Needle and Thread

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by

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ABSTRACT

*Needle and Thread* is an expanded cinema performance that involves the projection of 16mm film, archival footage, video, 35mm slide projection, an audio/soundscape and liquid light projection. The performance explores the fibers of connection, the invisible thread that ties together my matriarchy, utilizing the language of cinema to piece together the fragments of memories; Histories that loop and feedback through generations. Using the metaphors of textile weaving and the threading of cameras and projectors, I examine how our minds sutures memory and myth.

A recording of my mother's voice is played throughout the performance from a vintage cassette tape. She describes memories and moments she can recall of my grandmother and great-grandmother, discussing her own lack of memory, particularly when thinking of my childhood.

The performance explores the tension between feeling tethered and untethered to the women before me. Am I cut from the same cloth? How do we reconcile with the torn and missing threads of our childhoods? Are memories mendable like fabric? Can a splice bring clarity to an upsetting past? Are the personas and decisions of the women in my family projected onto me? These are some of the questions I’ve ventured to answer aesthetically in this piece.
PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTION

The theater is black. A tape cassette player is turned on. The faint ethereal sound of a humming projector can be heard. A ghostly country tune is audible for a few moments. My mother begins to speak. She describes my grandmother. The video projector begins to glow. The video is of floating candles in a convex glass intercut with 1950s archival footage of women working at home with fabric and in textile mills. There is also archival footage of cameras and projectors being threaded and being processed in a factory. There are moments of black video that interrupt the archival material, allowing attention to shift to the voice alone and the other media projected on the screens.

“My mom...is and was...still is...a spitfire” The slide projector is switched on; an image of a woman leaning against a railing in the country is seen. 35mm slides progress over the course of the performance depicting family vacations and the mothers and grandmothers from another time. The dowser on the overhead projector is flipped up. A small square matte covers the top. Slowly, I pull down 4 rows of 16mm film covering the
entire square. I investigate the frames with a film loop. I bring the loop up to light of the overhead projector and then flip the dowser down, covering the overhead projector.

“You know, she was a wild child...” The dowser is flipped up. Two strips of film taped together are already there. I bring a magnifying glass close to the light and bring it down to the film. Slowly, I split the two strips of film from each other. Once the two strips are no longer tethered by tape, I bring the strips up to the light. The dowser is brought down.

“...My Avô, which is Portuguese for grandma...” The dowser is flipped up. A smaller rectangle matte is now on the overhead projector. I bring a needle and thread up to the light of the projector, bringing it down to the matte. I then take the two newly separated strips of film and slowly sow them together using the sprocket holes. I lay the thread and needle on the surface. I investigate the two with a magnifying glass, slowly bringing the magnifying glass up to the light source of the overhead projector. The dowser is flipped down.

Fig. 7 (left): Archival Footage, Prelinger Archives, 2019. Fig. 8 (right): Archival Footage, Prelinger Archives, 2019.
“I saw the decline in my grandmother.” The dowser is flipped up. A small round matte has been placed onto the overhead projector. I slowly spin a small petri dish of bleach. I take a strip of film and dip it into the bleach. Pulling the film horizontally in and out of the potion, holding both ends of the strip. This process continues until the emulsion on the film is gone. I spin the petri dish of film slowly. I bring the film up to the light. The dowser is flipped down.

My mother begins to reminisce about memories from her own childhood and what purpose memories serve. The overhead projector is turned off during this segment. My mother describes moments where she has painful flashbacks from her childhood. The dowser on the overhead projector is flipped up. The round matte is still present, this time with a tall glass cylinder in place of the petri dish. I pour a concoction of nail polish remover and water into the cylinder. I cut pieces of the bleached film into the cylinder with scissors. I add red dye to the potion slowly spinning the cylinder. The dowser is then brought down.
Imagine having the three of you... The dowser is flipped up. A large convex class is placed on the overhead projector. Three lit tea candles are spun slowly. The overhead projector is turned off. The slide projector is turned off. The video projector is dowsed. The candles are blown out. The tape recorder is stopped.

**AESTHETIC APPROACH**

Concerning the aesthetic approach, it was important that each medium and technique that was applied had meaning and purpose. I wanted to move from one projection and physical act to the other fluidly, seamlessly. I also felt that it was necessary to physically connect to what was happening on screen.

