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Introduction: Film Quilts and the Practice of a Material Archiveology

When entering the Gustavsbergs Konsthall art gallery in Sweden in 2009, visitors were surprised to see that the gallery's windows had been covered by semi-transparent curtains of vivid colours and geometric shapes which closely resembled traditional American quilts. On closer inspection, these curtains appeared to be composed of 16mm strips of film, sewn together and arranged according to colour and pattern. The transparency of the celluloid and its arrangement created vibrant, radiating shapes that attracted the viewer closer, while also encouraging a distanced point of view. Viewing the city of Gustavsberg through the patterns of the film quilts called attention to and prompted inquiry regarding their materiality and potential to filter the world through a different point of view. Whose point of view was it?

For American filmmaker Sabrina Gschwandtner's first solo exhibition, *Watch & See* (2009), the artist stitched together hundreds of yards of documentary archival footage donated to her by Anthology Film Archives, in New York City, with a Bernina sewing machine. Gschwandtner writes on her website that her "film quilts recuperate sewing's essential role in cinema, while expanding material possibilities for quilt-making."¹ I argue that Gschwandtner's film quilts pose critical points of discussion around the ontology of quilt-making as a fibre art, as well as cinema as a projected medium. The qualities of both artistic media become expanded in their encounter and interaction. Most importantly, her quilted film works offer a sensorial and spatialised experience of archival film footage that leads to an understanding of film archives as embodied

sites of historical, gendered knowledge. Through this material encounter with the audience, they reflect on and expand a conception of film archives as enclosed spaces that regulate both objects and bodies.

To study the impact of Gschwandtner's quilted film works on film archives, I turn to Catherine Russell's work on *archiveology*. Russell defines archiveology as "a mode of film practice that draws on archival material to produce knowledge about how history has been represented and how representations are not false images but are actually historical in themselves and have anthropological value."² As I show in this article, Gschwandtner's quilts offer a critical reflection on the history of craft, and its revaluation by feminist artists, filmmakers, and critics dating back to the 1960s. Beyond the film quilts' subject matter, Gschwandtner's methodology interrogates the role of images in the creation of historical knowledge, and affirms their function as forms of knowledge in themselves. As Jaimie Baron argues, history becomes "not only knowable but also perceptible in these [archival] images" by bringing the viewer in direct "contact" with the past.³ Composed of cut and stitched rescued celluloid, film quilts materialise and spatialise the practice of montage on which archiveology rests – quite literally putting the viewer in physical contact with past images. As the etymology of *archiveology* suggests, film quilts as well as archiveological films use "the image archive as a language."⁴ Archives, in these practices, are repositories, and offer the building-blocks for a language based on fragmentation and metaphor.

Quoting Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller", Russell contends that "the archiveologist is in this sense a craftsman, whose work takes place primarily at the editing table or computer, fashioning the 'raw material of experience' into a 'ruin that stands on the site of an old story,'"⁵ and adds that "the emphasis on gesture and detail in archiveology necessarily shifts the focus of experimental media from masculinist oversight and vision to filmmaking as craft."⁶ This

conceptual framing of archiveology as craftwork powerfully echoes Gschwandtner's commitment to meticulous manual labour deeply entrenched in the history of women's work. For her, craft – whether it be quilt-making, knitting, or film editing – is key to the writing of a feminist history of art and media. She writes that “[i]n the era of streaming video, with film on the brink of obsolescence, I drew from the craft of quilting salvaged remnants to create a feminist future for film.”⁷ Indeed, Gschwandtner's work intervenes at the crossroads of two strands of feminist criticism that flourished in the 1970s and questioned the intersection of “gender, domesticity, and power”: the reclaiming of a history of craft as specifically feminine and subversive, and a feminist film theory that challenged patriarchal norms of representation.⁸

With the concept of archiveology, Russell intends to “emphasise the documentary value of collecting and compiling fragments of previously filmed material.”⁹ Documents, for her, are produced by the process of excision and recontextualisation of archival fragments, producing renewed histories and knowledges. One could then further ask what are film quilts documents *of*, and how does their materiality potentially affect their documentary value as historical objects? To answer these questions, I reflect on Gschwandtner's conscious positioning of her works within a feminist history of women's crafts, and more specifically the gendered and racialised history of quilt-making and its disregard by institutions of the art world. I discuss the way film quilts may evoke a history of feminised labour in the film and media industry. Finally, I consider the materiality of the quilts as sensorial objects, to counter understandings of film archives as disembodied and purely visual. The material display of Gschwandtner's film quilts offer a renewed sensorial experience of the archive, one that acknowledges the copresence of viewer and object. I expand on Baron's definition of archival footage “as a *relationship* produced between particular

elements of a film and the film's viewer,"¹⁰ to consider how this relationship might develop within a material, tactile encounter such as those provided by Gschwandtner's film quilts.

