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Martha Wilson's Algorithmic Performative in Context

ABSTRACT While working at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) as an English instructor in the early 1970s, American artist Martha Wilson enacted a series of critical interventions within the algorithmic protocols of conceptual art. Situated at the confluence of conceptual and protofeminist currents and navigating the interstices of the legendarily marginal NSCAD, Wilson's work of this period substituted a dissident repertoire of embodied actions for the abstract forms and logical routines enshrined in both mainstream conceptualism and early computer art. Wilson thereby exposed the gendered discontents of nascent algorithmic visuality—its normative taxonomies and universalizing occlusion of difference. Wilson's acts of resistance resonate today in the low-tech tactical interventions of post-internet artists.

While Wilson's early production has previously been interpreted as foreshadowing Judith Butler's speculations on gender performativity, this article recontextualizes Wilson's engagement with the theatrical sociology of Erving Goffman in relation to nascent algorithmic models of human interaction employed by the military-industrial field of game theory. Wilson's creative adaptation of Goffman's descriptions of the behavioral routines of everyday life emerges as a parallel manifestation of the Cold War think tank aesthetics excavated by Pamela M. Lee. Goffman's applications of game theory historicize Wilson's exploration of gender roles to a pre-Butlerian moment, establishing previously overlooked continuities between Wilson's algorithmic investigations and the contemporaneous game-theoretical concerns of her NSCAD instructor David Askevold.

KEYWORDS Martha Wilson, algorithmic culture, conceptual art, Erving Goffman, game theory, David Askevold

To many observers in the early 1970s, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax appeared to fulfill Marshall McLuhan's thesis that contemporary information networks are generative of "centres-without-margins."¹ Located at the geographical periphery of North America, the isolated college quickly established itself as an unlikely hub for pedagogical innovation following the appointment of conceptual wunderkind Garry Neill Kennedy as president in 1967. Navigating the interstices of this legendarily marginal institution and lacking the affordances of a conventional fine arts training, artist Martha Wilson enacted a series of critical interventions within the algorithmic protocols of conceptual art anticipatory of more recent tactics of digital resistance. Today, Wilson's interpolation of the gendered body within the purified

1. Marshall McLuhan, "Introduction," in Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (1951; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), xiii.



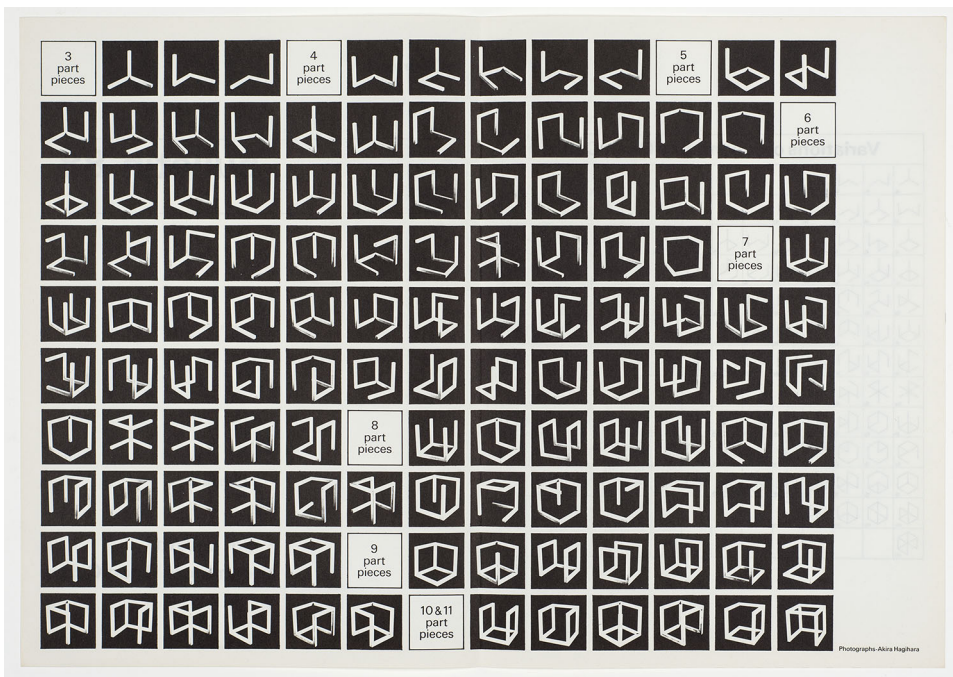
A Portfolio of Models (1974) by Martha Wilson; courtesy Martha Wilson and P·P·O·W, New York.

permutational syntax favored by her male peers at NSCAD also complicates prevailing functionalist analogies between early conceptualism and digital art.

Wilson's early production illuminates her resistant relationship to dominant articulations of the algorithmic. The fleshy grid of *Breast Forms Permuted* (1972) is illustrative of the artist's interventions within the algorithmic logic of hegemonic conceptualism in its eponymous substitution of the gendered body for the autonomous forms manipulated by conceptual prototypes, for which the late modernist vocabulary of Minimalism remained an enduring referent. *A Portfolio of Models* (1974) extends Wilson's embodied riposte to hegemonic conceptualism into a performative investigation of the socialized routines of gender expression. In this series, the artist enacts a typology of gendered roles whose attributes are subversively treated like the formal variables in a Sol LeWitt wall drawing, or the linear elements permuted by a computer-generated drawing by Manfred Mohr.

Wilson's early engagement with the sociology of Erving Goffman as a framework for conceptualizing social roles and gender illuminates Cold War-era applications of game theory as unfolding an embodied computational epistemology foreshadowing, but also diverging from, Colin Koopman's description of how historic processes of datafication produced what he terms "informational persons."² In particular, the artist's proto-

2. Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 4.



Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes (1974) by Sol Lewitt; © Estate of Sol Lewitt (© Visual Arts-CARCC, 2023); courtesy RKD–Netherlands Institute for Art History.

Butlerian destabilization of gender binaries troubled the incipient algorithmic imperative to categorize or format subjects in a manner foreshadowing the critical inhabitation of taxonomic and procedural slippages that Legacy Russell celebrates in her manifesto of glitch feminism.³ Like contemporary glitch artists, Wilson’s early work turned “fail[ing] at forms” into a critical imperative.