I was inspired by visual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s piece, *Untitled (March 5)* #2. It consists of two burning light bulbs mounted on a wall in porcelain sockets attached to intertwined wires. The subtitle of the piece is the birthday of his partner who had recently died. The bulbs allude to their close relationship and to the unknown: which life would burn out first?

What visual metaphor could I use to depict the measures of distance I’ve felt between myself and the women in my family? The feelings of connection come in waves - they recede and subside depending on the turbulence caused by life. The performance is all about illumination, what light can reveal and conceal concerning ourselves and the stories we tell ourselves to be true. A physical object felt necessary, a light source of some kind, faced with the variable of chance; of being extinguished. How do I make these light sources dance with the element of chance?
The inspiration for the candles came from Remedios Varo, a surrealist painter whose work rivals that of Hieronymus Bosch (but is much less known).

Towards the end of her life, Varo painted one of her few pieces without human life: *Still Life Resurrecting*. Reality is capsized; cyclical motions go awry, yet those cycles are necessary for creation. The element of chance is at work in this image.

There is a sense of immediacy in this painting. The change must happen and will happen now, not in some distant world or time, but here in the real world with unearthly aid. The candles are not just illuminating the objects, but are also the source of the painting’s energy. And what we illuminate is the feast in which we consume. (Lauter, pg. 86)

![Still Life Resurrecting by Remedios Varo](image)

**Fig. 11: Painting, *Still Life, Resurrected*, 1963 by Remedios Varo**

Thinking about ways in which I can make the formal personal, I decided to film candles in a large clock face full of water. Three candles with multiple meanings: the self,
the women in my family, the memories that fizzle and fade and myself and my three siblings, the literal light of my mother’s life.

First the water is poured. Lit candles are placed into the clock face one at a time. The clock face spins (clockwise). The motion represents the passage of time. The water represents the element of chance. The film ends when the candles are extinguished by breath. This is important to note because by illuminating my mother’s stories, I am extinguishing a pattern and giving way for new meaning to spark.

I recorded the candles in the clock face on two different mediums: video and 16mm film. The ethos being that they are speaking a cinematic language, vying for illumination. Which will speak louder? A question I ask myself all the time: is the transition from film to video inevitable? Is there room for both, or am I holding on to a medium that is bound for imminent demise? All preservation systems have elements of decay, from film to analog video to digital video and memory. The capacity for recording whether physical or technologically assisted has the seeds of its own demise and fallibility. How do we compromise myth and truth?

It was essential to capture the moment in which these three candles (people/memories/frames) were ignited, brought to conscious being and to capture the process of ignition and extinguishing of a myth, a story, memory or a thought.
AESTHETIC APPROACH

_Needle and Thread_ utilizes mediums that most contemporary artists and thinkers might consider antiquated. The decision to use analog media formats was deliberate. Each visual and sonic element was carefully chosen. Each decision depended on the answer to the following question: can this image or sound transcend time? I wanted to be able to make the audience believe that yes, this is my mother speaking and yes the photos and film images are of her family. But both of these statements are not necessarily true.

**Overhead Projector Performance Work** (Illuminating, destruction machine.)

It was important that this piece was a live performance. The act of remembering is a kind of performance itself. We are constantly physiologically retrieving memories. The element of chance in possibilities of the performance underscores the possibility that the memory may not be retrieved; it is not 100% guaranteed and reliable. A performance of the threading, the act of suturing is not hidden as in the illusion of the Hollywood system but made apparent and human.

The performance work conducted with the overhead projector took the longest to master and was the hardest to integrate into the rest of the symbols and metaphors generated by the other mediums at work. I knew that I wanted to rip apart and deconstruct film live, but how and with what tools? How can I connect the recorded material with what is happening live? The answer became clear once I began using a 35mm film loop to investigate the frames of 16mm film. When I drag the loop across the
sprockets of the filmstrip, the reflected light on the screen creates the allusion that film is moving. One can discern that I am investigating, not only the memories mentioned by my mother, but the movement of frames themselves. What does it mean to break the movement of a linear line? By breaking the linear line, I’ve given myself room to expand my perspective on the past. This led the idea of splitting the film in two, the act of the cut, the separation between mother and daughter. The next step was the bleach bath. The melting of emulsion represents the disintegration of my great-grandmother’s, my grandmother’s and my mother’s memories. The same strip of film is then cut with scissors and dropped into a pool of acetate. Acetate dissolves film completely. Representing the final act of destruction to a memory, a relationship, a moment.