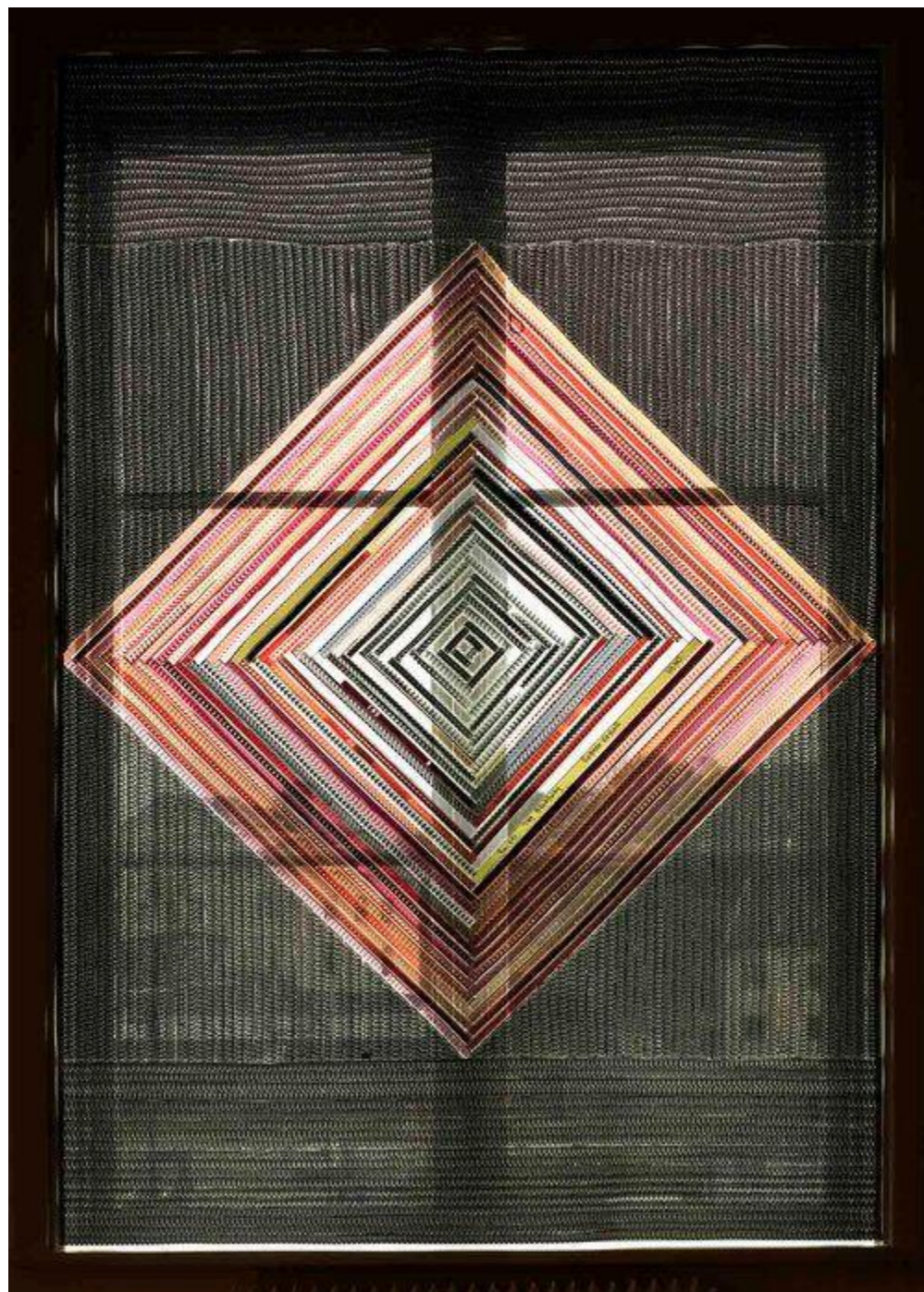


Figure 1: Sabrina Gschwandtner, *What is a Dress?* 2009. 16 mm film, polyamide thread, cotton thread, 72 x 48 in.

***Hands at Work* (2017): The Gendered and Racialised Legacy of Quilt-Making in America**

For her 2017 exhibition *Hands at Work* at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery (Los Angeles), Gschwandtner displayed a series of film quilts composed of footage from the 1981 documentary film *Quilts in Women's Lives*.¹¹ Directed by Pat Ferrero, the film takes part in the wave of feminist artists of the 1960s-80s that fought for the recognition of craftwork as a form of fine art grounded in a specific feminine tradition and legacy. Indeed, the 1960s onward saw a renewal of interest by feminist artists in crafts such as quilt-making, knitting, and macramé, and an attempt to legitimise their place within institutions of the art world and bring attention to centuries of anonymised labour. Particularly, as Elissa Auther notes, these fibre crafts represented an essential point of access into a genealogy of women's productions, and "an alternative history of art making" that had remained unacknowledged for centuries.¹² Critics worked to recast these crafts away from the sphere of domesticity and anonymity and into the public light, all the while highlighting the contradictions of "seeking recognition in the mainstream art world."¹³ Auther adds that "in this context, the once negative associations of fiber or craft with femininity and the home were recast as distinctive and culturally valuable features of an artistic heritage specific to women."¹⁴ Artists like Judy Chicago, Tracey Emin, Joyce Wieland, Faith Ringgold, and Miriam Shapiro among others, reclaimed these crafts in their work, while questioning their association with domesticity. Most famously, Chicago's 1979 installation *The Dinner Party* subverts the domestic setting of a dinner table by honouring thirty-nine women of significance in Western history, whose names are embroidered along the table runner. Chicago worked in collaboration with artisans specialising in needlework and china painting, acknowledging their names on panels that travelled with the exhibition for the first ten years of its history. Similarly, experimental feminist filmmakers turned to craftwork, like Joyce Wieland in *Handtinting* (1967-68), where she applies fabric dyes and needle perforations to found footage of a Job Corps documentary where disenfranchised black and white women are

educated in typing.¹⁵ Aside from filmmaking, Wieland (in collaboration with needleworkers) also produced textile works such as hanging quilts and cushions that combined traditionally female craftwork with political messages targeting issues of feminism and ecology (as with *The Water Quilt*, 1970–71). These feminist multimedia works of art participated in the revaluation of craftwork as a form of fine art, with a grounding in women’s work.

Among the key feminist texts centring on women’s crafts, Patricia Mainardi’s 1972 article “Quilts: The Great American Art” is commonly recognised as essential for the recognition of quilt-making as a quintessential American and women’s art, and reads as a manifesto against the institutional and ideological division of fine arts and craft:

[...] although the sexist and racist art world will, if forced, include token artists, they will never allow them to expand the definitions of art, but will include only those whose work can be used to rubber-stamp already established white male art styles. Because our female ancestors’ pieced quilts bear a superficial resemblance to the work of contemporary formalist artists [...], modern male curators and critics are now capable of “seeing” the art in them.¹⁶

As Mainardi notes, from its origins in the 1660s, needlework was an art for and by women, where they played the roles of “audience and critics.”¹⁷ Far from a uniquely domestic and functional use shrouded in anonymity, quilters displayed their crafts publicly in fairs, churches, and grange halls, often signing their quilts and naming their patterns in acts of recognition. Quilting bees (a get-together for people who sew and quilt, dating back to the eighteenth century) presented women the opportunity to gather in groups (that Mainardi compares to contemporary consciousness-raising groups) and discuss social and political events, as platforms to practice a form of public speech.¹⁸



Figure 2 : Pat Ferrero, *Quilts in Women's Lives*, 1981. 16 mm, 28 mins, documentary. New Day Films.

