

## EXHIBITION CATALOG "Anne Wilson: Unfoldings"

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Essays:

"The Topology of Anne Wilson's *Topologies*" by Kathryn Hixson

"Anne Wilson: Present Corpus" by curator Lisa Tung

"Over Time" by curator Tina Yapelli

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### The Topology of Anne Wilson's *Topologies*

Kathryn Hixson

#### Descriptive prologue

Swirls of matter charged with unbridled energy whip around frantically then shoot off into the ether. Spindly bodies with long whiptails skit along the surface, then suddenly swarm together into a mass of buzzing angry anarchy. Wormlike strings wriggle and squirm, bumping along. Like strands of DNA they twist and merge into chugging lengths of bubbling genetic information. Blobby bits are tossed out from a central point, like termites quickly dispersing after their nest has been routed. Tiny grids, proudly organized, start to self-destruct, spontaneously unraveling into degenerate chaos. Then, suddenly, they reappear, but are changed, copies of former selves, but now armed with a glowering self-consciousness. Weird evolutions are everywhere. Clustering over a precipitous edge, a forest of spindly spears saves a gathering of specks from jumping off into oblivion. Scraggly clumps are slumped together, dirty and smelly. Cheery florals are wrenched from any coherence, unceremoniously dumped, heaped into a mess that is black like the night. Delicate circular bits calmly reproduce themselves, quietly growing, and growing and growing like a tumor. Frightening and sudden, hairy caterpillars scurry away from being squashed, but are unable to hide. Wispy wings of delicate webs flutter, drifting with the turbulence. Decrepit, distained webs languorously slope toward entropy, energized or invaded by tight wads of knotted order. Scraggly lines dance awkwardly, bumping into each other, awash and adrift. Everywhere, the sanity of order is threatened by a looming entropic dissolution, tinged with the reek of chaos.

#### Abstraction

The sweeping horizontal expanse of Anne Wilson's *Topologies* suggests the above description. But it is not a representation or a mere description of such forces. It is not topography, a map of specific localities with accurate and detailed facts. It is a topology, an abstracted consideration of spatial relationships which are always in motion: growth, evolution, and decay, from which "one can draw deductions as to its history," a science of place.<sup>1</sup> The subject of Wilson's *Topologies* -- the locales and events it examine -- are quite specific in terms of materiality. But in terms of translation into metaphorical abstraction, the subject remains fugitive, slithering and darting across the whiteness of the plane to defy any stability, or growing in spurts to include a multiplicity of meanings.

## Material Process

The material of which *Topologies* is made is also in flux, always responding to forces around it, its meaning multiplicitous and unstable. It is made of black lace, bits and pieces that Wilson has collected from antique stores and flea markets, some dating as far back as 1860, from historical handmade point and bobbin lace to machine-made fishnets from the 1920s to contemporary high-end laces manufactured in Belgium and France. Without any particular goal or composition in mind, after amassing a varied and voluminous collection, Wilson organizes the lace scraps into categories -- like types -- that are structurally and visually similar. Led perhaps by a curiosity about structure per se, she deconstructs each type, literally, by reducing it to base elements, unraveling the stuff to the point that it reveals the delicacy of its structure.

Wilson also scans her bits of lace into the computer and manipulates them electronically, further devolving them into new manifestations of line and structure. Introducing the further mediation of the graphic, digital representation of lace to formulate new possibilities of evolution, Wilson then hand-stitches the hybrids that result from her computer manipulations and adds them into the mix of found and deconstructed lace, in a fit of hastened evolutionary development. She further confuses the field as she responds to the growing morass by inventing new forms: knits, crochets, nets and stitches – results of physically handling her chosen material.

## Anti Un Form

Wilson's deconstructions are tenuously laid out over a white expanse, then strenuously pinned, like insects, to stay their development for purposes of phenomenological observation. The tension between order and disorder continues an artistic investigation going back to post minimal work from the early 1970s -- Robert Rauschenberg's invocation of an entropy box, Robert Morris's droopy felts, and Barry Le Va's scatter works. These artists took Jackson Pollock's all-over coverage of paint on canvas into a three dimensional space in which gravity and randomness determine form. Composition is not dictated by aesthetic decision-making, but left to natural forces. This abnegation of formal control to extra aesthetic non-artistic forces surfaced again in so-called abject and scatter art in the 1990s in the work of artists like Cady Noland, who piled six-packs of cheap beer around back-yard wire fences to present the aesthetics of American bourgeois life, and Karen Kilimnick who made a rambling installation called *I Don't Like Mondays, the Boomtown Rats, Shooting Spree, or Schoolyard Massacre*, about the crazed child murderer Laurie Dann. Wilson's *Topologies* takes the aesthetic of scatter beyond a simple rejection of historical form tied oppositionally to Modernism. Wilson assumes scatter as a compositional un-template, then lets the process of de/reconstruction begin to form into its own logic. Then, fixing the new rambling anti-structure with pins, she creates a new hybrid form, a formlessness arrested.

