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## An Interview with Anne Wilson

Aimee Resnick (she/her) - April 23, 2023

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Anne Wilson installing *Topologies*

Anne Wilson is a Chicago-based artist who creates sculpture, drawing, performance and video using domestic materials like linens, sheets, hair, glass, lace, and thread. In her work, she engages themes of loss, family, and the private. In 2022, she opened the Davis Street Drawing Room. In this project, she invites artists, writers, historians, and students to explore her textile archives and delve into her artistic process. In January, I had the pleasure of visiting her studio. Today, we sat down to discuss the Davis Street Drawing Room, the intrinsic meanings of fabric, and meditations of domesticity.

**NAR: You prepared a written statement for today. Can you begin by reading your piece?**

**Wilson:** Of course. Although I've worked between drawing and sculpture and performance, my artwork has always been grounded in a textile language. For many years, I've maintained a studio-based practice of material drawing - stitching into found textiles, creating exhibitions for my Chicago gallery, Rhona Hoffman. And at the same time, I work in a more participatory and socially engaged form of artmaking – like the performances of walking weaving warps in public spaces. The Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and The Drawing Center in New York City both hosted public performances of this kind.

My newest project, the Davis Street Drawing Room, brings together so many of the sources of my artwork across drawing, sculpture, and performance. This new experimental art project is public-facing and transforms my largest personal studio in Evanston into an archive of lace fragments, rolled linens, mended cloth, handmade glass bobbins, thread spools, and early hair and cloth drawing studies from my art practice. Together with project manager Sofía Fernández Díaz, we invite small groups of artists, writers, and historians to experience these sources – with the invitation to look closely and slowly over a period of time – and to draw, to write, to photograph, to read and research. Both digital microscopes and hand magnifiers are available in the Drawing Room, as well as paper and drawing tools. The way in which the focus of slow, close observation of textiles opens to complexity, critical thinking, and invention is the primary thesis of the experience.

All visitors to the Drawing Room are invited to create a visual or text-based “study” to share as part of a growing collection within the archive. Evolving concurrently with the use of the space as an active room to draw in, this collection of responses is contained within drawers and displays and a soon-to-be-made website. In the lineage of art practices that foreground the relationship between artist and audience, these participant studies shape the collective meaning-making at the core of this project.



Dorie Millerson looking at lace in the Davis Street Drawing Room

**NAR: Thank you for the statement! Let's start with your home itself: can you tell us the history of the house and its significance to your practice?**

**Wilson:** Sure. 1302 Davis Street, which is my home and studio, was originally built in 1887 as part of a Victorian-style double house. I speculate that where my studio resides, now the contemporary art space we're calling the Drawing Room, may have actually been a room for visitors to "withdraw" to, a drawing room at the turn of the century.

Many of the found textiles I've used as critical sources for my work came to me through family: my grandmothers, my aunts, my cousins. Most of it is used, some of it saved because it was special. There was great pride in making. A lot of the cloth was hand embroidered. And these textiles, many made for the home, are from the very same time period as the architecture of the Davis Street building. There are interesting histories to share about these intersections between architecture, textiles, and my own biography and artwork.

This past summer, I met with the archivist of the Evanston History Center. With her help, I was able to discern which of all the many different histories of this building were documented within the archives and which evolved as myth. So in the late 1800s, this building was a boarding house run by a woman proprietor. In 1909, the exterior was renovated by the early modernist architect, Walter Burley Griffin, to a prairie school style facade of beige stucco with dark brown horizontal trim. When we purchased our home, the interior had not been renovated. It still holds features of the 1880s with evidence of single rooms for boarders, original moldings, light fixtures, and a skylight made of stained glass. One can imagine many of my family textiles occupying the rooms in this house.

**NAR: The first action visitors take upon visiting your home is to remove their shoes. Why do you value this separation of inside from outside? How does invoking domesticity prepare visitors to engage?**

**Wilson:** In a practical way, because we live in very messy, wet weather, it helps protect the floors. But also I think that removing your shoes and being offered a clean pair of warm socks provides an aspect of care. You know, caring both for the house and for the warmth of participants' feet.

There's a series of events in welcoming people to the space. We ask them to slow down; to remove outerwear and shoes; to move into the kitchen space where coats and bags and coffee cups are left; to be offered fresh filtered water; to sign in to a visitor registry, and to be reminded that the entire second floor of the building is available over the three hour period. There's structure to the afternoon, and there's a request for care back, I suppose.



Sofia Fernández Diaz working on the Participant Archive

**NAR: Inside the home, I remember gentle music wafting from various alcoves and cubbyholes. How did you select your ambient playlist, and how is it significant to you?**

**Wilson:** Sofía Fernández Díaz, who is the project manager of the Davis Street Drawing Room, is a recent graduate of my department, Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I was one of her advisors. She has her own robust art career alongside jobs like this.

When working with me on the Drawing Room, we talked about how we enjoy certain kinds of repetitive processes in our art practice. We also love music, love sound. We talked about the possibility of playlists contributing to how visitors adopt similar repetitive thinking.

I've been very interested in contemporary music by composers like Steve Reich. There's a whole range of musicians in his generation centered around minimalism, repetitions and repeats. It's a systematic way of building sounds that parallels a textile-making process. I've also been really interested in Ravi Shankar and his genre of music that prepares one for meditation.