Pat Ferrero's film *Quilts in Women's Lives* (1980) follows this commitment to providing a platform to women's crafts by giving a voice to a series of quilters in the form of oral histories. Ferrero films each quilter in frontal shots, without offering an overarching voice to organise their individual experiences. Mirroring the structure of the quilts themselves, interviews are juxtaposed without any apparent order, leaving it to the viewers to form conclusions or "patterns" about the film's message.¹⁹ As Anne R. Kaplan notes, "the choice of the quilters (a black, an immigrant, unmarried sisters, an artist, a schoolteacher, early middle aged and elderly women, and so forth) makes the point that the art of quilting belongs to a great variety of women at different stages of life, who derive different kinds of gratification from it."²⁰ The film seems to argue that orality is embedded within the fabric and structure of the quilts, as they become mirrors to the socio-economic

background and the subjectivity of their makers. They are the material embodiment of a history of American women in their diversity.

Indeed, the women of the film choose to connect their quilt-making to questions of patterns and the choice of specific colours, of emotions embedded within the fabric of the quilt, and of the genealogy of patterns and quilts as objects passed down from generation to generation. Joan Mulholland similarly argues that quilts were a “communication genre” as early as the 1700s, through which women could transmit “patterns of speech” intergenerationally in what she terms “language lessons.”²¹ Gschwandtner’s film quilts, while losing the orality of the original documentaries that are sewn together, reproduce this nearly aural quality of the quilts by returning to classical quilt patterns like crazy quilts, diamonds, log cabins, etc.²² If we follow the rhetoric of *Quilts in Women’s Lives*, through her choice of materials, colours, and patterns, Gschwandtner inscribes a form of subjectivity into her quilts. Her own subjectivity is sewn into the quilts, while at the same time she carries a tradition of quilting that includes the “language” of the women that quilted and recorded these patterns before her. Film quilts take on the grammar of quilting, and apply it to a new medium that allows Gschwandtner to refer back to the voices of the women documented in *Quilts in Women’s Lives*.



Figure 3: Lucy Hilty remembering her Mennonite upbringing and her parents' relation to quilting. Pat Ferrero, *Quilts in Women's Lives*, 1981. 16 mm, 28 mins, documentary. New Day Films.

By choosing Ferrero's 1981 documentary as the primary source of her film quilts, Gschwandtner participates in this larger history of feminist reflections on women's crafts and their inclusion in fine arts settings. Before turning to quilting and experimental film, she was most famous for being the founder and editor of the activist knitting zine *KnitKnit* from its inception in 2002.²³ With film quilts, Gschwandtner crosses the boundaries of crafts and fine arts by bringing film and textile together, and exhibiting them as works of art in galleries. Drawing from activist documentaries such as *Quilts in Women's Lives* further addresses this ideological divide. If Ferrero's film echoes the structure and technique of quilts in its editing and structure (through a non-directive approach and the juxtaposition of interviews), the film quilts re-spatialise the footage into material objects, sewn together into visual patterns according to colours and not narration. The very fact that the *Hands at Work* quilts are composed of discarded found footage vividly recalls Mainardi's attack against the disregard of women's crafts by fine arts institutions. Gschwandtner writes that the film strips (Ferrero's documentary, along with other short textile documentaries from the 1950s-80s) were given to her after they were de-accessioned from the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) following the digitisation their collections in 2009. She adds that "not only had the movies' subject matter – mostly that of women creating textiles – been deemed unworthy of archiving, but some of the film had faded or discolored, adding an additional layer of valuelessness."²⁴ First de-accessioned from the FIT, then sorted by archivists at Anthology Film Archives, these documentaries emblemise the gendered archival choices that lead to the dismissal of women's craft as well as women's films.²⁵ This narrative surrounding the rescuing of film from degradation and oblivion is common to the practice of found footage.²⁶ With the film quilts, this rescue from archival loss takes on a political implication, as Gschwandtner inscribes her work in the legacy of 1980s feminist art and craft historians. In the meantime, she distances herself from sacralising the film prints, by cutting and sewing them, and thus deteriorating their initial conditions. Intervening

physically on archival prints through painting, puncturing, scratching, and using chemical solutions marks much of the work of found footage feminist filmmakers, such as Peggy Ahwesh, Cécile Fontaine, Annabel Nicholson, Naomi Uman, and Joyce Wieland among others. These processes enable them to alter the original message of the film and reveal its patriarchal underpinnings.²⁷

If the film quilts offer a reflection on the gendered division between fine art and craftwork, they do so with a special attention to the presence of African American women in the long legacy of women quilters in American history. The film quilt that most prominently tackles this issue is *Elizabeth Keckley Diamond* (2014), a small format quilt depicting the black quilter Elizabeth Keckley in black-and-white film strips forming a central diamond shape. Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818-1907) was born to enslaved parents and sold as a young girl to a North Carolina slave owner. She recounted her life story in her memoirs, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, first published in 1868, chronicling her journey from being enslaved to buying her freedom through her success in her trade as a “slave entrepreneur”, and becoming the dressmaker and confidant of Mary Todd Lincoln.²⁸ One of the most well-known black public figures of quilt-making, Keckley holds a central place in Gschwandtner’s quilt, with four film strips depicting her portrait in a medium close-up, intersecting in a cross in the centre of the composition. These four rows of quilt immediately capture the viewer’s attention and guide their gaze throughout the rest of the composition, representing an unknown African American family. The footage sets Keckley as the clear central figure of this film quilt portrait, acknowledging and asserting the importance of African American women in the history of quilt-making. As Mainardi and Lisa E. Farrington both note, quilting was never limited to a specific class or race in the United States, and the history of the craft reveals a network of influences between Indigenous, African, and European cultures as early as the 1600s.²⁹ Enslaved people such as Keckley often crafted numerous quilts for

those who claimed ownership over them, frequently with highly creative techniques and styles, and it is through her craft as a seamstress that Keckley gained recognition and her eventual freedom. Unlike her other quilts from the series *Hands at Work*, *Elizabeth Keckley Diamond* works in a quasi-monochromatic manner, setting up a stark contrast between the warm coloured background made of film leaders and the cool-toned diamond shape depicting the quilt-maker. This striking contrast and the structure assemble a powerful portrait of Keckley through an allegory of her craft. With her film quilt, Gschwandtner pays homage to a key figure of American history and art.



Figure 4: Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Elizabeth Keckley Diamond*, 2014. 16 mm film, polyester thread, lithography ink, 15 7/8 x 15 13/16 x 3 1/16 in.