## Mad for it

Lace is frilly finery -- *punto in aria*, or "sketches in the air," as the Italians dubbed it. It is pure, autonomous decoration, without any need for a woven ground on which to sit. But as fragile as it is, each piece of lace is a unified whole, each part interdependent. This contradictory nature of lace, that it is the most delicate of substances, but the most unified in its structure, is perhaps part of its historic appeal. Lace is an abstraction of social forces, of labor, wealth, prestige, yet it is also a formal abstraction. Its lines and patterns mimic but never represent nature; it complements the body, either by framing the face (Spanish mantillas, Dutch ruffs, English cravats), or softening the body's edges with shawls and flounces, or fancifies everyday clothes into ethereal fairy-like fantasies. Like jewelry or gold, lace is clearly identifiable as a social measure. It makes the wearer more abstract -- the owner/wearer can be categorized as a type, representing a certain class.

Invented in the 16th century, in Italy and Flanders almost simultaneously, lace caught on like wildfire. The church, royalty, and the aristocracy became mad for its delicate tracings. At points in its 300-year history, so much money was being lavished on handmade lace that governments outlawed importation of foreign types. France resorted to importing Italian lace makers to make a French lace. Belgium lace was smuggled into England labeled *point d'Angleterre* to escape steep customs. Sumptuary laws limited the wearing of lace, but, like the designer drugs of today, those who could afford lace found ways to get it.

In the height of its popularity, lace smuggling -- running lace, it was called -- proliferated across Europe. Lace was transported illegally in baked pies, stuffed into turbans, or replaced cadaver parts in coffins. (In one scam, a well-fed French dog was taken to Belgium, starved, covered with lace and concealed beneath the hide of a larger dog, then sent home to France, taking the contraband with him.)

If you look at European portraits from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, lace is everywhere, from Catherine de Medici to Mary Queen of Scots, in Goya's Spanish royalties, and Rembrandt's staid sitters. (The authenticity of two Rembrandt pictures was recently challenged because the technique of painting lace was not considered up to the artist's standards.)

Lace, which had grown out of simple cuts in linen, reinforced with buttonhole stitches or knotted nets made for practical purposes, evolved in kicks and spurts. For several hundred years, it was handmade in workshops, nunneries, ladies' courts, and domestic abodes -- a cottage industry that turned into a vast network that served up goods coveted by the wealthy, fattened with the spoils of empire. But with the French Revolution of 1792 the ostentatious displays of the aristocracy were abruptly halted. Then, in 1818, someone figured out how to get a machine to replicate bobbin-lace techniques, and the gilded era of handmade lace was over.

But lace did not lose its symbolic value; it morphed to accommodate more democratic usage, the Puritan era, and the needs of Queen Victoria. The Queen's extravagant displays of white lace encouraged the spread of doilies throughout middle class English parlors, and her long period of mourning for Prince Albert popularized the black variety. Then in the twentieth century, machine-made lace continued to thrive, the white fit for brides and the black for ladies of the night.

### Bend over

One way to view Wilson's *Topologies* is to commit some time to it, sit on a bench and study its trajectories, as you might study the social history of lace itself, eye to eye, calmly and cerebrally accumulating knowledge of its many forms. The plane on which it sits could serve as a table, a place of communion, or a large desk on which to read and write. The black-on-white graphic form of the lace is like a text or diagram, explicating itself as the eye traces its various courses.

A scarier way to engage the piece is to walk around its lengthy perimeter, pausing periodically to bend over it for a closer look at the swirls of black thread. The piece's severe horizontality becomes activated, a force on your body which undercuts, undoes, undermines, and confuses your normal vertical stance. The horizontal plane could be a bed where intimacies are conducted, or a coffin, the black lace literally becoming the body for which we mourn.