Lee Rodney and Jayne Wark have illuminated Wilson’s early production as interrogating the performativity of gender. However, what also bears examining is Wilson’s adaptation of Goffman’s articulation of social roles as algorithmic routines resembling the actions of hypothetical players modeled by game theory. Distinctions between Judith Butler’s discursive performance theory and Goffman’s theatrical but equally algorithmic descriptions of social interaction come into focus through the latter thinker’s engagements with game theory, a field also explored by Wilson’s NSCAD instructor David Askevold. Where Askevold employed game theory to critique American imperialism at the peak of the Vietnam War, Wilson adapted game-theoretical constructions of self and society to renegotiate the gender inequities of the art world. Paying attention to continuities as well as distinctions between Wilson’s early work and that of her NSCAD colleagues serves to historicize and contextualize Wilson’s investigations.

3. For an etymology of the word “glitch,” see Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2020), 28.

To study the algorithmic dimensions of visual culture first begs the question: What is an algorithm? Ed Finn approaches the study of cultural computation through a productively expansive, medium-agnostic definition of algorithm as “a recipe, an instruction set, a sequence of tasks.”⁴ Finn’s is one of several recent accounts of algorithmic culture to adopt critical methods drawn from the humanities.⁵ Christiane Paul traces the origins of contemporary algorithmic methodologies in the visual arts to the instruction-based procedures employed by Dadaist artists and their Fluxus and conceptual heirs, arguing that, “the basis of any form of computer art is the instruction as a conceptual element.”⁶ Similarly, Grant D. Taylor proposes that the instruction-based art of LeWitt mobilized an algorithmic logic functionally homologous to the command-based operations executed by early computer artists such as Mohr and A. Michael Noll to generate serial permutations of defined formal relationships and values.⁷ However, this apparent isomorphism obscures the divergent political meanings that were attached to computer art and conceptualism, and which are urgently in need of unpacking today.

Where Lucy Lippard influentially framed conceptual art as “a product of, or fellow traveler with, the political ferment of the times,” Taylor points to a *New York Herald Tribune* review of the inaugural exhibition of computer art, held at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1965, as indicative of critical consensus in this period in its dismissal of the works on view as “cold and soulless.”⁸ Critics’ negative reception of early computer art foreshadowed a general disenchantment with art-and-technology projects from 1970 onward reflective of heightened popular awareness of the military applications of new technologies in the Vietnam War.⁹ Nonetheless, Taylor represents early computer artists as “a small band of likeminded artists and scientists” bound by shared utopian ambitions, for which contemporary reviewers simply lacked an adequate critical apparatus.¹⁰

The celebratory tone of Taylor’s survey of historic computer art minimizes the stakes of political representation—or lack thereof—in para-computational practices of the 1960s and ’70s. However, Taylor’s parallel research on women artists as key to the development and dissemination of digital art during the same period retrieves a longer subterranean history of women’s involvement in computing that serves as a partial corrective. Taylor notes that programming as a professional field had been dominated by women since the 1940s due to its associations with historically gendered forms of

4. Ed Finn, *What Algorithms Want: Imagination in the Age of Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 17.

5. Similarly, in *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, Tung-Hui Hu insists that digital infrastructure is “a cultural phenomenon” open to discursive analysis. Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), xx. See also Ted Striphas, “Algorithmic Culture,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 4-5 (2015): 395-412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577392>.

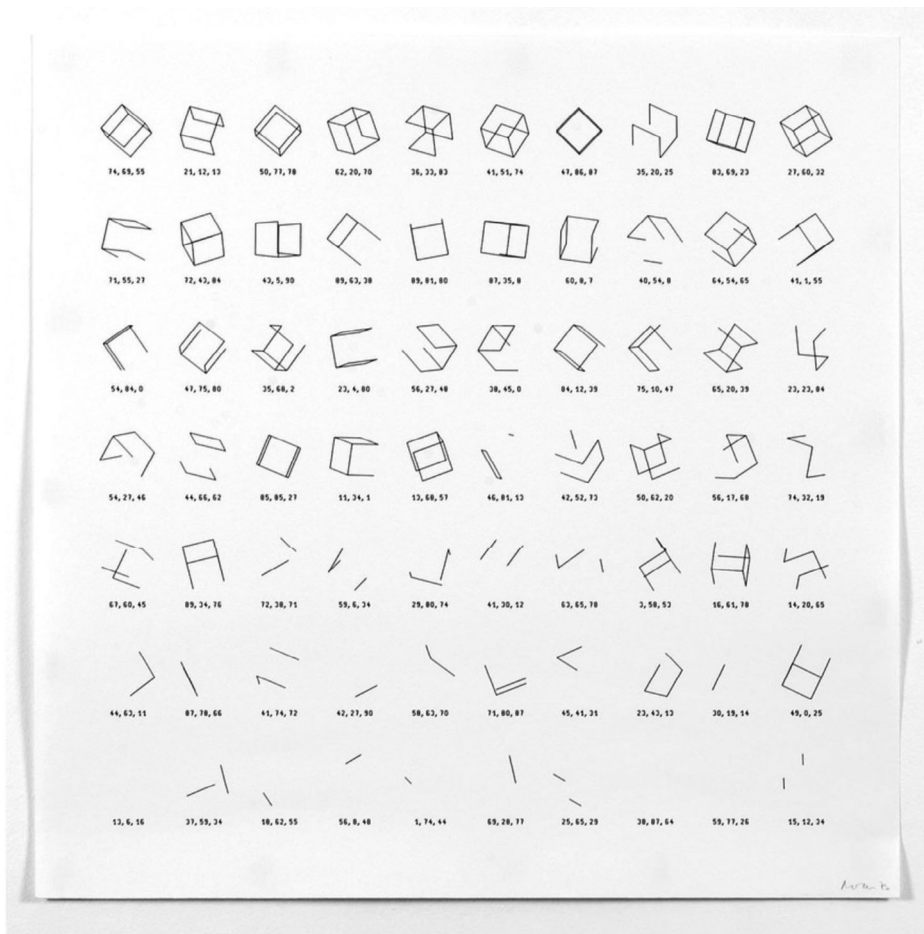
6. Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 13.