Jonathan Walley notes that among the leaders surrounding the black-and-white diamond shape, a couple of celluloid strips depict an ornate coffee pot and what appears to be a painting. These objects function as indexes of wealth and privilege, starkly contrasting in colour and shape with the central imagery of paired down portraits of African Americans, seemingly isolated from this world.³⁰ As Walley writes, Elizabeth Keckley holds a privileged position within this composition, mirroring her social status: “Keckley stands as a mediating figure between the two worlds, more upwardly mobile than a typical black woman but still severely restricted by the structure of the society in which she lived. Her place at the centre of the quilt elevates her as subject but also emblemizes her distance from white society and power.”³¹ On the other hand, these details only emerge upon close examination of the quilt, pulling the viewer into a more complex understanding of this historical figure. This playful push and pull of the quilt, between overall pattern and microscopic details, mirrors the feminist interpretation of quilts as a “secret language of women.”³²

Quilt-Making and Film Editing as “Women’s Work”

If Gschwandtner’s film quilts offer a reflection on the gendered and racialised history of quilt-making, their structural components materialise this history in concrete forms. Made by stitching together celluloid strips of archival films, the quilts reproduce the craftwork that they depict. The delicate work performed by the artist is foregrounded when one approaches the quilts to examine their sutures. Gschwandtner purposefully uses the medium of film in order to recall the labour of film editing. Walley argues that the artisanal labour of sewing spatialises the process of editing, by “reimagin[ing] montage in spatial forms, lending them a concreteness they lose otherwise and throwing into relief the tropes of editing made invisible by narrative action.”³³ Moving beyond cinema as a projected medium, film quilts call attention to the materiality of the celluloid as well as the processes by which it is edited into narrative sequences. Pared down to film strips sewn

together by hand, they offer a reflection on the specificity of cinema as an art form, and the craftwork that goes into film editing.³⁴

This attention to sewing as a materialisation of the labour of editing inscribes Gschwandtner's quilts within a feminist tradition of experimental handmade cinema dating back to the 1970s, along the works of Annabel Nicholson and Jennifer Reeves among others. These filmmakers pay specific attention to suturing and de-suturing as a feminist practice meant to defamiliarise the image of the female body, and more specifically a labouring female body.³⁵ With the experimental film *Light Work I*, Reeves sews together educational footage on a sewing machine, filming extreme close-ups of the sutures.³⁶ She interlaces these shots with footage of women weaving in factories in the film's opening sequence. The extreme close-ups of the sewn footage, juxtaposed with imagery of women's labour formulates a clear comparison between film editing and sewing, calling attention to the gendered labour of editing. Similarly, Gschwandtner often chooses footage of quilters' hands stitching fabric together in close-ups, mirroring her own craft as a film quilter. In her 1973 performance *Reel Time* at the London Film-Makers' Co-op, Annabel Nicholson ran a loop of film through a sewing machine and into a projector, slowly breaking down the celluloid by puncturing it with an unthreaded needle.³⁷ She placed herself in front of the projector, delineating starkly the outline of her body while operating the sewing machine, a symbol of domestic work. Here, the gendered body of the craftsperson and editor is highlighted even more. As Gregory Zinman writes: "[...] in *Reel Time*, in which the seams were the subject of the work and the construction/destruction of the image was laid bare for all to see, Nicholson reintroduced the labor behind filmmaking, and through sewing bound together the notion of 'women's work' and filmmaking."³⁸ The invisibility of the labour of film editors, once projected on screen and embodied by Nicholson, can no longer be ignored. With these experimental works, feminist filmmakers and

performers recall the anonymised and unacknowledged labour of film editors, a position that women overwhelmingly occupied.

The comparison of film editing to a form of feminised domestic labour dates from the early stages of film production. As Leana Hirschfeld-Kroen notes, editors themselves compared their work to sewing and knitting, as this domestic metaphor “opened these jobs up to women”³⁹ while also absorbing their labour into the films themselves, essentially rendering their work unnoticed and anonymous.⁴⁰ Indeed, performing duties that were considered repetitive and technical – such as cutting and pasting negative film together – contrary to the creative work of male authors, the “cutters” were altogether absent from trade presses and film credits.⁴¹ These tedious and labour intensive jobs fell to young working-class women. As technology advanced, and the studio system evolved in the 1930s and 1940s, working conditions changed for female “cutters.” Longer moving pictures and multiple reels made the labour of the editor more visible on screen (as it impacted the narrative more ostensibly). The studio system reacted by segregating the tasks of the editor along gendered lines “film editing split into two subfields: the individual, male-dominated mental artistry of “editing” and the mass feminized handiwork of cutting, splicing, joining, gluing, and lacing.”⁴² Only very few women rose to prominent positions as recognised film editors, as for example Margaret Booth, who began her career as a cutter for D. W. Griffith.⁴³ This form of gendered labour falls under what Kylie Jarrett terms “women’s work,” “the social, reproductive work typically differentiated from productive economics of the industrial workplace.”⁴⁴ This category offers a critical framework to deconstruct the way that creative domestic work – such as weaving, sewing, and knitting – came to be constructed as reproductive and anonymised throughout the consolidation of the Hollywood studio system.