Yves Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss discussion of Georges Bataille's version of horizontality can handily be transferred to our interaction with Wilson's *Topologies*. "Man is proud of being erect (having thus emerged from the animal state, the biological mouth-anus axis of which is horizontal) but this pride is founded on a repression."<sup>2</sup> The pure vision of the Impressionists and of high culture at large is vertical, the field of vision of the upright cognitive human. What is repressed by this intellectual uprightness, however, is the base materialism of the body: the

horizontality of sex and death. Pure verticality denies our more bestial nature. But as we bend over to enter Wilson's sputtering array, we return to the stance of the four-legged animal, breaking with our evolutionary development that has led to a vertical mouth-anus axis. Bending over, we violate the hierarchy of the visual over the material body.

Bois and Krauss also describe Bataille's notion of matter as "shit or laughter, or an obscene word or madness; whatever cuts all discussion short, whatever resists form."<sup>3</sup> *Topologies* is similarly full of Bataille's "expenditures," presenting a sort of scatology: "the science of that which is wholly other."<sup>4</sup> Wilson's pieces of lace pinned in dribbles and drabs or piles of accumulations resist a vertical, imposed, formal composition. Like Marcel Duchamp's *Standard Stoppages* or Pollock's drips, the material of the art is left to gravity, freed from a cultural propriety normally divorced from base bodily functions and earthly forces.

### Squashed spiders and high heels

While Wilson carries on in this antiformal tradition, if you will, her source material comes heavily laden with social meaning. Like Piero Manzoni's canned shit or Andy Warhol's step dance diagrams, it has already been mediated by the trappings of consumer culture. *Topologies* is more evocative of the moment that the high heel squashes the spider, a conjunction of making with its own symbolic construction.

Why is black lace so sexy? Is it that the graphic structure of black line "draws" a pattern over the skin, highlighting its body-ness, making its physicality overt? The serial or repetitive patterning of the lace conforms to the curves of the body, and the abstract pattern makes the body more abstract and therefore easier to fetishize. ("That is a sexy leg," as opposed to, "Look! Aunt Julie is wearing fishnet hose!") Conversely, the stretchy interdependency of lace causes the rigid patten to become fluid, and therefore exaggerates the curvature of the body. (Think of the single line of seamed hosiery caressing the back of the leg -- now that is sexy).

Black has been culturally constructed: the forbidden, the darkness, fear of the unknown. But black lace conceals as it reveals. So if black lace can reveal the body through its holes, the body is read as mediated through darkness (the prostitute) while white lace reveals the body through purity, goodness and light. (Though it may be pointed out that lacemakers in the eighteenth century, furiously passing bobbins back and forth across the pillow in their laps, suffered from the darkness of their workshops and the exacting chemical cleanliness of their environment, controlled to ensure the absolute whiteness of their product. Conversely, an anecdote of lacemaking traces a situation of a young highly skilled lace maker who was reduced to working on black lace after it was learned she was misbehaving sexually.) But black lace was not always associated with fallen women; Spanish women popularly mixed black lace made in Chantilly with white. Perhaps black lace became black-listed as it drifted into low life and eventually into the contemporary pornography scene, where, more than ever, symbolism is everything.

### Bad Evolution

The progressions of *Topologies*'s like-type lace deconstructions and evolutions evoke the microscopic biological model of growth and decay, a macroscopic expanse of urban development, as well as a cosmology of the infinite heavens. The strings, piles, and whorls have a pleasing logicity and graphic coherence, but each is ominous, foreboding, as if things have gone awry. The virus has begun to mutate insidiously, the cancer is out of control, the shantytowns are mushrooming, the traffic jams impenetrable. The hurricane is nearing in imminent swirl, and the comet is speeding down to earth. This dis-ease rises from Wilson's un-natural intervention into the process. Her computer manipulation of the images of lace and subsequent material riffs of these representations are more like genetic tampering, bad cloning, imposed Modernism, cloud seeding or even greater cataclysmic events that mess

with the “natural” order. Wilson’s interjection of both the cold hard digital machine and her own specific knowledge and virtuosity of skill makes for some weird mutants and scary hybrids.

This perversion relates back to the material itself, the black lace. Its symbolic history tied to puritanical grief of lascivious sexuality has been perverted by contemporary subcultures to various ends. Punks, Vivienne Westwood and now recent couture fashion have used black lace to deface that which it once represented: high culture and extreme propriety. Look up “black lace” on the Web and the first sites that pop up are of lesbian pornography. Wilson’s “bad evolutions,” like lace itself, turn into new beings that are no longer tied to the past.