7. Grant D. Taylor, *When the Machine Made Art: The Troubled History of Computer Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 48.

8. Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), x; Taylor, *When the Machine Made Art*, 51.

9. See Anne Collins Goodyear, “From Technophilia to Technophobia: The Impact of the Vietnam War on the Reception of ‘Art and Technology,’” *Leonardo* 41, no. 2 (2008): 169-73, [10.1162/leon.2008.41.2.169](https://doi.org/10.1162/leon.2008.41.2.169)

10. Taylor, *When the Machine Made Art*, 105.



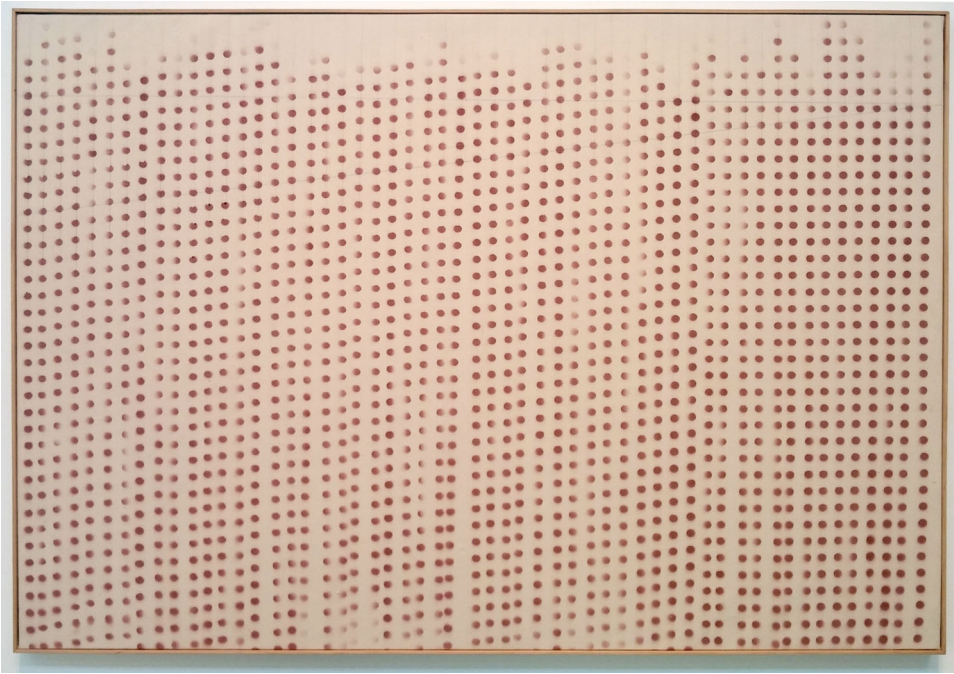
P-154-c/B (1973) by Manfred Mohr; courtesy Manfred Mohr.

clerical work; in particular, the operation of telephone switchboards.¹¹ Taylor's recuperation of early women computer artists including Lillian Schwartz and Grace Hertlein builds on Jennifer S. Light's research into the algorithmic labors of "human computers," mostly female clerical staff who performed manual ballistics calculations and later provided manual support for early mainframes such as the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) during World War II, thereby earning the sexist sobriquet "ENIAC girls."¹² Complementary to the counter-histories of Taylor and Light, Wilson's work offers a genealogy of algorithmic culture grounded in embodied performance distinct from well-trodden prehistories of the digital associated with weaving technologies such as the Jacquard loom.¹³

11. See Grant D. Taylor, "Up for Grabs': Agency, Praxis, and the Politics of Early Digital Art," *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*, no. 2 (2013), <https://csalateral.org/issue/2/up-for-grabs-early-digital-art-taylor>.

12. Jennifer S. Light, "When Computers Were Women," *Technology and Culture* 40, no. 3 (1999): 457, 459.

13. See, for instance, Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).



Period 012: #17 (1969) by Gerald Ferguson; courtesy the Estate of Gerald Ferguson and Olga Korper Gallery.

Wilson's permutational exploration of performative identity constitutes an overlooked counterweight to the "autonomous" practices foregrounded by recent historiographies of early digital art.¹⁴ This paper asks: What would a history of computer art look like that paired the conceptual Wilson, instead of LeWitt, with computational methodologies and models? How might such a shift in perspective re-narrate this still underresearched, yet already familiar history; and what might it contribute to contemporary debates about algorithmic (in)visibilities?

LANGUAGE POLITICS

Wilson's groundbreaking early work was the product of her fraught association with NSCAD. In 1970, Wilson relocated to Halifax with her then-partner, artist Richards Jarden. While Jarden entered the college's MFA program, Wilson began an MA in English Literature at Dalhousie University, whose campus was then located across the street from the innovative art college. In their move from Ohio to Halifax, the pair was following in the footsteps of Jarden's former Wilmington College painting instructor, Gerald Ferguson, who was hired by NSCAD in 1968. Ferguson's conceptual practice, which was represented alongside Jarden's in the era-defining *Information* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1970, proved to be an influential prototype—and provocation—for Jarden and Wilson alike.