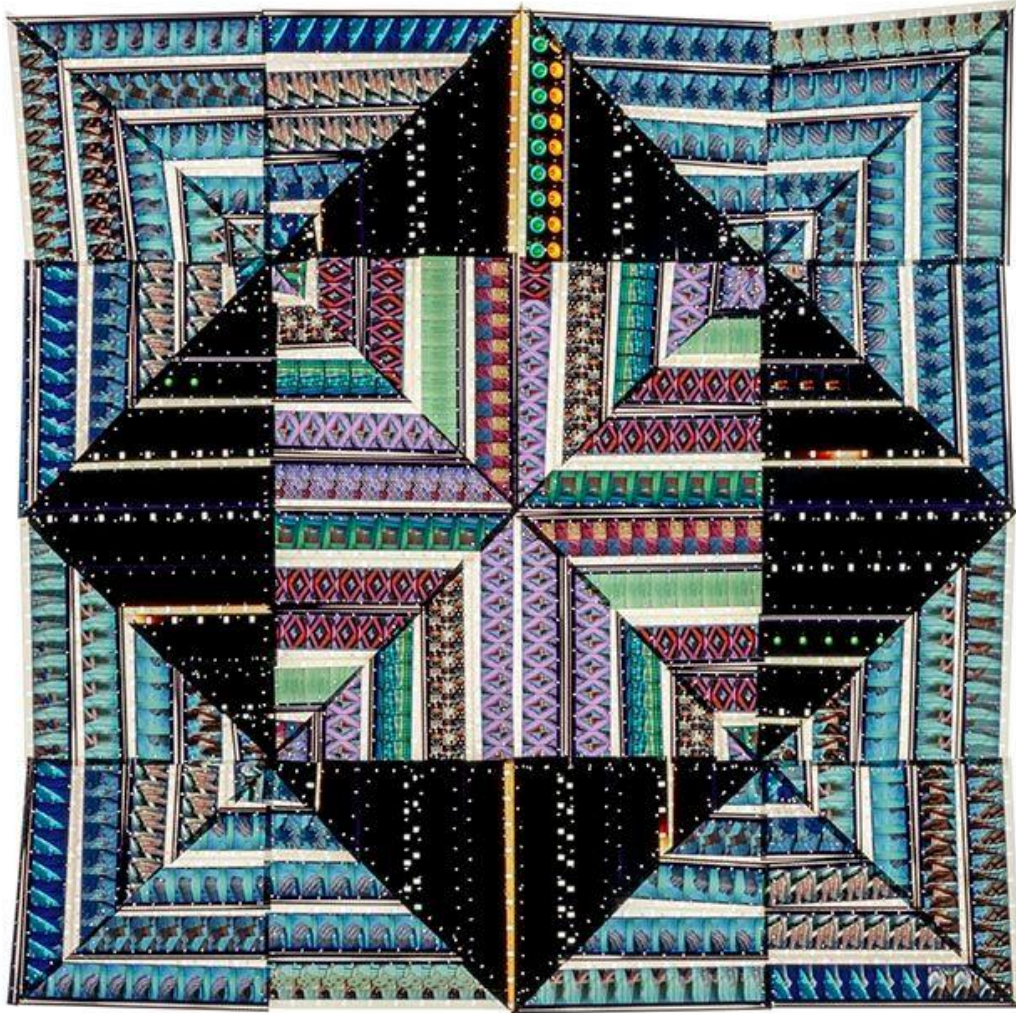


Figure 5: Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Hands at Work (for Pat Ferrero)*, 2017. 16 mm film, polyester thread, 14 7/8 x 14 7/8 x 3 in.

Through the techniques that she uses, Gschwandtner inserts her work within this feminist critique of film labour, as she writes “for me, what related my work more to ‘craft critique’ and to feminist traditions was that the labor of the work was being done by me, with needle and thread or yarn – these things that signify what has historically been labelled ‘women’s work,’ just like film editing has been.”⁴⁵ While reproducing a form of gendered labour with her own body in the fabrication of film quilts, Gschwandtner transcends the reproductive aspect of editing and sewing by calling

attention to it, and placing it at the centre of her works.⁴⁶ Her film quilts condense in material forms the questions of women's work and the appropriation of domestic craft into reproductive labour. Her work often challenges the anonymity of feminised labour by naming the quilters and filmmakers that she represents and borrows from in her titles (like *Elizabeth Keckley Diamond*, 2014). The playful movement between the overall object of the quilt, the microscopic observation of the celluloid's images of working craftswomen, and of the quilting technique sewing these images together formulates a critical argument tying together these elements into a feminist discourse.

Film Quilts as Sensory Vectors of Archival Knowledge

As noted above, Russell defines archiveology as self-reflective history-making process drawing from archival materials. The knowledge it produces is both historical and historiographical, reflecting on its own status as a constructed text. So far, I have shown how film quilts can produce a feminist discourse that confronts the structural absence of women's narratives from the history of film and fine arts. While they use images as documents of a specific women's history, the historical knowledge produced by the quilts is no longer transmitted didactically – as was the case in Ferrero's *Quilts in Women's Lives* – but through the materiality of the quilting process. Knowledge becomes embedded in the quilts' stitches, connecting individual stories and techniques. It is through this alternation between the images and the process of their juxtaposition that Gschwandtner articulates the encounter and interaction of the feminist recovery of crafts like quilting and needlework in the 1960s onward with the contemporary reappraisal of the history of cinema as a one of gendered labour. Through this, Gschwandtner positions her work as part of the legacy of the feminist movement in both the arts and cinema. Particularly, her method of suturing images of craftwork, domesticity, and female community recalls works such as that of Chicago and

Wieland, in their construction of a specific feminist history. Archival images become the grammar to articulate this history.

As objects made from cutting and stitching celluloid strips, Gschwandtner's film quilts materialise the practice of archiveology and encourage an embodied relation to archival materials. To understand this interaction between archival images and viewers, I turn to Baron's theorisation of the way found footage formulates this in terms of a relationship. In *The Archive Effect* (2013), Baron contends that archival images, because of their indexical quality, bring the viewer in "contact" with history.⁴⁷ She adds that the archive enters into a relation with the viewer through these film practices:

This reformulation of archival footage and other indexical archival documents as a *relationship* produced between particular elements of a film and the film's viewer allows us to account [...] for the ways in which certain documents from the past – whether found in an official archive, a family basement, or online – may be imbued by the viewer with various evidentiary values as they are appropriated and repurposed in new films.⁴⁸

Concentrating on the meanings introduced by the confrontation of archival materials to viewers enables Baron to reflect on the multiplicity of interpretative contexts of found footage experiments. In the case of Gschwandtner's film quilts, these contexts range from educational documentaries aimed towards young audiences and textile students, to feminist audiences engaged in the recognition of women's work. Juxtaposed images, Baron claims, carry with them traces of their original intended context. The temporal disparity between intended context and context of reception – often intentional in found footage films and videos – creates the conditions for the recognition of multiple layers of historical experience in the viewer. Film quilts materialise the clash of these various historical and social contexts through their stitches that render visible the constructedness of the artist's message. *Elizabeth Keckley Diamond*, for example, uses tinted blank

leaders to enhance the darkness of the stitches juxtaposing black and white portraits of the quilter with warm coloured shots of ostentatious objects. They immediately appear to be from different class backgrounds, and archival sources, as their colours, compositions, and places in the quilt indicate. Blank leaders, in addition, recall the mediated nature of the images we encounter: they were once part of larger documentary films. This further leads viewers to question their original context of reception. Archival knowledge, in film quilts, becomes a sensory and nearly tactile experience. As I have argued, the film quilts' stitches carry the knowledge of women's labour, and a legacy of women's craftwork. If Ferrero's documentary "flattened" the quilts it depicted by recording them on film, film quilts work to re-materialise them into three-dimensional objects to be experienced physically. They invite a closer inspection, moving the viewers' bodies in and out of their spaces of exhibition. The materiality of their fabric, highlighted by irregular stitching and bright colours, appeal to a sense of touch, especially when exhibited in front of windows.

