maintained the home as public space. Wilson performed domestic labor as her art practice, emphasizing the relationships between private acts and public institutions. Working specifically with art practices thought of as women's work, she critiqued practices of sewing and embroidering as rituals that defined the domestic sphere as feminine, gendering the boundaries of public and private. She used two materials in her artwork, each of which told a story and reflected the irreversible disrepair of the aging process: household linens and human hair.

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[1] Helen Molesworth, "Housework and Art Work," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 71-97.

Wilson's materials spoke to the viewer even without artistic manipulation. Both hair and cloth are carriers of culturally constructed meaning. Cloth is a carrier of meaning in itself; white cloth is a cultural symbol of purity, innocence, and virginity. In her artwork, cloth was made impure with clumps of black, brown, or red hair sewn into its surface. These cloths were household linens, tattered, torn, worn, stained; they held the evidence of family secrets. Hair too holds secrets though more personal ones. Hair tells the story of its owner and his or her projected identity but it also reflects the reality of the body: shining, graying, thinning.

The time an aunt spilled red wine on the tablecloth, a father burned a hole with his cigar, a child innocently pulled a dangling thread; cloth holds a physical form of memory, a permanent, tangible memory that does not fade or wane with the passing years. Wilson's cloth could easily be compared to one aspect of the body in particular (skin) acting as a barrier of protection for the soft inner parts. Unlike cloth, skin heals and scars fade, yet both show signs of disrepair and the evidence of aging. Clothing and its relationship to skin create a parallel history: "its history is our history."[2] Worn, torn, stained areas on cloth are inevitably caused by human interaction, through close relationship with the body. In this way, cloth maintains a space between abstraction and depiction, it acts as skin so much that it is a symbol of the body's protection. Henri Bergson referred to this transitory space between abstraction and depiction, between mind and body as the space of memory.[3] Cloth holds a physical memory of its past available to the eyes of the viewer but as an everyday object, it inevitably invokes personal memories for the viewer as well.

Jennie Sorkin's "Stain: On Cloth, Stigma, and Shame," described the many facets of recognition present on a piece of cloth. When a piece of cloth receives a stain or tear it maintains a permanent scar and cannot forget the laceration but instead retains a form of physical memory.[4] A viewer of such an object will notice the imperfection foremost as the eye is drawn to the irregularity in color or pattern or texture. The emphasis becomes not the beauty of the remainder of the cloth but the stain, no matter how small, making the cloth a thing to be discarded or to be hidden in a bottom drawer. It becomes an object of shame and embarrassment because it has a physical tarnish, what Sorkin referred to as the " record of what has been near, on or is of the body."[5] Some of Wilson's titles also alluded directly to the body, such as *Graft*. To graft is to aid the body in the

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[2] Tim Porges, "Essay", *Telos Portfolio Collection: Anne Wilson* (Winchester: Telos Publishing, 2001), 22.
[3] Henri Bergson, "Summary and Conclusion," *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 307.
[4] Jenni Sorkin, "Stain: On Cloth, Stigma and Shame," *Third Text* 53 (2001): 77.
[5] Sorkin, "Stain," 78.

healing process, thus referring to a scar or imperfection that is being mended. However, cloth cannot be made whole again once it is torn without leaving some form of record and Wilson did not attempt to mend these linens to hide their imperfections, instead she emphasized scars by sewing dark human hair onto the pure white cloths, making references to deterioration permanent and conspicuous.[6] As previously mentioned, Molesworth's article stated that when maintenance labor is made visible, the labor that it is meant to maintain becomes impossible.[7] In Wilson's art, the white cloth was mended but because of the visual emphasis on deterioration and the incorporation of corporeal debris into the cloth, it no longer performed its social function.

Cloth was more than just a veiled reference to the body for Wilson; it was symbolic of family lineage and relationships. As Janet Marquardt-Cherry pointed out, cloth brought up references to lineage because the reproductive act of the family took place "between the sheets" and the tablecloth was symbolic of the family around the dinner table.[8] Wilson used pieces of cloth that directly alluded to the family: sheets and table linens. These objects were part of family traditions but also reflected social codes of conduct and interaction. Not only did Mother take out a special tablecloth for Thanksgiving dinner but there were certain social codes deigned appropriate for such formal occasions; cloth napkins on your lap, elbows off the table, etc. Codes of domesticity and family tradition adhered to these linens just as the stains and tattered threads.

