

Anne Wilson

ARTIST INTERVIEW

Anne Wilson is a contemporary textile artist and Professor of Art in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her artwork has been exhibited at museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Arts & Design, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, and more. She is currently working on a new commission performance/sculpture for The Drawing Center in New York City in fall 2014. *TAC* checked in with her about her creative process and her upcoming projects.

What is your relationship with textiles? How does incorporating these materials help illuminate your concepts and meanings?

Although I've worked between sculpture and drawing, performance and video, my work has consistently extended from the methodologies and content of textiles or fiber. I've always felt that the textile was a particularly powerful material subject. In the hands of a maker, it can represent conformity to social norms as well as resistance and personal agency. And as a discipline, textile or fiber affords myriad interdisciplinary liaisons to old and new technologies, and to diverse cultural histories and aesthetic forms. In my own artwork I've used the materials of table linen, bed sheets, lace, human hair, thread, and wire to explore themes of time, loss, and public and social rituals.

Tell us about studying feminist theory at George School. How did a Quaker education influence your work and shape your ideas about Feminism, and the artists you paid most attention to?

My mother's side of my family is Quaker; she and others went to George School and I was a willing student. It was in religion classes in George School that we read and discussed *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan and practiced passive resistance role-playing as part of the Quaker belief in non-violence. The focus and discussions were about negotiation and facilitation as mediators of conflict, about equal rights for both men and women, and about cultural inclusion. I believe these three years of my life were formative to my politics as an artist.

As an art student at Cranbrook Academy of Art (BFA) and then California College of the Arts (MFA), I was influenced by the work of contemporary

artists who used fiber materiality coming from diverse positions. These artists included Ritzki and Peter Jacobi, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Olga de Amaral, Lenore Tawney, Sheila Hicks, Claire Zeisler, Ed Rossbach, Antoni Tapies, Eva Hesse, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude (among others). Some of this new work exploited sculptural and haptic capacities of pliable materials in asserting monumental scale, immersive tactile environments, and properties of absorbency, mobility, and collapse.

And in my lifetime as a practicing artist, I also deeply acknowledge the contributions of feminist, queer, multi-cultural, post-colonial, and post-modern theory in opening the art world to greater inclusion.

Can you explain your artistic process?

My practice is concept-driven and research-based, often requiring months of research prior to the making of a work. This research often involves hands-on material experimentation in my studio, and travel to other studios, libraries and archives. I often work with studio interns from my school, so my studio sometimes feels like an extension of the classroom.

You experiment often with large-scale while remaining focused on close detail; how does this affect the planning of a piece or a concept?

One such research-based project that is both large in scale and very detailed is an expanding installation project called *Topologies*, first shown in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and re-presented at five other venues. *Topologies* is composed of hundreds of black lace parts,

which are held to a horizontal surface with insect pins, as a form both sculpture and materialized or physical drawing. The found laces come from all over the world and high value is placed on historical study of lace alongside translations of the found into handmade parts through scanning and rematerializing fragments. So there are certain constants in subsequent iterations of Topologies and always new decisions within a very improvisational method.

When Topologies was at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2007-08, students used the installation as a kind of study table, looking closely to draw from and make films.

In your piece, *Local Industry*, you invite visitors at a Knoxville Museum to participate in the process and creation of a piece. How did you arrive at this concept?

I arrived at this concept through research of the location of the Knoxville Museum of Art in eastern Tennessee. I realized the museum was located in the historic heartland of woven textiles and locations in the Southeast that represented missions of economic self-empowerment through hand weaving. The Penland School in North Carolina began as a cottage weaving industry in the early 20th century; the Arrowcraft Weavers was an outgrowth of an early settlement school which then developed into the present day Arrowmont; a weaving labor program was developed at Berea College, which was founded in 1855 as the first interracial and coeducational college in the South; the John Campbell Folk School, and others. The legacy of the modernist weaver, Anni Albers, is situated in the South, Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

In addition to these histories of hand weaving, the Southeast is also an historic center of industrial textile production in the United States. And yet the U.S. textile industry is presently in a crisis of production as many factories have moved offshore and theories abound as to the impact of the loss of skill-based knowledge (Richard Sennett, among others). So, in this historically rich geographic context, I wanted to create an exhibition around the subject of labor – art labor, cultural labor--and not with the presumption of reconciling or resolving the complications and tensions of labor, but more to offer spaces of participation and meditation on this subject.