Furthermore, the film quilts deconstruct the archive as a unified source of historical knowledge. This archival knowledge, as feminist archival theory demonstrates, is rooted in patriarchal order and can only be dismantled through a scrutiny of its constructedness.⁴⁹ As Kate Eichhorn writes: "rather than approach the archive as a site of preservation (a place to house traces of the past), feminist scholars, cultural workers, librarians, and archivists born during and after the rise of the second wave feminist movement are seizing the archive as an apparatus to legitimize new forms of knowledge and cultural production in an economically and politically precarious present."⁵⁰ As Russell notes, Walter Benjamin approached the archive as a "construction site," where fragmentation leads to openness and possibility.⁵¹ Found footage, and film quilts in particular, by editing and juxtaposing images from a variety of contexts, break down the seamlessness of the archive, and expose its construction. Fragments from institutional and family archives cohabit to

formulate new historical knowledge. Quilts mirror this heterogeneity by juxtaposing squares of different film sources, colours, shapes. Their organisation does not follow a narrative impulse, but, rather, it is grounded in more formal implications that hark back to traditional patterns and a legacy of women's craft. What film quilts emphasise specifically is the materiality of archival images as objects subjected to decay and manipulation. Far from the supposed disembodied knowledge of official archives, the footage of the quilts physically reacts to its interactions with the artist and its viewers. These interactions escape the control of archives and their sanitised environment. Gschwandtner, for example, does not hesitate to paint over the footage with lithography ink to create more vivid colours over the film leaders. Her film quilts present and encourage a view of the archive as a series of objects connected by the situated voice of the artist, and as subject to interpretation and sensory encounters.

In choosing the archival material to integrate in her quilts, Gschwandtner refuses to follow an archival logic of the perfect print, favouring instead deteriorated prints and incomplete footage. Her work questions the archival choices leading to the de-accessioning of textile documentaries on women's quilts, in the same vein as Peggy Ahwesh with her short film *The Color of Love* (1994), where she "rescued" degraded pornographic footage from a dumpster.⁵² Ahwesh's film focuses on the graphic patterns emerging from the mould and the leaks, covering the images of two women having sex with each other and a corpse. Both filmmakers emphasise the sensorial engagement with these images and their materiality, calling for an embodied response. If Gschwandtner's quilts do not present the same level of degradation, they similarly reflect on the disregard of archival institutions for women-centred works. Furthermore, film quilts often make use of film leaders, lacking visual images. They sometimes include handwritten notes, or the titles of films, such as the

“Discovering Form in Art” in the film quilt *Arts and Crafts* (2012) that ironically recalls the sudden “discovery” of the formal qualities of quilts by fine arts curators in the 1970s.⁵³

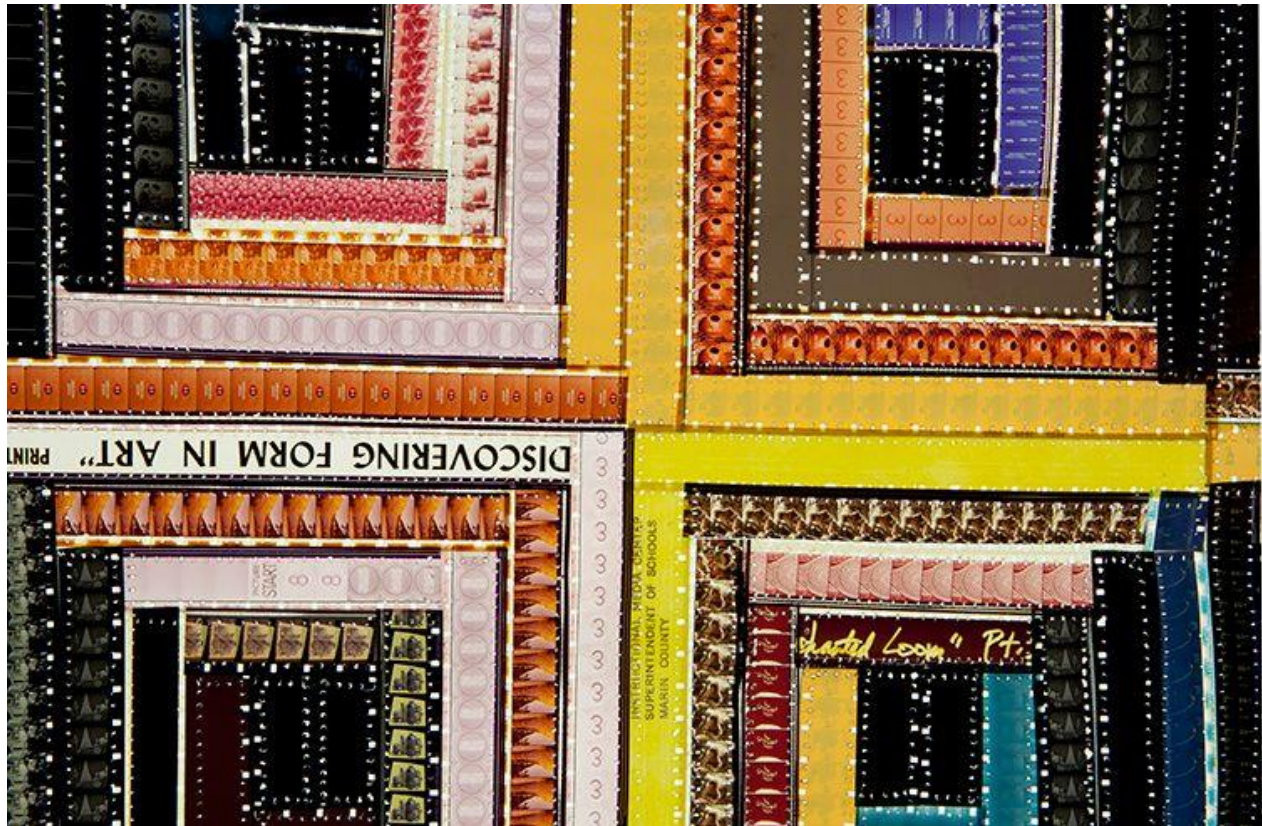


Figure 6: Sabrina Gschwandtner, *Arts and Crafts*, 2012. 16 mm film, polyamide thread, 23 1/2 x 23 in.