14. Taylor, *When the Machine Made Art*, 48.

Trained as a painter, Ferguson temporarily suspended his painting practice for a two-year period beginning in the summer of 1969 amid mounting criticisms of the medium advanced by conceptual peers. These included prominent visiting artists invited to NSCAD as part of Askevold's famed Projects Class, such as Lawrence Weiner, whose use of language as a dematerialized medium in the artist's book *Statements* (1968) would shape Ferguson's appropriation of the alphabet as a readymade structure in the obsessively typewritten *abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz* (1968) and subsequent alphabet spray paintings.¹⁵ The sequential format adopted by Ferguson in these early works drew inspiration from the visual logic of LeWitt's serial wall drawings, while employing the more rigorously dematerialized medium of language derived from Weiner's example. To produce the letter paintings, Ferguson effectively transformed himself into a human proxy for his IBM Selectric typewriter, thereby enacting LeWitt's celebrated aphorism, "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."¹⁶ Underscoring this point, Ferguson would later recall that, "I would become the machine—to register each letter."¹⁷

Ferguson's use of language as a medium parallels Wilson's early textual work *Chauvinist Pieces* (1971), though Wilson herself—like Ferguson—notably cites Weiner's formative example instead.¹⁸ Wark describes *Chauvinist Pieces* as "allud[ing] to the alienation [Wilson] felt from a community she sought to be part of, but that excluded her both as a woman and as an interloper with no credentials as an artist."¹⁹ Wilson remembers that in the early 1970s "women were not valued" at NSCAD.²⁰ Consequently, Ferguson's linguistic permutations were equally important to Wilson as something to push back against as models in a conventional sense. The resulting photo-text projects consciously broke with the "straightforward" and "hard-hitting" qualities that Ferguson admired in the work of conceptualists like Carl Andre.²¹ Indeed, Wilson recalls that her now iconic *Breast Forms Permutated* was conceived as "a spoof of works by conceptual artists whose work consisted of every possible iteration within a given problem's scope."²² "It was a joke," Wilson elaborates elsewhere, "about conceptual artists like Sol LeWitt and Jan Dibbets who were permutating everything but who didn't connect with the real world."²³

It is tempting to read *Breast Forms Permutated* as a travesty of Ferguson's contemporaneous "Period" or "Dot" paintings. Dissatisfied with the imperfections that dogged

15. See Gerald Ferguson, "The 1968–1969 Works," in *Gerald Ferguson: The Initial Alphabet*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1994), 13.

16. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (1967; repr., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12.

17. Ferguson, "The 1968–1969 Works," 17.

18. See Liza Zapol, "Oral history interview with Martha Wilson," May 17–18, 2017, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_387845.

19. See Jayne Wark, "Martha Wilson: Not Taking It at Face Value," *Camera Obscura* 15, no. 3 (2001): 5.

20. Wilson quoted in Zapol, "Oral history interview."

21. Ferguson, "The 1968–1969 Works," 21.

22. Martha Wilson, "Feminism," in *Martha Wilson Sourcebook: 40 Years of Reconsidering Performance, Feminism, Alternative Spaces*, ed. Martha Wilson (New York: Independent Curators International, 2011).

23. Martha Wilson quoted in Vincent Honoré, "Martha Wilson in conversation with Vincent Honoré," *Cura*, no. 29 (Fall 2018), <https://curamagazine.com/digital/martha-wilson>.

his letter paintings, Ferguson resolved to restrict himself to “something even more basic for a unit than a single letter”; namely, to the period stencil from the same set he had employed to produce the letter paintings.²⁴ The areolae of female NSCAD students that punctuate Wilson’s fleshy grid of black-and-white photographs notably echo the columns of slightly askew dots in works such as *Period 012: #17* (1969), painted by Ferguson with the aid of plasterer’s corner beading following his rejection of the period stencil as insufficiently exact. In effect, Wilson rebuts the machinic syntax of Ferguson’s “Dot” paintings with a defiant grammar of embodied imperfection and formal indefiniteness. Wilson underscores that “Breasts are limitless in form, you can’t permute them.”²⁵

Breast Forms Permutated was among a handful of works that brought Wilson to prominence following a fateful encounter with visiting critic and curator Lucy Lippard. “Lucy Lippard came to the college in 1973,” Wilson recalled. “She looked at my work and said, ‘yes, you are an artist and there are other women all over North America and Europe who are doing feminist art.’”²⁶ Lippard would go on to include this work in her traveling survey of women conceptualists, *c. 7,500* (1973). Lippard would also write about it in multiple texts, beginning with a 1975 article for *Ms.* magazine on a recent tendency within conceptual practice that Lippard termed “transformation art.” In that highly perceptive essay, Lippard links female-identified conceptualists’ strategies of self-transformation and critical explorations of “a self that challenged or exposed the roles they had been playing” to the serial methods of conceptualism.²⁷

Breast Forms Permutated was executed after Wilson was hired to teach English at NSCAD in 1971. Wilson began auditing classes at the college, which brought her into contact with visiting artists including Vito Acconci, whose exploration of sexuality in performances such as the masturbatory *Seedbed* (1972) she credits with giving her license to investigate gender identity in her practice.²⁸ If *Breast Forms Permutated* enacts a proto-feminist détournement of Acconci’s sexually explicit, masculinist performance practice, it was the visiting performance artist’s recommendation of Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) that would ultimately prove more impactful on Wilson’s subsequent interrogation of gender roles:

And [Acconci] was the one who, after I showed him my work, he said, “Oh, you have to read Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,” and it was—it totally rocked my world, that idea of performance being the common denominator that we share in the art world, and not in the art world. Everybody is performing at all times, and it’s okay to examine that. And he—Erving Goffman—is very careful about peeling away the layers of performance in everyday behavior, because we’re performing first for our internal sense of performance.²⁹

24. Ferguson, “The 1968–1969 Works,” 17.

25. Wilson quoted in Honoré, “Martha Wilson in conversation.”

26. Wilson quoted in Honoré, “Martha Wilson in conversation.”

27. Lucy R. Lippard, “Transformation Art,” *Ms.* 4, no. 4 (1975): 34.

28. See Wilson quoted in Honoré, “Martha Wilson in conversation.”

29. Wilson quoted in Zapol, “Oral history interview.”



Breast Forms Permutated (1972) by Martha Wilson; courtesy Martha Wilson and P.P.O.W., New York.