**Found 16mm Film and Candle Footage**

I decided very early on in the process that I would include 16mm film. It is a medium that is time-period specific, but can also be used to explore multiple temporal dimensions. It was also a medium used to make home movies, before the popularity of super 8mm film in the 1950s. If I was going to explore the pasts of the women in my family, it was essential to use media that could easily be associated with those characters and the metaphors of fabric weaving, textile creation. It also represents me as a maker, a seamstress in my own right, weaving the fabric of stories with frames. It is important to note that the 16mm film and 35mm slides are not images of my family. My mother purchased the film and 35mm slides at a yard sale. During her narration, she explains how she doesn’t have a lot of memories of her children after they were born. The use of
the found footage depends the irony that our family needs to purchase the memories of others to fill in the gaps.

**Archival Footage (Video)**

The Archival material of the textile factories and the women working within them was found via the Prelinger Archives, an online resource of works in the public domain that do not have copyrights which can be used freely. This footage became the key to connecting all the metaphors together. From the live performance work being done on the overhead projector and the women in the home movie slides and 16mm film. It ties together the themes of sowing, mechanical threading and work of women. The material was originally shot on 16mm film. The color and textures evoke memories and bends the temporal distance between myself and the labor that the women in my family have done in the past. It was important to choreograph the visuals to match the processes that I put the physical film through on the overhead projector.

**Video Footage (candles)**

The decision to record the candles floating in the convex glass was made in order to connect the 16mm projected and the candles that would be later lit and blown out on the overhead projector. It also speaks to the various mediums at play. Memories are now recorded with video signals, a transition in the documentation of our lives.
**Sound Recording**

Recording the interview with my mother over the phone was not intentional: It was practical as we live in different states, but the texture creates another layer of temporal distance, an ethereal aesthetic that benefits the setting in which I am creating for the piece. To add a roundness to the recording, I created a soundscape, incorporating sounds of fabric being pulled, rope tightening, a 16mm projector running, etc. The same type of delay and echo filter was used for each one. There is also the echo of a country song entitled “Thank God for a Mother Like Mine” a song written and performed by the daughters of Kitty Wells. All of the women in my family have an affection for country music. The words are barely audible, but the suggestion of the song acts as a binding agent to all the materials and images at work.

**Slide Projector**

The slide projector images provide proof to the narrative being spoken by my mother; a visual signifier of the moments that she is describing. Most of the images are of family vacations that have disintegrated and have been affected by mold. This will act as a metaphor for the memories in which my mother wishes she had been with my grandmother and the moments she regrets not remembering with me. The act of magnifying and cutting the images with scissors related to the act of magnifying and cutting images live is a performance of making visible the hidden act of editing and selecting clips and a the performance of a zoom in, mirroring the psychological acts of memories that could have been my mothers.
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This performance has evolved immensely over the past year, partially due to the extensive research that was conducted regarding how artists of the past and present were performing and posing questions through similar mediums. A good portion of my work meditates heavily on memories - how they form and deteriorate, neurologically and emotionally.

I began the process by trying to visualize how the brain recalls a moment. What would the process of deterioration feel like on screen? The research and practice for this performance lead to a revised question: how do these processes shape our own narratives and myths?

Performance art has always fascinated me. There is nothing quite like being suspended in a moment by a performer, leaving your emotions in their hands. I felt that it would take a monumental amount of courage for me to ever consider trying. What would it be like to leave the comfort of the box in which I place images and expand outward? Producing a performance piece was completely new to me, but I was determined to produce a work that I felt empowered to perform.

My first inclination was to place myself in front of an audience, to act not only composer and mediator, but also illuminator and projection. But it became clear that this was not my vision. I realized that there were ways to perform that did not mean facing the audience. The performance became screen-based.
Moving image film is a part of all that I do. It was such a relief and revelation when the film was placed in my hand. I could see and feel all the frame per second, I could cut the film with scissors and splice the film back together with tape. The clarity that comes with physically taking apart and putting something back together invigorates my passion for image making.

I knew that I wanted physical film and projection, but what was the context? Why did I want to perform it? What’s the importance?