By including leaders within her compositions, Gschwandtner expands the purview of the film archive, questioning what constitutes “film” as an object. In her film quilts, every inch of the film strip qualifies as archival material, carrying both formal capacities and historical information. Her work confronts viewers with archival hierarchies. One could wonder how the integration of film leaders into found footage expands the “evidentiary value” that Baron confers to archival materials.⁵⁴ What are the intended contexts of leaders? What traces of history do they carry with them? Gschwandtner’s quilting practice utilises them as she would recycle strips of fabric, granting them a new life and purpose outside of the archive, whilst acknowledging the emotional and subjective traces of history embedded in them.

Conclusion

To conclude, I propose a return to Gschwandtner's 2009 Gustavsbergs Konsthall exhibition *Watch & See*, where she hung film over the windows of the gallery. For later exhibitions Gschwandtner's quilts were displayed against light boxes for fear of their deterioration with sunlight. However, I argue that choosing to hang the quilts over windows in an otherwise empty gallery space crystallised Gschwandtner's reflections on the history of quilt-making and women's work in the film industry. Looking through them provided the viewer with a renewed experience of the cityscape, suddenly filtered through images of crafts and women's hands. The patterns of the quilts overlaid the lines of rooftops, inviting the viewer to step closer and examine the details of the colourful film strips. Casting coloured lights into the gallery itself, film quilts also transcended this space, now imbued with new subjectivities. If (art) history repeatedly ignored and anonymised craftswomen's points of view, these quilts reclaimed them as central in our experience of the city and the art world alike. As Gschwandtner writes, "[t]hey physically engaged the idea of shedding contemporary light on history."⁵⁵ Furthermore, this display mechanism accentuated the materiality of the footage, its weight, sutures, and slow deterioration. Both quilts and celluloid film footage are fragile artefacts that require specific exhibitionary and archival treatment due to their materiality. By taking them out of storage boxes and dark rooms, Gschwandtner exposed their fragility as well as the craftwork that goes into making and conserving them. Her art practice transcends the archive while constantly returning to it, exposing its material components and the labour of its workers.

Gschwandtner's more recent work – the *Cinema Sanctuary Study* series – returns more directly to a feminist film history, and the still-unrecognised labour of female cinema pioneers of the late 1800s to early 1900s, such as Alice Guy-Blaché, Germaine Dulac, and Marion E. Wong. For this

new series, she searched archival collections around the world in a methodology that Russell would identify as archiveology – reprinting footage from their films onto 35mm film stock, cutting, and sewing it into entirely black and white quilt patterns.⁵⁶ She identifies her practice as a form of quilting, salvaging strips of film and fabric to create new patterns – and futures – for the history of film and craftwork. This echoes Kate Eichhorn’s call to consider archival practices as genealogical tactics. In this, Eichhorn follows Wendy Brown’s theorisation of “genealogical politics” as an inquiry into the “past of the present” that renders “the categories constitutive of the present” historical and constructed rather than natural.⁵⁷ This defamiliarising process, for Eichhorn “is not a turn toward the past but rather an essential way of understanding and imagining other ways to live in the present,” and an essential feminist tactic.⁵⁸ Gschwandtner’s archival work – whether it is centred on female cinema pioneer or the reclaiming of quilting as a feminist art – turns to a history of feminist film and artistic tradition to expose the ideology that led to their neglect, and to renew our sensorial interactions with archives in a non-hierarchical, future-oriented process.

Notes

¹ Sabrina Gschwandtner, “16mm Film Quilts Series (2009-2018),” <https://www.sabrinag.com/filmquilts>, Sabrina Gschwandtner, n.d., accessed November 11, 2021.

² Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 22.

³ Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 1.

⁴ Russell, *Archiveology*, 12.

⁵ Russell, *Archiveology*, 22.

⁶ Russell, *Archiveology*, 6.

⁷ Gschwandtner, “16mm Film Quilts Series.”

⁸ Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Tactility and Transparency: An Interview with Sabrina Gschwandtner,” in *Sunshine and Shadow: Film Quilts by Sabrina Gschwandtner*, eds. Glenn Adamson, Sarah Archer, and Julia Bryan-Wilson, 2013, 45.

⁹ Russell, *Archiveology*, 27.

¹⁰ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 7.

¹¹ Pat Ferrero, *Quilts in Women’s Lives*, 16 mm, documentary (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1981).

¹² Elissa Auther, “Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960–80,” *The Journal of Modern Craft* 1, no. 1 (March 2008): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2752/174967708783389896>; See also Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London and New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

¹³ Auther, “Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft,” 31.

¹⁴ Auther, “Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft,” 31.00/00/0000 00:00:00

¹⁵ Joyce Wieland, *Handtinting*, 1967-68, 16 mm, colour, silent. See Kay Armatage, “Joyce Wieland, Feminist Documentary, and the Body of the Work,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13, no. 1-2 (1989): 91-101.

¹⁶ Reproduced in Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 1st ed (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 1982), 343.

¹⁷ Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” 331.

¹⁸ Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” 342; see also Joan Mulholland, “Patchwork: The Evolution of a Women’s Genre,” *The Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 63, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1996.1904_57.x. Mainardi recalls that Susan B. Anthony is said to have made her first public speech during a church quilting bee in Cleveland.

¹⁹ Anne R. Kaplan, “Review: Quilts in Women’s Lives: Six Portraits [Film] by Pat Ferrero,” *The Oral History Review* 18, no. 1 (1990): 123.

²⁰ Kaplan, “Review,” 122.

²¹ Mulholland, “Patchwork,” 58; 59.