For two years prior to the exhibition, “Anne Wilson: Wind/Rewind/Weave” (January 22-April 10, 2010), I made numerous site visits to Knoxville and individual weaving studios in surrounding areas. I knew my own background as a weaver would allow me to engage in shoptalk and more in-depth conversations about the work of other weavers. I also worked with student assistants to compile research. And a catalog was eventually produced. For me, there was a kind of conflation of pedagogy and art practice in creating this project—the research aspects of Local Industry really merge teaching-thinking and art-thinking.

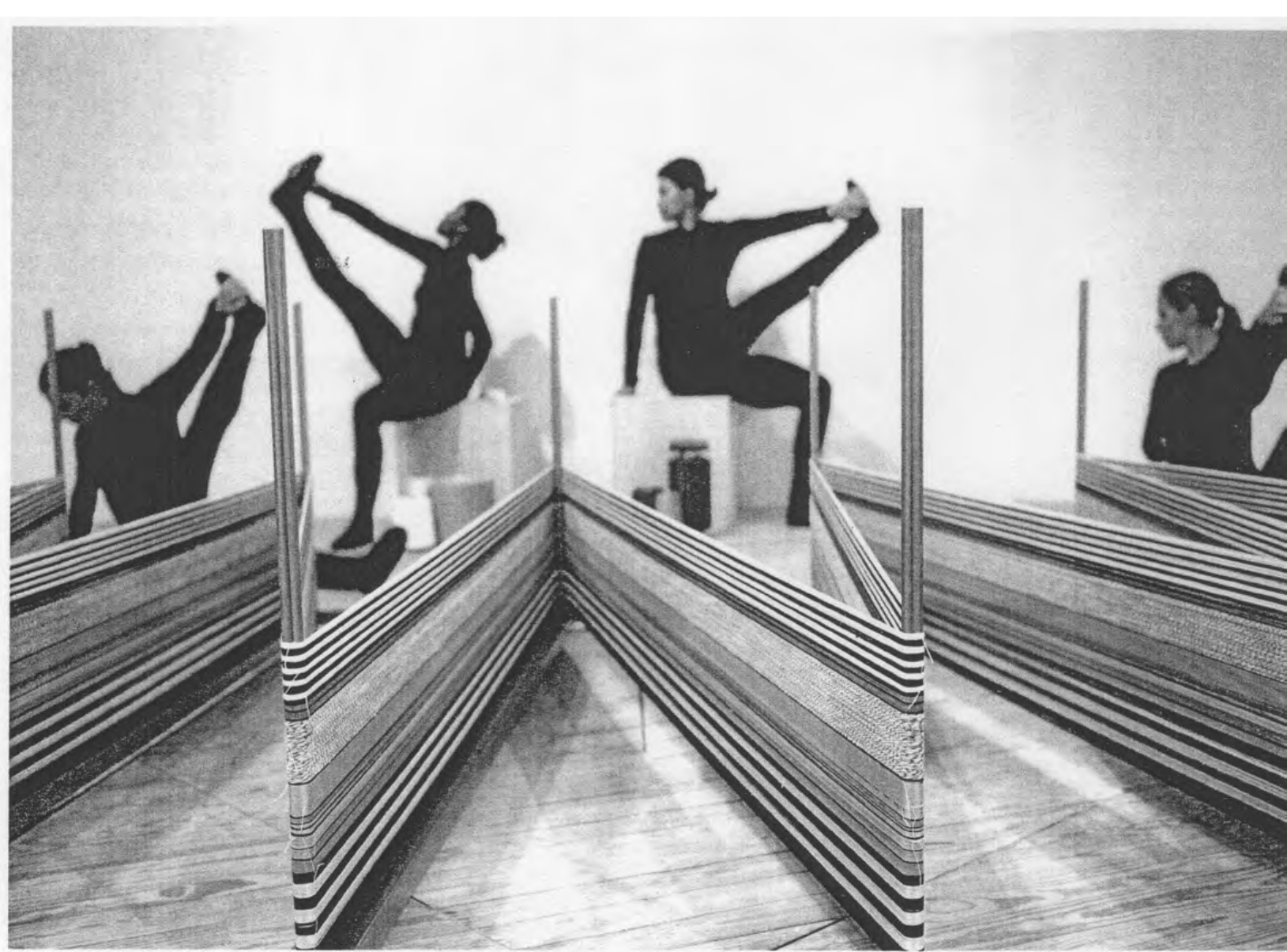
The Reading Room was a separate space within the Knoxville Museum exhibition and included videos and books about contemporary performance art and art theory, textile history, weaving histories, and labor histories in the U.S. As well, much of our studio research was made available on-line and can currently be accessed at: <http://www.annewilsonartist.com/local-industry-overview.html>

What was your goal for the audience and participant interaction?