Goffman, who remains one of the most cited authors in the humanities and social sciences four decades after his death, is best known for the book Acconci recommended to Wilson, which proposes a “dramaturgical” analysis of human interaction as

“performance.”³⁰ Goffman argues that performance is integral to the “stage-craft” of everyday life, which operates to construct a “collective representation.”³¹ The transformative impact of Goffman’s theatrical conception of human behavior on Wilson’s early practice is evident from her recently published *Journals*. In an entry for June 22, 1972, we read that “[i]ndividuals play at being themselves in order to realize themselves, so in a sense, all human beings are performing in front of video monitors or audiences, fictive or real, at all times.”³² The 2011 artist’s book *Martha Wilson Sourcebook* likewise reproduces extended excerpts from Goffman’s chapter on “Performances” in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.³³

Wark may have been the first to connect Wilson’s exploration of the performative character of identity to Goffman’s writings. Wark proposed a link between Goffman’s notion that identity is a production formed at the interface of self-presentation and social interaction, and Wilson’s work *Appearance as Value* (1972), in which the artist’s “self-mockery suggests that she sees both the ‘internal’ and the projected ‘appearance’ of self as equally fictive, equally performative.”³⁴ However, it is Butler’s subsequent theorization of gender performativity as an antifoundationalist account of gender identity that occupies the bulk of Wark’s analysis. Although cautioning that Butler has rejected comparisons to Goffman, Wark draws attention to the shared origins of Butler’s performance theory and Goffman’s earlier dramaturgical analysis in French existentialist phenomenology.³⁵ Distinguishing the essentializing fictions of a stable gender identity from acts of identification, Butler’s model of performativity is indeed eminently dramaturgical. “That the gendered body is performative,” writes Butler, “suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”³⁶ Wilson’s reading of Goffman had arrived at remarkably allied insights on gendered subjectivity as early as 1972: “the ‘self,’” Wilson observes in her *Journals*, “does not exist as anything but a dramatic effect.”³⁷

Yet while there is clearly some agreement between Butler’s and Goffman’s respective accounts of the semiotics of social performance, their differences should not be glossed over in search of dehistoricized analogies. Butler’s account of gender is, for instance, notably more attentive to the role of political institutions in discursively constituting those very subjects whom they claim to represent. While it is beyond the scope of the present article to detain the reader with a comprehensive catalog of the many nuances that distinguish the respective frameworks of Butler and Goffman, in the next section

30. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 8.

31. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 8, 17.

32. Martha Wilson, *Martha Wilson Journals* (Paris: mfc-michèle dider, 2021).

33. See Erving Goffman, “Performances,” in *Martha Wilson Sourcebook*, 34–37.

34. Wark, “Martha Wilson,” 11.

35. See Wark, “Martha Wilson,” 30.

36. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; repr., New York: Routledge, 2006), 185.

37. Wilson, *Martha Wilson Journals*.

I attend to Goffman's debt to game theory in order to historicize Wilson's engagement with the sociologist's proto-algorithmic account of social performance within its Cold War milieu.

ROUTINE PERFORMANCE

An interdisciplinary approach to the study of human interaction, game theory applies mathematical models of probability and risk to describe the decision-making behaviors of rational actors in a transactional economy.³⁸ Through the early and influential contributions of mathematician John von Neumann, game theory was constituted as a discursive site adjacent to, and overlapping with, the fields of computer science, cybernetics, and information theory. Like the ENIAC general-purpose digital computer constructed at the University of Pennsylvania, for which von Neumann served as a consultant during World War II, game theory aspired to operationalize the conditions of universal computability theorized by Alan Turing in his groundbreaking 1936 paper "On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem."³⁹ In lieu of the applied logic of circuit switches and algorithmic functions materialized by von Neumann's epochal formalization of computer architecture,⁴⁰ game theory employed an isomorphic diagram of decision-making to map the interactions of self-interested individuals. As a mathematization of social behaviors, game theory paralleled the application of information-theoretical principles to model and regulate human and nonhuman systems in cybernetics, a transdisciplinary field of study popularized by von Neumann's colleague Norbert Wiener through the publication of his book *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* in 1948.⁴¹

As initially formulated by von Neumann and collaborator Oskar Morgenstern in *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), game theory was taken up in the following decades across a wide array of disciplinary contexts, from economics to political science. It was simultaneously understood as a justification for the self-interested behaviors of economic actors under nascent neoliberal reforms as well as policies of nuclear deterrence premised upon mutually assured destruction. As meticulously documented by art historian Pamela M. Lee, game theory's influence was by no means limited to established academic contexts. Indeed, at the height of the Cold War it came to define a pervasive *mentalité* that shaped developments in contemporary art practice every bit as much as in the applied sciences. I want to bring Wilson's investigations of gender performance within this fraught orbit.

38. See Pamela M. Lee, *New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 117.

39. See Alan Turing, "On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem," *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society* 2, no. 42 (1937): 230–65, <https://doi.org/10.1112/plms/s2-42.1.230>.

40. See John von Neumann, *First Draft of a Report on the EDVAC* (Philadelphia: Moore School of Electrical Engineering, 1945).

41. See Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: J. Wiley, 1948).

Goffman's era-defining analyses of human interaction in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* are explicitly indebted to von Neumann and Morgenstern.⁴² There is a striking correspondence between Goffman's definition of *interaction*—the locus of his inquiry into the dynamics of self-presentation—and von Neumann and Morgenstern's application of the economic metaphor of *exchange* to frame the interests of participants in games of strategy. Goffman describes interaction as comprising “all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another's continuous presence.”⁴³ What Goffman refers to as interaction, von Neumann and Morgenstern describe as the subject's participation in a “social exchange economy,” in which “each participant attempts to maximize a function (his . . . ‘result’) of which he does not control all variables.”⁴⁴ Consequently, participants' actions are reciprocally shaped by the anticipated responses of the other players. In effect, Goffman reframes von Neumann and Morgenstern's mathematical description of participants' strategic attempts at mutual influence under idealized conditions of game play in order to study the messy dynamics of impression management in everyday life.

Through the course of their interpersonal interactions, the social actors studied by Goffman endeavor to foster and maintain an advantageous image of self by mobilizing a common stock of cultural “sign-equipment,” much as von Neumann and Morgenstern describe the function of “signaling” between players in a game of bridge.⁴⁵ Under these game-like conditions, Goffman's social actor constructs what he terms “a routine of interaction,” a concept he credits to von Neumann and Morgenstern, although they notably do not employ this terminology.⁴⁶ What Goffman undoubtedly intends here is the game theorists' mathematization of participant behaviors as variables in an economic equation. Goffman's word choice is telling, *routine* invoking both a theatrical repertoire as well as the operations of the computer hardware for which von Neumann's name is synonymous. As such, Goffman's treatment of social interaction as a cultural aggregate of performative routines anticipates the algorithmic behaviors fostered by computational capitalism more recently studied by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Tiziana Terranova, among others.⁴⁷

Just prior to the inauguration of Wilson's algorithmic explorations of gender performance, curator Jack Burnham had proposed an allied computational description of human behavior in his curatorial essay for *Software–Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, the influential art-and-technology exhibition presented by the Jewish Museum in New York City in 1970. Burnham's systems theory–inflected meditations

42. See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 9, 49.

43. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 8.

44. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 10–11.

45. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 14; von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, 53.

46. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 9.

47. See Patricia Ticineto Clough, “Future Matters: Technoscience, Global Politics, and Cultural Criticism,” *Social Text* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 1–23; Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

describe the human subject's "behavioral idiosyncrasies" as a "program."⁴⁸ Burnham's comments testify to the interdisciplinary currency of what we would now think of as algorithmic models of behavior in art discourse circa 1970.

Goffman's routines find another compelling counterpart in the titular models of Wilson's series *A Portfolio of Models*, in which the artist enacts a gendered array of socially prescribed roles: Goddess, Lesbian, Housewife, Working Girl, Professional, and Earth Mother. This work was produced during a fertile transitional phase following Wilson's breakup with Jarden and leading up to her subsequent move to New York in the spring of 1974.⁴⁹ An entry in the artist's *Journals* from February 1973 links the germination of this series to the artist's search for new models of self in the wake of her traumatic separation from Jarden. Under the heading "A Portfolio of Models," Wilson writes, "When I was alone . . . I searched around for models, for someone to admire, to emulate. None of these models satisfies me. Who am I to make myself into? 'I am not a fixed quantity, I have learned that."⁵⁰

In tension with classical game theorists' individualist accent on self-interest, Wilson's inhabitation of multiple roles in *A Portfolio of Models* can be read as pitting the artist against herself in a contest of social "programs"—an allusion, perhaps, to the competing expectations of parents, mentors, and romantic partners with which the artist grappled in arriving at a constructivist understanding of identity in this critical phase of her artistic evolution. In 1975, Wilson observed that "I could generate a new self out of the absence that was left when my boyfriends' ideas, my teachers' and my parents' ideas were subtracted."⁵¹ The artist's aperçu that selfhood is not a fixed quantity can also be interpreted as licensing her performance of multiple participant roles in Goffman's game theory-inflected schematization of intersubjective interaction as a form of programmable contest. Consequently, the artist's early performances substitute a proto-feminist logic of qualitative fluidity for the stable identities and oppositions of Aristotelian logic underwriting game theory's hyperrational account of behavior.

Wilson's deployment but also deformation of social taxonomies is strikingly consistent with Dara Birnbaum's works of the later 1970s, such as *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79) and *Kiss the Girls: Make them Cry* (1979), which Lee reads through a Butlerian lens as enacting "a kind of game in which her character-types perform."⁵² Lee argues that Birnbaum's recirculation of popular representations operationalizes postmodern accounts of information as novel social contract. In particular, Lee traces Jean-François Lyotard's epochal analyses of an emergent information society in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) to the principles of game theory. In that text, Lyotard echoes von Neumann and other game theorists who had based their claims about human behavior on an idealized condition of informational transparency and abundance, in which all

48. Jack Burnham, "Notes on Art and Information Processing," in *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1970), 12.

49. Wark, "Martha Wilson," 21.

50. Wilson, *Martha Wilson Journals*.

51. Wilson quoted in Lippard, "Transformation Art," 36.

52. Lee, *New Games*, 183.

	SHOOT	DON'T SHOOT
SHOOT	Death For Both	Life For One
DON'T SHOOT	Death For One	Life For Both



Shoot Don't Shoot (1970) by David Askevold; courtesy Kyla Ready-Askevold and Aaron Brewer.

participants in an adversarial interaction are presumed to enjoy equal access to the same information.⁵³ Economist John Harsanyi would distill the assumptions informing this ideology of communicational transparency in the maxim “when two rational individuals have the same information, they must draw the same inferences and thus come to the same conclusion.”⁵⁴ Lee argues that Birnbaum’s recirculation of mass media imagery both replicates and rescinds this paradigm of informatic ubiquity: “She plays the game already given her, enters into its regulatory contract, but does so in the service of its invalidation.”⁵⁵ The same could be said of Wilson’s earlier Goffman-inspired *A Portfolio of Models*, in which the artist’s avatars enact socially defined roles that, in their very multiplicity, undo the individualist premises of the game theory upon which Goffman’s sociology was based. As Lee Rodney perceptively wrote in an unpublished curatorial essay from 1996, “Wilson denied the singularity of representation, and the related assumption that the real and the representation are directly connected.”⁵⁶ Wilson’s algorithmic performative thus anticipates but also diverges from Colin Koopman’s Foucauldian analysis of the taxonomic procedures of datafication that produce a formatting of informational persons. Even while mobilizing demographic representations, Wilson demonstrates that the contours of identity are always more fluid than the discrete boxes of a demographic form.

53. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

54. Harsanyi quoted in Lee, *New Games*, 129.

55. Lee, *New Games*, 185.

56. Rodney quoted in Wark, “Martha Wilson,” 23.

Wilson's oblique engagement with game theory via her reading of Goffman paralleled the investigations of Askeveld, a more sympathetic NSCAD instructor. A former student of Ferguson at the Kansas City Art Institute, Askeveld was hired by NSCAD shortly after his former instructor, and would go on to show alongside Ferguson and Jarden at *Information* in 1970. *Shoot Don't Shoot* (1970), the work by which Askeveld was represented in that exhibition, was the outgrowth of a multiyear exploration of games and game theory sparked by a chance encounter with an analysis of the mathematical game "Sprouts" published in the July 1967 issue of *Scientific American*.⁵⁷ Askeveld seized upon the rules of the game as a readymade set of constraints fulfilling LeWitt's prescriptions against arbitrary formal decisions. The result was *3 Spot Game* (1968), a Plexiglas and steel cable sculpture that, in its strict adherence to the mathematical instructions of "Sprouts," paradoxically manifests the inefficiencies and even absurdities latent in such a hyperrational approach.