²² For further reflection on the importance of the “handmade” as a mark of authenticity and subjectivity, see Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and Other Arts* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

²³ Most of the academic publications on Gschwandtner’s work focus on her knitting work and her involvement with the zine. Recently however, Jonathan Walley dedicated a chapter of his book *Cinema Expanded* to “Film as Weaving” and the formal experiments of Sabrina Gschwandtner, Richard Kerr, and Mary Stark, weaving film strips into sculptural forms. See Jonathan Walley, *Cinema Expanded: Avant-Garde Film in the Age of Intermedia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²⁴ Gschwandtner, “16mm Film Quilts Series.”

²⁵ See, for example, B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71*, 2nd ed (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Jackie Hatfield, “Imagining Future Gardens of History,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 21, no. 2 (2006): 184–91, <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2006-008>; Robin Blaetz, ed., *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁶ One can think, for example, of Peggy Ahwesh’s *The Color of Love* (1994), or Barbara Hammer’s *Nitrate Kiss* (1992).

²⁷ For an account of feminist uses of found footage, see for example the special issue of *Feminist Media Studies*, “Women Without a Movie Camera”. Monica Dall’Asta and Alessandra Chiarini, “Editors’ Introduction: Found Footage: Women Without a Movie Camera,” *Feminist Media Histories* 2, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2016.2.3.1>.

²⁸ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011),

<http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3039500>; For historical analyses of Keckley's labour as a slave, a seamstress and a companion to Mary Todd Lincoln, see Xiomara Santamarina, *Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Janaka B. Lewis, "Elizabeth Keckley and Freedom's Labor," *African American Review* 49, no. 1 (2016): 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2016.0004>; Patty Wilde, "From Slave to Seamstress: Elizabeth Keckley's Rhetoric of Emotional Labor," in *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor*, eds. David Gold and Jessica Enoch (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 31–41,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2234962>.

²⁹ See for example Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art"; Lisa E. Farrington, "Creativity in the Era of Slavery," in *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26–49.

³⁰ Walley, *Cinema Expanded*, 325.

³¹ Walley, *Cinema Expanded*, 325.

³² Mulholland, "Patchwork," 68.

³³ Walley, *Cinema Expanded*, 327.

³⁴ This medium specific discourse is at the centre of Jonathan Walley's definition of expanded cinema. He writes that "expanded cinema neither abandoned the project of specifying cinema and distinguishing it from other art forms, nor cast off cinema's historical traditions, formal conventions, or familiar materials. After an initial, and rather brief, wave of expanded cinema that equated the term with intermedia and promoted the belief that cinema could be anything, a shift occurred whereby cinema's unwieldy and unlimited expansion encountered a reassertion of cinema's specificity an artistic autonomy by film makers and critics. [...] expanded cinema is best seen, I argue, as negotiating between cinema's technological and aesthetic heterogeneity under one hand, and its specificity and historical continuity on the other." Walley, *Cinema Expanded*, 15–16.

³⁵ See Gregory Zinman, "Sewing Light and Bleaching Bodies: Feminist Handmade Film Practices," in *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and Other Arts* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 138–45; and Shana MacDonald, "Voicing Dissonance: Resistant Soundscapes in 1960s Feminist Experimental Film," *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015): 89–107,

<https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2015.1.4.89>. MacDonald analyses the ways that filmmakers Carolee Schneemann, Gunvor Nelson, and Joyce Wieland use "discordant soundtracks [to] defamiliarize the domesticity of these private spaces and critically interrogate the domestic roles of wife, muse, and mother commonly associated with the spaces" (90).

³⁶ Jennifer Reeves, *Light Work I*, 16 mm/HDCAM, 2006.

³⁷ Thomas Elsaesser, in his archaeological approach to the history of the cinematic apparatus, notes that the projector is closely linked to the sewing machine and borrowed from its mechanisms. Thomas Elsaesser, "Digital Cinema and the Apparatus: Archaeologies, Epistemologies, Ontologies," in *Film History as Media Archaeology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 253–266, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048529964-010>.

³⁸ Zinman, "Sewing Light and Bleaching Bodies," 140.

³⁹ Leana Hirschfeld-Kroen, "Weavers of Film: The Girl Operator Mends the Cut," *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 3 (July 1, 2021): 104, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2021.7.3.104>.

⁴⁰ For recent accounts of women's work in the film industry, and the feminised role of the film editor, see Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers

University Press, 2016); David Meuel, *Women Film Editors: Profiles in the Invisible Art of American Movies* (Jefferson, IA: McFarland, 2016); Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018),

<https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt212172p>.

⁴¹ Jane Gaines and Radha Vatsal, "How Women Worked in the US Silent Film Industry," in *Women Film Pioneers Project* (New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2011),

<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-nwqe-k750>.

⁴² Hirschfeld-Kroen, "Weavers of Film: The Girl Operator Mends the Cut," 104–5.

⁴³ Margaret Booth's interviews at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are an invaluable source of information on the labour of women editors in the early 20th century. Kristen Hatch, "Cutting Women: Margaret Booth and Hollywood's Pioneering Female Film Editors," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Radha Vatsal, Jane M. Gaines, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013), <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-t0y9-hv61>

⁴⁴ Kylie Jarrett, "The Relevance of 'Women's Work': Social Reproduction and Immaterial Labor in Digital Media," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 1 (January 2014): 15,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413487607>.

⁴⁵ Bryan-Wilson, "Tactility and Transparency: An Interview with Sabrina Gschwandtner," 40.

⁴⁶ If Gschwandtner's quilts reflect on the labour attached to analogue film editing, feminist scholars like Donna Haraway, Sadie Plant, and Lisa Nakamura expand these considerations into a critique of digital technologies and their similar reliance on racialised women's work for reproductive tasks. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991); Lisa Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 919-941, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2014.0070>; Sadie Plant, *Zeroes + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997).

⁴⁷ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 1.

⁴⁸ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 7.

⁴⁹ See for example Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Simone Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium* (New York, NY: Atropos Press, 2009); Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013); Russell, *Archiveology*.

⁵⁰ Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 4.

⁵¹ Russell, *Archiveology*, 13.

⁵² Peggy Ahwesh, *The Color of Love*, 16 mm, colour, sound, 1994.

⁵³ See Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art."

⁵⁴ Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 7.

⁵⁵ Bryan-Wilson, "Tactility and Transparency: An Interview with Sabrina Gschwandtner," 43.

⁵⁶ Russell, *Archiveology*, 18.

⁵⁷ Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 95.

⁵⁸ Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 9.

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