I hoped, because of the rich studio and factory production traditions in the Southeast, that there might be a particularly receptive audience and engaged participants for such a museum factory project as Local Industry. Indeed, 79 experienced weavers participated in 1-3 day sessions, collectively weaving the 76-foot length of cloth over a three month period. And 2,100 museum-going individuals signed the “archive of production,” participating primarily in the winding of bobbins. The completed cloth bolt is now part of the Knoxville Museum’s permanent collection and when shown it will always be accompanied by a complete archive of everyone who participated.

What is your hope for viewers to experience?

Alongside valuing and exposing process as part of the experience--both the social and visually commanding aspects of process – another goal of Local Industry was to value skill, to create a well-woven and highly visually considered bolt of cloth. And skillful it was. When the first section of the cloth was removed from the loom it looked like a compilation of personal bests by these experienced weavers.



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Above: Wind-Up: Walking the Warp Houston,
2010 Performance and sculpture, with Hope Stone
Dance, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
Photo: Simon Gentry



Above: Topologies: Made at the V&A, detail, 2008

Lace, thread, insect pins

54" x 74"

Collection Victoria & Albert Museum, London

In the spring of 2011, the Museum opened a second exhibition just of the finished cloth, presented horizontally, flat out on a platform. So, museum viewers had both the experience of production of the cloth as well as the visuality of the final work. Interestingly, the Local Industry Cloth was borrowed by the Whitworth museum in Manchester, England, to be part of another exhibition in 2012, attesting to the integrity and visual presence of this cloth as an art object.

When developing your conceptual and “walking” pieces, how do textiles play their part in your thought process?

With the walking pieces, we are performing the infrastructure of a textile making process. The choreography is based on the actions of constructing of a weaving warp – “walking” a warp is one of the very elemental ways in which a weaving warp is made in many cultures.

Thinking through an interactive group process is always an important goal of these performative projects – being thoughtful about incorporating exercise, spaced rotations, and ongoing feedback. And as a performative group, we’re aware of the complicated issues surrounding textile production today (the human rights of workers, living wages, freedom to voice grievances). In these walking performances we’re forming our own micro-political team, working from the inside of a process and through our direct physical participation to think about time, labor, art and cultural production. Writer Lydia Matthews uses a term called “participatory knowledge,” a term with a lineage to Buddhism.

How much do your surroundings inform your process of creating a walking piece?

Each walking project begins with a different set of criteria based on historic and cultural histories of place and the physical aspects of the exhibition space. At the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston I worked with the Houston-based contemporary dance ensemble called Hope Stone, using all donated surplus fiber from U.S. textile mills. I think of that color and stripe pattern as a conjunction, or mashup textile, referencing West African hand-woven cloth and commercially woven beach stripes.