Sofía then started preparing a playlist with my recommendations alongside her own ideas. It was jointly formed. We always ask if visitors wish to hear a soundtrack. Not everyone has the same comfort level with sound. Some people prefer silence. It's a negotiation to help visitors slow down and embrace a focusing mechanism.



Group session in the Davis Street Drawing Room, left to right: Delaina Doshi, Kate Morrnick, CJ Mattia, and Lily Lloyd Burkhalter

**NAR: How do people's preconceived, every-day notions of fabric affect their interactions with individual textiles in the Drawing Room?**

**Wilson:** We know fabric so intimately: through the clothes we wear, the sheets we sleep on. This familiarity allows cloth to be easily dismissed, even though we hold an internal somatic knowledge that can be heightened through art.

We have three digital microscopes and many handheld magnifiers in the Drawing Room. We also have thread counters. The opportunity to look at textiles through magnification isn't available to most people practicing outside textile conservation. Magnification opens up new possibilities for looking and thinking - for drawing and photographing and writing. Fabric becomes unique and complex; other worlds are revealed for contemplation.

**NAR: Would any everyday object hold the same significance when magnified, or is this unique to textile?**

**Wilson:** It depends on what the object is, but textiles are an especially good subject for magnification. What may appear to be an opaque, continuous surface can unfold into a biome of texture, form, and structure. Threads move up and down and over and across in a multitude of different configurations. There's also a textural difference. A strand of hair looks different from linen or cotton fiber. And a silk filament is different from any of them. Magnification opens to structures you can't see with your naked eye.



**NAR: Your personal studio resides on the third floor, accessible only by ladder. How did you come to create this space? In what manner does solitude inform your artistic practice?**

**Wilson:** Before my move to Davis Street, I had a studio storefront in Rogers Park with a separate small apartment in the same building. So I had a separation between my artwork and my personal life, which I really liked.

After a year of looking, this Davis Street house became available. I really do like old things. We didn't want to change it, but I wanted to make this new, big open space into a place to live and work and have a family life.

The third floor has the same footprint as the second floor. It was easy enough to ask a friend to insert a ladder stair so that I could duplex the 2 front rooms of each floor as studio spaces, separate from the family part of the house.



Drawings from the Participant Archive of the Davis Street Drawing Room, left to right: Susan Peterson, Robert Earl Paige, Rin Visaney Scholtens, and Sofia Gabriel

**NAR: You invite visitors to create studies on the drawing room. How is this interaction with the drawing room important to its meaning? What study has been most evocative to you?**

**Wilson:** There are many incredibly beautiful visual drawings by accomplished artists in the archive. A new facet of contribution for me was the participation of writers. That was the recommendation of my former studio assistant, Lily Lloyd Burkhalter, who's a French-American writer. She really encouraged me to invite writers and share the same kinds of prompts.

Jeffrey Wolf is a writer and faculty member at Columbia College Chicago. He hosts a wonderful public reading program in Edgewater, called "An Inconvenient Hour." About a week after his visit, he shared a text called "The Handkerchief." It was an essay extending from the starched white men's handkerchiefs on display in the Drawing Room.

I've collected these handkerchiefs for years. They're in various states of fragmentation that reveal stages of wear. They're interesting to look at and think about. Jeff wrote a story about his relationship with his grandfather. In the story, he's a young boy who was very allergic and not managing well. So his grandfather would always take a clean, folded handkerchief from his back pocket and offer it to him. It's written exceptionally well. I cringed and I laughed. There are many stories, many really interesting stories that activate the use function of these textile sources based on the writer's own history and connection to textiles through lived experiences and different cultural backgrounds.

And the range of visual responses constantly inspires - from graphite drawings and rubbings, to color pencil and marker drawings, tracings, cyanotype prints, 3D prints on wood and acrylic, collage, photographs, and microscopic imaging. The participation of others in the Davis Street Drawing Room archive truly shapes the collective meaning-making at the core of this project.

We're currently making a project website for the Drawing Room. We expect it to be online about the time of the publication of this article.

*(Editor's note: you can now access the archive [here.](#))*



Excavation table in the Davis Street Drawing Room

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**NAR: Fragility is a common theme among your textile sources. When handled, many of these items don't have the same objective function as in the past. In what ways is use intrinsic to textile? Is fabric tethered to its function, or does it have a separate material value?**

**Wilson:** We could talk for hours on that question. I'll just make some brief remarks.

Textiles are often created for use. At the same time, they are constructed surfaces we extend through supplementary techniques like embroidery or dyeing or printing. Textiles are carriers of skill based knowledge, concepts and expression, aesthetic tradition, and familial and cultural histories; they can express both personal and cultural narratives.

Today, textiles are a robust participant in contemporary art. They're being made by artist hands in studio settings for gallery exhibition, they're being made by collective and collaborative groups, and they're being made as part of public-facing and socially-engaged practices.

Looking at a tapestry on a wall, we combine our conscious awareness with unconscious recognition to evoke meaning.

**NAR: We usually end with something silly. If you were a fabric, what kind of cloth would you be?**

**Wilson:** I think a really old, well-washed, rather supple linen.

*Please note: this interview has been edited for length and clarity.*