My first inclination was to examine the structure and systematic workings of the film camera. I determined that the loop formers within the camera were the part of this system that felt significant to me. Loop formers create the perfect amount of tension in order for the film to be pulled through the camera smoothly. This relates to the tension I feel between being tethered and untethered to the women in my family. How is that tension sustained in my own life? I believe the answer is through the stories that are passed down through the generations. The stories are the loop formers of our conscious self. There has always been a need in me to move forward, which at the same time meant moving away from my family. But the frames keep moving, the claw continues to pull down frames in the camera, the tension of the loops unwavering. There is something powerful about slowing down and illumining was has been exposed. I have given myself the chance to pause and reflect. A privilege my ancestors did not have.

During my research I inevitably stumbled upon Proust. I was intrigued by his principles of seeing and how we shape our realities. His cinematographic principle conforms to the continuity of normal experience. (Shattuck, 30) This reminded me of
how projected film presents us with the illusion of movement, of linear thought. The montage principle relates to the principles of editing - the Kuleshov effect. Any images placed together will create a meaning not possible on their own, creating a new conflict and tension. Films employ both the cinematographic and montage principles. A process in which two photographs of the same object are taken at slightly different angles and are viewed together creates a stereoscopic image. This kind of image creates an impression of depth and solidity. The stereoscopic principle allows for multiple images to live and breathe together, without the restraints of time. We need multiple images and memories to create a full image of the past. Proust’s principles felt crucial in conjuring my own philosophy.

Which lead to the crucial question: what is the tension of this piece? What is my allegory? I decided to work with tangible metaphors and to keep them as simple. I knew that light projection was going to play a role, but what could I pull from the everyday? How can I describe what distance feels like between the present and a memory and the frustration that is felt trying to bring them to the light? My grandmother suffers from dementia and her ability to recall memories declines with each passing day. Part of the goal of this piece was to evoke what that tension feels like within my grandmother’s mind.

Something physical had to be changing during the performance. I knew that I wanted to stay away from very obvious causes and effects. How can I delay those effects and let those metaphors build in a way that was fresh? I decided on 16mm film, 35mm slides, overhead projection, live sound recordings and video.
Without having content in mind, I began with configuring the process of the performance. In hindsight, this may not have been the best decision, but I believed so much that the content would take shape in my mind once the processes became clear.

The present needed to challenge our perception of the past, there had to be a balance of mystery and clarity. I knew that layering and sampling were going to be crucial. I started to consider drawing from myths, female heroes from ancient Greek and Roman myths. Or why not replace females for male heroes? I then started to consider the formation of myths themselves. What is failure to a mythic male hero opposed to a mythic female heroine?

While reading *Women As Myth Makers* written by Estella Lauter I discovered that a myth is a linguistic transaction and that we are consciously mediating between fiction and belief, the modality between language and whatever it is that lies beneath or beyond language. A myth closes the gap between event and meaning. The archetypal system in which most myths work are patriarchal. Myths have been primarily written by men. The revision of the construction of female myths is long overdue. Can female myths work within the system of archetypal myth making that exists? Or does a new system need to be created in order to evoke the female experience? I realized how heavily I rely on the myths I’ve created surrounding the females in my family. Their stories are filled with pain and tragic situations. Their lives became my cautionary tales. But there must be more. In order to rekindle my connection with them, I needed to deconstruct and re-envision those images and stories myself.
After the interview with my mother, I could see the form and content merging together. The play with color, texture and words on the projector was finally integrating with the swirling candles in the bowl. This piece is now so much more than performance. It has proven to be an opportunity to exercise ghosts, a ritual in the reconfiguration of my narrative. By engaging with the metaphor of sowing, I was able to create my own cinematic poetry.

Through the language of cinema, I permeated the void that I have been trying to fill for years. My initial intention was not to make a personal piece, but I believe that I have successfully married my formal approaches with the rich content that my mother provided. My hope is that this will encourage others to reflect on the patchwork of stories and images that make up their own narratives.

EXHIBITION

There are various arenas in which this piece could be exhibited. I envision it working well in gallery and museums focusing on expanding film beyond the single channel screen, as well as in educational settings. This could mean performing for students working in traditional forms of media making, particularly nonfiction storytelling. The performance will be recorded onto video, expanding its audience and reach.
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