Inspired to investigate the theoretical foundations of games, in the early 1970s Askeveld produced multiple works premised on the archetypal scenario of game-theoretical speculation, the "prisoner's dilemma." Developed in 1950 by Melvin Dresher and Merrill Flood, fellows of the military-industrial think tank RAND Corporation, the prisoner's dilemma maps the probable outcomes of a hypothetical situation in which criminal accomplices are detained in separate cells and each offered plea bargains in exchange for testifying against the other party.⁵⁸ In essence, the prisoner's dilemma is a variation on the two-player games modeled earlier by von Neumann and Morgenstern. In zero-sum two-person games, any advantage for one player represents an equivalent loss for the other party.⁵⁹ Askeveld's *Shoot Don't Shoot* reframes the climactic shoot-out in Sam Peckinpah's 1970 anti-Western *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* as just such a zero-sum matrix. The work consists of a pair of frame enlargements appropriated from Peckinpah's film, each condensing the adversarial, shot-reverse structure of the climactic gunfight sequence into a single superimposed image.⁶⁰ These opulent photographs are complemented by a textual distillation of potential narrative outcomes, which Askeveld presents as a tabular inventory of game-theoretical gains and losses: Death for Both, Life for One, Death for One, Life for Both. Aaron Brewer incisively reads this work's critique of mythic representations of the American Western as an outgrowth of Askeveld's interrogation of RAND-authored game theory amid the think tank's contributions to American military strategy during the Vietnam War.⁶¹

Shoot Don't Shoot represents an overlooked antecedent to Richard Serra's *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974), a work that Lee positions alongside Birnbaum's previously mentioned

57. See Aaron Brewer, "Outcome," in *David Askeveld: Once Upon a Time in the East*, ed. David Diviney (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2011), 69–71.

58. See Merrill M. Flood, *Some Experimental Games*, RM-781 -1 (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1952).

59. See von Neumann and Morgenstern, *Theory of Games*, Chapter 4.

60. See Petra Rigby Watson, "For What is Geography?," in *David Askeveld: Cultural Geographies and Other Works*, exh. cat. (Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island: Confederation Centre Art Gallery & Museum, 1998), 33.

61. See Brewer, "Outcome," 80.

video works as unfolding a “simultaneous reproduction and inversion of both the game-theoretic and televisual scenario.”⁶² In Serra’s case, Lee posits that the artist’s strategic deployment of game theory operates as a commentary on the unravelling of Richard Nixon’s presidency as a working demonstration of the irrational behaviors authorized by the prisoner’s dilemma. Staged with Robert Bell in January 1974, Stella’s *Prisoner’s Dilemma* transforms the titular scenario into a parody of police procedurals like *Dragnet*, in which an improbable cast of artworld figures including the legendary art dealer Leo Castelli stand in for the generic “participants” of game theory. As a fellow contributor to *Information* and a participant in Askeveld’s Projects Class as well as the storied “Halifax Conference” held at NSCAD in 1969,⁶³ it seems virtually impossible that Serra was unaware of the latter’s contribution to *Information* and related research on game theory. Setting aside questions of priority and influence, it is clear that *Shoot Don’t Shoot* and *Prisoner’s Dilemma* both belong to the spectrum of practices, as sketched by Lee, that “adopt the protocols of the game in order to track and challenge it.”⁶⁴ Indeed, Askeveld constitutes a crucial missing link in Lee’s genealogy of modern and contemporary artists directly or indirectly engaged with think tanks like RAND and the theoretical models they popularized. Wilson’s parodic enactment of the algorithmic routines of gender performance in postwar society belongs to this same historical trajectory as well.

The adversarial rhetoric legitimized by Cold War game theory is also legible in the idiosyncratic terminology of Goffman’s sociology, upon which Wilson’s experiments in rescripting embodied presentations of selfhood drew. His characterization of the relatively enduring aspects of the subject’s performance of self (including what we would now think of as gender) as constituting a “personal front,” recalls the application of game theory to model nuclear deterrence between the superpowers, as a kind of two-player game writ large.⁶⁵ Goffman’s sociology assumes the same conditions of absolute conflict between social agents as that modeled contemporaneously by game theorists for a range of military applications. Goffman would return to and expand upon these themes in the 1969 book *Strategic Interaction*, a more explicit attempt at synthesizing the methods of symbolic interactionism and game theory. *Strategic Interaction* draws on the work of RAND economist and mathematician Thomas Schelling, best known for his application of game theory to problems of deterrence in the 1960 book *The Strategy of Conflict*.⁶⁶ Significantly, Lee documents how the latter title’s treatment of the potential for a surprise nuclear attack served as the point of departure for an earlier video project by Serra and Bell, *Surprise Attack* (1973).⁶⁷

62. Lee, *New Games*, 206.

63. See Garry Neill Kennedy, *The Last Art College: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1968–1978* (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 58–63, and Les Levine, “Afterword: The Best School in North America?” in *The Last Art College*, 419.

64. Lee, *New Games*, 140.

65. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 14.

66. See Erving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969); Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

67. See Serra quoted in Lee, *New Games*, 197.



I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity (1974/2008) by Martha Wilson; courtesy Martha Wilson and P·P·O·W, New York.

Through the artist's algorithmic animation of Goffman's investigations into the routinization of everyday life and gender roles in postwar North American society, Wilson's early work participates in the same think tank aesthetics that Lee attributes to more overt engagements with game theory such as John Chamberlain's *RAND Piece* (1971), an irreverent exercise in bureaucracy resulting from Chamberlain's placement with the titular think tank as part of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Art and Technology program, which paired artists with corporate sponsors.⁶⁸ For her part, Wilson's strategic inhabitation of Goffman's adversarial model of interaction was partly motivated by what Wark describes as the artist's "struggle for legitimacy" within the male-dominated environment of NSCAD.⁶⁹ In effect, Wilson operationalized Goffman's game-theoretical approach to human interaction as a heuristic vehicle for overcoming self-doubts and for breaking into an aggressively masculinist artworld milieu. Wilson enacts such a strategic reprogramming of the social presentation of self in *I Make Up the Image of My Perfection/I Make Up the Image of My Deformity* (1974/2008), which demonstrates competing routines of self-presentation that paradoxically fail to cohere into

68. See Pamela M. Lee, *Think Tank Aesthetics: Midcentury Modernism, the Cold War, and the Neoliberal Present* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 24–27. See also John Chamberlain, *RAND Piece* (1971).

69. Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2001): 48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358731>.



CV Dazzle Look 5 (2015) by Adam Harvey; screenshot by Adam Lauder.

a singular front. In this work, Wilson's deformation of social routines foreshadows Russell's meditations on the feminist potential for tactical mobilizations of unprogrammed errors "to create space through rupture."⁷⁰ Like Russell's theorization of glitch feminism as cultivating a strategic opacity, Wilson's performances of self are designed "to disappear between ticked boxes."⁷¹

STRATEGIC IN/VISIBILITY

Wilson's algorithmic rehearsals of the gendered routines of socialized selfhood should not be mistaken for a dematerialization of subjectivity consistent with the antivisual protocols of conceptual art. Wark has elucidated how the tense status of visibility in Wilson's early production was conditioned by the artist's need for visibility as an emerging artist, a necessity at odds with what Benjamin Buchloh has characterized as conceptualism's "rigorous elimination of visibility."⁷² Wilson's use of camouflage to evade the categorical gaze reproduced by early conceptualism must not therefore be conflated with more recent strategies of resistance to pervasive datafication such as *CV Dazzle* (2010), Adam Harvey's digital "look book" for evading algorithmic facial recognition technologies using Cubist-inspired cosmetics that render human faces illegible to automated surveillance systems. Daniela Agostinho has noted that the hacktivist imaginary sketched by Harvey and other countersurveillance actors premised on tactics of deception and evasion intended to resist the contemporary field of ubiquitous capture and automated recognition conceals a dependency on forms of privilege associated with whiteness. "Visibility,"

70. Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 7.

71. Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 75.

72. Benjamin D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990): 107, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778941>.

Agostinho observes, “is not distributed equally in society, and consequently that invisibility from identification regimes is often an unequally distributed privilege that not all subjects can aspire to or benefit from.”⁷³ Tactics of countersurveillance dependent on concealment and camouflage frequently assume generic whiteness as a universal condition of possibility. This blind spot in dominant hacktivist imaginaries is exemplified by Harvey’s unexamined dependence on pale skin tones to generate his contrasty dazzle camouflage.

Agostinho upholds the work of multidisciplinary artist Sondra Perry as modeling alternative tactics of “opacity” and “deformational uncertainty”⁷⁴ that do not elide what Butler terms the “differential distribution of recognizability.”⁷⁵ In particular, Agostinho explores Perry’s recurrent use of Chroma key—the technical term for the green screen technology commonly employed to superimpose background imagery during video production—as a medium enabling the simultaneous visibility and opacity of people of color. In Perry’s video installations, which often portray members of the artist’s family engaged in mundane activities, opacity defines a mode of resistant visibility that, in recognizing the potentially fatal consequences of withdrawal from the field of recognizability for marginalized individuals, asserts visibility while renegotiating the conditions of that visibility—particularly recognition schemes premised on racializing taxonomies and their economies of power.

Wilson’s transformational undoing of stable gender roles clears a path for more recent challenges to oppressive schemes of recognizability such as Perry’s tactical relation to dominant and historic representations of blackness and their algorithmic capture. Wilson’s early work unfolds an allied negotiation of the pressures for enhanced visibility—in Wilson’s case, pressures associated with the artist’s struggles for legitimacy and recognition within the masculinist milieu of NSCAD—and the need for marginalized social actors to define the terms of their own recognizability. In Wilson’s case, as in Perry’s, such acts of self-definition operate through a deformation of the very terms of description applied by taxonomic schemes of recognizability: a refusal of stable categorization.

Setting the stage for more recent practitioners such as Harvey and Perry, Wilson’s challenge to still-dominant determinist and techno-essentialist constructions of computational arts highlights opportunities for low-tech tactical interventions within the increasingly hegemonic visual field constituted by algorithmic instrumentalities. Fore-shadowing Harvey’s *CV Dazzle*, Wilson’s early conceptual practice constitutes a working demonstration of the strategic utility of makeup and costume changes—what Goffman would term changes in routine—in evading the taxonomic gaze. But like the opaque field of vision constituted by Perry’s use of Chroma key, Wilson’s purpose exceeds mere evasion; her transformational role-play effects a canny deformation of what Butler would articulate as social schemas of recognizability. Wilson’s interpolation of gendered

73. Daniela Agostinho, “Chroma key dreams: Algorithmic visibility, fleshy images and scenes of recognition,” *Philosophy of Photography* 9, no. 2 (2018): 136, https://doi.org/10.1386/pop.9.2.131_1.

74. Agostinho, “Chroma key dreams,” 151.

75. Butler quoted in Rasmus Willig, “Recognition and critique: an interview with Judith Butler,” *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 1 (2012): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2012.648742>.

representations of the body into the algorithmic matrix of early conceptualism contests the putative neutrality and universality of procedural languages, much as Agostinho has more recently exposed the unacknowledged privilege upon which hacktivist evasions of visibility tend to be premised.

This reassessment of Martha Wilson's early practice has drawn attention to the algorithmic bases of the artist's reprogramming of gendered routines, an algorithmic methodology that likewise propelled conceptual art of the same period. Unlike conceptual peers such as Gerald Ferguson and Sol LeWitt, however, Wilson exposed the situated contexts of algorithmic behaviors. Informed by the game-theoretical sociology of Erving Goffman, Wilson's dissident approach to algorithmic performance reveals a previously unremarked alignment with the game theory–inspired work of her NSCAD instructor, David Askevold. Yet, in contrast to Askevold's investigations into the role of think tanks in guiding American foreign policy at the height of the Vietnam War, Wilson uncovers the game-theoretical bases of gendered behavioral routines on the domestic front. ■

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