The visuality of Wilson's domestic ritual took cloth out of the realm of function, but her choice to perform these rituals with human hair also made these cloths even more unlikely to fulfill their intended role. Historically hair had been an inspiration and medium of choice; just think of the many ways hair was put to decorative use in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hairwork like many other forms of embellishment was considered the woman's domain and women learned the techniques to show their proficiency with the needle. By twisting groups of hair around a thin, pliable wire and molding it into the shape of flowers or wreaths or by using small groups of hair like thread, women used hair to embellish cloth much like fancywork or embroidery. Hair was valued as a means of remembrance, leading to the gifting of locks of hair to loved ones or the recuperations of a loved one's hair after death. A woman might collect keepsakes of hair from her family, friends, and neighbors in order to make a hair wreath or other image. Stores also supplied hair (often supplemented with animal hair such as horse hair) for these projects when cherished hair ran low. Lockets of hair were worn by loved ones of both the living and the dead. It be-

[6] Sorkin, "Stain," 80.
[7] Molesworth, "Housework," 88.
[8] Janet Marquandt-Cherry, "Anne Wilson: New Frayed Edges," *Women's Art Journal* 23 no. 2 (2002/2003): 50.

came immensely fashionable to have the hair of the deceased placed under glass or in a piece of jewelry as a constant reminder to the wearer. Queen Victoria of England made this and other mourning fashions popular after the death of her mother and her husband both in the same year (1861). Other mourning practices using hair were taken up such as the art of making hair wreaths and bouquets of flowers that were framed and hung in the home as a continued reminder and presence of a dear family member.

Wilson played directly to those mourning practices in her artwork, *Mourning Cloth*. By referring to the Victorian fashion of remembering a loved one by wearing their hair, often in the form of a brooch or locket, she tied her work to sentimentality. Yet she did not note where this hair came from or use the hair in a decorative pattern. The hair was stitched haphazardly onto a cloth, thicker in some areas, thinner in others, surrounding and emphasizing a hole in one area; who was or what was she mourning? Instead of recognizing the person from whom this hair came, her *Mourning Cloth* recognized the tradition of hairwork as a means of dealing with grief. The ritual of hairwork as a mourning practice was memorialized by Wilson's own performance of this task.

Why is hair such an important symbol of a person? It is of course an identifying feature but because of its propensity for change, hair is a symbol of identity beyond mere recognition. Hair is a marker of age, gender, race, personality. The way you treat your hair, cleaning, cutting, dying, embellishing, are all signifiers of how you wish to be identified by society. Hair also tells us about our own bodies. The color, sheen, and texture of our hair fluctuate when we are sick, eating poorly, undergoing hormonal changes, or physical and mental stresses. Hair is part of our everyday experience but how often do we really think about its nature beyond appearances? Hair by its very nature is dead matter being pushed out of our bodies, yet we tend it like a precious garden. Our attitude changes toward our hair when we find it in the bathroom drain or (heaven forbid) on the dining room table. Although hair is dead even as it leaves the follicle, it is only a reminder of our ever-changing bodies when it is detached from the body. Shedding and invariably thinning hair is a reminder that our physical bodies are constantly moving towards decay, a personal memento mori. The abject nature of hair as a reminder of our physical mortality makes it a loaded material paired with Wilson's white cloth. When hair is displaced from the body it takes on a new identity, separate from our own.

Wilson combined hair and cloth, manipulating both their physical presence and their associations. In pieces like *Mendings*, she used human hair to sew together torn or worn areas of cloth. She did not attempt to fix these areas of decay but emphasized them with hair in contrast to the purity of the white cloth. Hair at the table or on the bed was symbolic of a failed domestic sphere, a home

where the decaying body intruded upon cleanliness and purity.[9] These hairs did not lie limply on the cloth but were employed to a function, holding the cloth together while even yet making it impossible and repulsive to use them. She used the hair, a piece of the body in the process of decay, to mend holes in the cloths, encircling the larger holes, emphasizing these orifices which in turn looked like wounds or areas of disease or decay on the cloth, symbolic skin. She expressed the abject body at two stages, directly and indirectly, as bodily decay and as reference to it.

In Julia Kristeva's "Approaching Abjection," she defined abjection as that which created an inner revolt, partially resulting from a desire, which was then rejected: a vortex of desire and repulsion. As the abject always has a relationship with the body, it always has a relationship with the self. The abject represents the site of physical boundary that defines the frontier between living being and corpse. For example, bodily fluids are all a part of maintaining life; they help keep the body in balance. The abject is what does not respect boundaries: the objects of in-between. These boundary-crossing objects heighten the display of human fragility.[10] The reference to the body through the abject is transparent in Wilson's hair stitching. Looking at a work like *Devour* we see the dead remains of a clump of red hair in the bathroom drain, the residue of our living body, a memento mori but yet proof that we are still living. The hair became part of her obsession, hundreds of thousands of stitches and hours of painstaking detail worked onto a piece of cloth that emphasized the body and it relationships to the world of objects through social rituals. Wilson stitched and mended worn and torn areas of cloth, holes that had been worn out by the use of the body which were then renewed by its own debris.