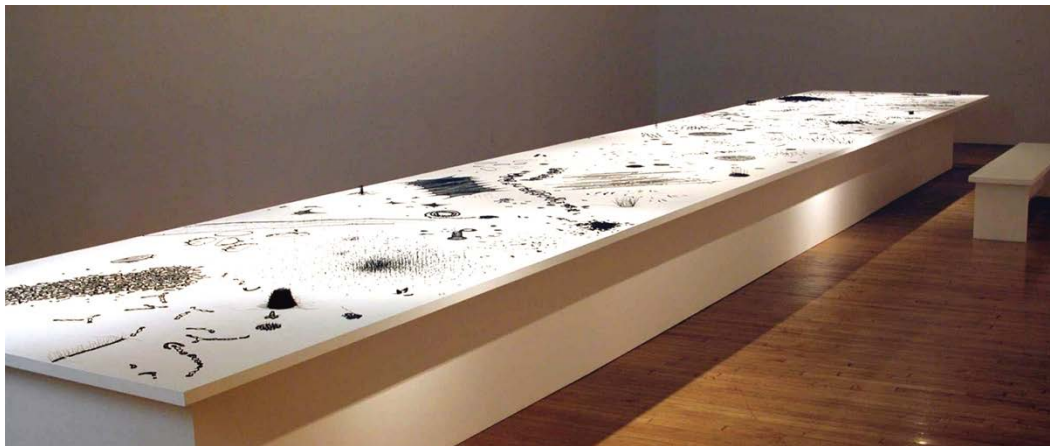
*Topologies* is parallel to the world of the Internet as well. Like Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomes, pockets of activities appear randomly, develop, spread, interact, pervert, and evolve. Wilson has pointed out that the basic terminology we use to describe this type of electronic communication is borrowed from threads and needles and bobbins: web, net, stitched, interlaced.

### Conclusions

Topology, in mathematics, studies objects in space as relational to other objects, as opposed to placing them in a fixed Euclidean set of universal coordinates. To make it more complicated, the objects are potentially always in flux, moving or morphing simultaneously, always effecting the environment around them, like two growing planets in perpetual motion, their gravitational pull on each other changing constantly. In this sense, Anne Wilson’s *Topologies* is like a topological study: the formal composition, historical resonance of the material and the interventionist processes are relational and unfixed, effected by each component as well as by those viewers who bend down to engage with it. Continuing to grow, physically increasing in size and traveling to new sites, *Topologies* will further confuse and fertilize its topological position.

*Kathryn Hixson is an art writer, educator, and former editor of New Art Examiner.*

1. Topography is to topology as geography is to geology. In physics, topology is the study of the relative relationships of things (that are always in flux) to one another, as opposed to a Euclidean system, which is dependent on absolute measures and measurable distance.
2. Yve Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A Users Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 26.
3. *Ibid* 29.
4. *Ibid* 31.



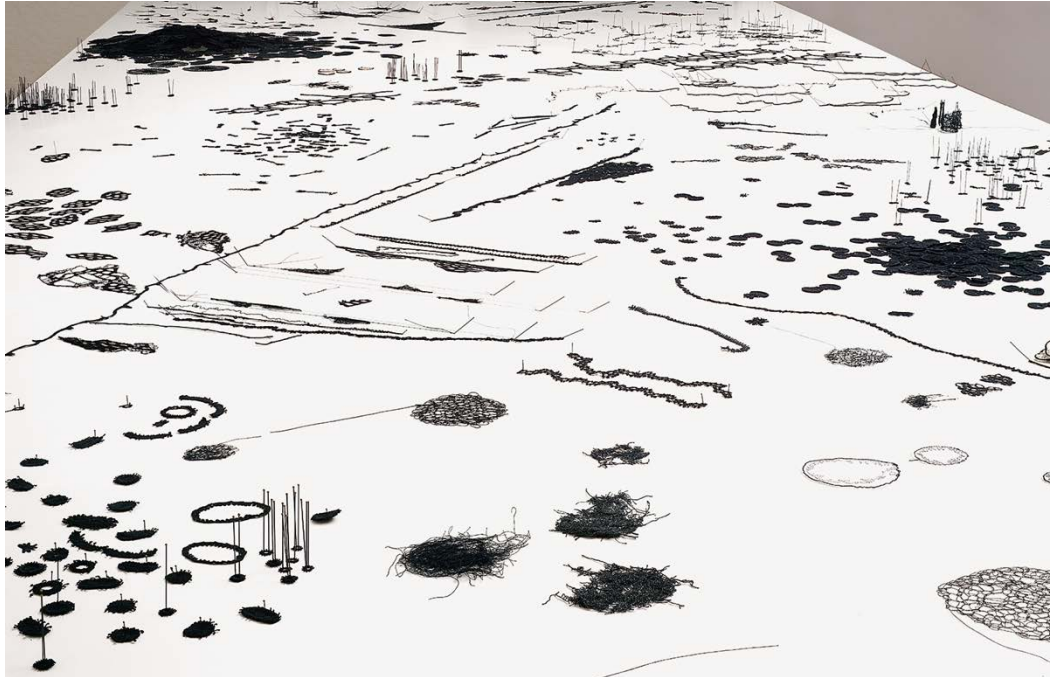
Anne Wilson, *Topologies* (9-12.02), 2002, *Anne Wilson: Unfoldings*, MassArt, Boston