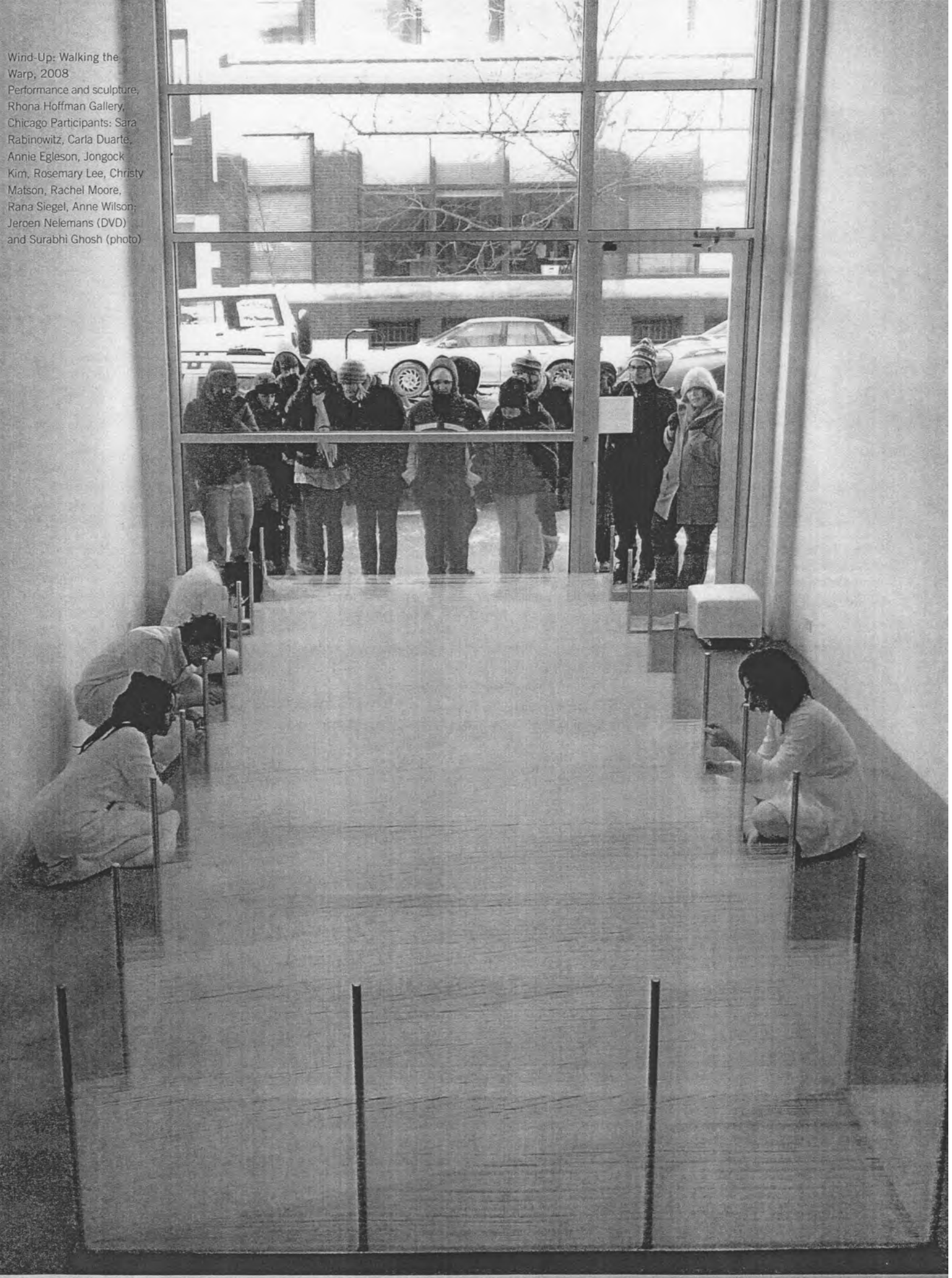
At the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, England, I worked with young professional dancers (ages 13 – 16) from the Center for Advanced Training and student dyers at Manchester Metropolitan University. As a comment on the absence of textile production in NW England (once the heart of the Industrial Revolution), this performance involved only the accumulations and repetitions of movement of eighteen dancers. The thread was absent. The dancers’ movement itself, metaphorically, became both a textile and a soft machine.

What can we expect from your upcoming walking piece at The Drawing Center, which debuts on September 12?

My new walking project is a commission for The Drawing Center, part of a fall group exhibition of sixteen artists entitled “Thread Lines.” Curator Joanna Kleinberg Romanow writes: “This exhibition disabuses the idea that drawing is simply putting pen to paper, framing it instead as an open-ended act in which lines can be woven, sewn, stitched, knit, even enacted.” The exhibition opens on September 12th, and closes on December 14, 2014.

For this exhibition, I am creating a new walking performance entitled “To Cross (Walking New York).” Relating to weaving choreography, the work engages the four structural columns in the main gallery space of The Drawing Center. Related to Chicago and Houston performances, the first portion of the exhibition will be a slow durational performance, then resulting in a still sculpture. The movement involves slow walking around the columns with spools of thread, exchanging the thread in the middle of the 4 columns so that a cross – a weaving cross – is made. In our initial research we discovered that The Drawing Center site, the 35 Wooster Street building, was originally built in the 1860’s for the “Positive Motion Loom Company” so we are, in fact, warping a kind of hypothetical weaving loom in a space with deep weaving history! ■

Wind-Up: Walking the
Warp, 2008
Performance and sculpture,
Rhona Hoffman Gallery,
Chicago Participants: Sara
Rabinowitz, Carla Duarte,
Annie Egleston, Jongock
Kim, Rosemary Lee, Christy
Matson, Rachel Moore,
Rana Siegel, Anne Wilson;
Jeroen Nelemans (DVD)
and Surabhi Ghosh (photo)



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