In a 100-part installation, Wilson presented *A Chronicle of Days* (1997-98), a series of torn damask tablecloth squares. One square per day, she embroidered white hair on white cloth, then framed and labeled it with the day and month of completion. In this way she made a chart of the various embellishments she could complete on a designated size and material of cloth in the course of one day. As with *Mendings* or *Graft*, these squares represented a dichotomy between the elegance of polite society and the impurity of the human body.[11] The patience and repetition of the work itself was a visual reminder of the history of female domestic drudgery. Beyond the previous hair pieces, this series conflicted with methods of art making which used charts and graphs, conceptual art

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[9] Alison Ferris, "Forbidden Touch: Anne Wilson's Cloth," *Reinventing Textiles, Volume 2: Gender and Identity* (Winchester, England: Telos Art Publishing, 2001), 41.

[10] Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 389-391.

[11] Eleanor Heartney "Anne Wilson at Revolution," *Art in America* 87 no. 3 (1999): 114-5.

in particular, artists who utilized charts and graphs in their art as a means of transferring an ideological expression in visual form; charts were a visual means of representing an orderly and often mathematical progression. Wilson's art referred to minimalism through her clean white surfaces, simplified forms and lines, but her use of cloth was a digression from minimalism that could not be amended. Cloth is inherently more than a visual reference, because of its relationship with the body and to touch; it is of a visceral nature opposed to the minimalist emphasis of the mind and the visual. Historically, the visceral, the natural, the body, were all related to the feminine because of their opposition to the visual and the ideological, the realm of the masculine. By placing domestic labor within the visual domain of mathematical progressions, Wilson equated the ritualized aspect of domestic labor to the ideological repetition found in conceptual art.

In 2002, Wilson participated in the Whitney Biennial, where she introduced a change in her materials from hair to black lace. After 2001 she began to incorporate more lace and thread into her work and to move away from hair. She determined that her work with hair had moved from references to the body to essentially formalist drawings with hair and thus resolved that her work could maintain its meaning by shifting to the more accessible and easier to work with medium of thread. In thirty-six feet of drawing with black lace and thread, she presented her newest artwork *Topologies*. In perspective, the large span of black line simulated the aerial view of a landscape or on a much smaller scale, the mapping of mutated biomorphic cells, a series of repetition and regeneration common in both urban sprawl and biological growth.[12] Her process in these line drawings also stemmed from a new methodology, an interest in computer manipulation. She began by unraveling a segment of black lace, scanning it digitally into her computer and then using this image to manipulate the line image as a way to play with it before she physically manipulated the lace into the final "drawing."

Instead of the dual focus of the body and the feminine seen in her earlier work, Wilson juxtaposed women's work to advanced contemporary technology. In formal qualities, she still produced an image on cloth, embellishing the material with fine lines that maintained an organic reference, but the material was different, instead of human hair it was manufactured lace and instead of using traditional women's work, she employed a technologically advanced style of manipulation; yet she maintained reference to the female gender by using black lace, a material culturally tied to the fashionable decoration of the female sex and a technically advanced form of women's work. While she moved away from direct references to the body, she continued to be concerned with the cul-

[12] Diane Gaston, "Anne Wilson: Unfoldings," *Art New England* 24 no. 3 (2003): 16-17.

tural codes of female gendering using cloth to explore her chosen inspiration. Originally, lace was a form of women's work made for and by women of leisure; because of its intricate details and patterns, it required a high level of skill and long hours to produce even the smallest segment. Such a time consuming material was a product of luxurious embellishment when applied to fine costume and the sense of luxury associated with lace continued to persist even when laces became machine manufactured. The modern technology of the textile industry thus was reflected in *Topologies* with the advanced form of computer manipulation Wilson used.

Elizabeth Barber pointed out that historically women were either so entrenched in everyday textile production and other household duties that they could not stop production in order to invest in or test a new technology or they were women of leisure who had no use for a new technology.[13] Thus, men were associated with the textile industry and it was this masculine presence both in the manufactured lace and the reference to computer technology (since technology of any sort was notoriously associated with men) that Wilson disrupted and mingled with her feminine references of women's work laid out on the tabletop. Even the technology that she employed, the JaqCAD program, referred to the relationship between the textile industry and modern computer technologies, for the program was designed for textile manipulation and weaving based on CAD (Computer Aided Drafting) programs.

Wilson visualized the domestic ritual of maintenance in her art by stitching and embroidering hair onto household surfaces, with her minute details aligning traditional women's work with an obsession more than the work of an idyllic housewife. Through her materials, Wilson tied domestic labor to the abject body. Just as skin acts as a boundary for the inner body, the domestic rituals of maintenance preserve and shield the private sphere of the family. As the deterioration of this outward projection of the happy household was made visible, was in fact emphasized, the private sphere was placed under a floodlight of criticism.

[13] Elizabeth Barber, *Women's work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 32-33.