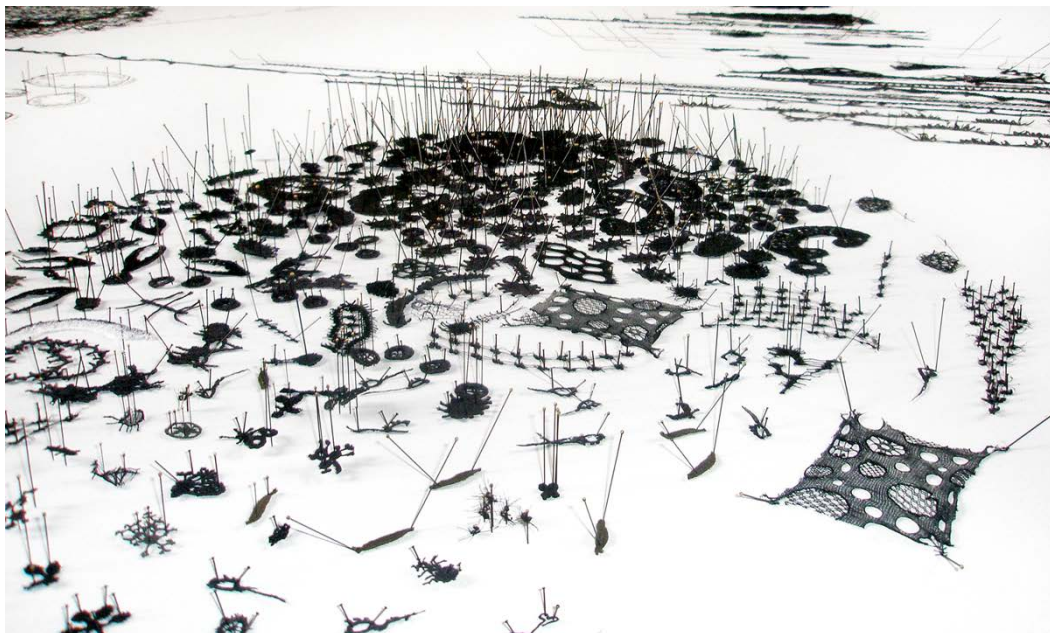
Anne Wilson, *Topologies*, detail



Anne Wilson, *Topologies (3-5.02)*, large detail, 2002 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art



Anne Wilson, *Topologies* (3-5.02), large detail, 2002 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art



Anne Wilson, *Topologies, Made at the V&A*, 2008  
Lace, thread, insect pins, 54 x 74 inches overall  
Collection Victoria & Albert Museum, London

*Topologies, Made at the V&A* extends from the larger *Topologies* installation created for the debut of the exhibition "Out of the Ordinary" at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 2007-08. Wilson created this smaller iteration for the traveling portion of the exhibition. Made in the spring of 2008 in a studio at the V&A, this piece responds to the floral motifs in textiles from India and South East Asia that surrounded Wilson each day as she worked at the museum. As a contemporary work of art, *Topologies: Made at the V&A* was installed alongside historical laces in the V&A's Lace Gallery.



Anne Wilson, *Topologies* (9-12.02), 2002, Anne Wilson: *Unfoldings*, MassArt, Boston  
Viewers bend over to experience artwork



Anne Wilson, *Topologies* (11.07-2.08), 2007-08, within exhibition "Out of the Ordinary," Victoria & Albert Museum, London