

Leftovers:¹ Performing Gleaning²

Brianne Waychoff

(The stage takes a diamond shape, with upstage center and downstage center being the vertical points

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¹ Footnotes are a type of leftover, a remainder, parts of thoughts relegated to the margins of the page. In this script the footnotes serve as documentation of the thought process and research that went into the creation of this performance piece, which breathes life into these theories onstage. While I could have reworked this script into a more traditional essay, I chose the footnote structure to evoke the partiality of the leftover and the process of gleaning as well as the marginality of women's work. These notes indicate the fragmented conversation I had with myself during the creating of and reflection on this performance.

² In "Killing Dillinger," Michael Bowman issues the following call: "In seeking to release knowledge from the vagaries of memory and performance, science has given us an impoverished sense of ourselves and of truth. Perhaps what we need now is a method that begins with *pronuntiatio* and *memoria*, that begins with performed memories, and looks for a style, an arrangement, and a logic of invention that will serve them, rather than vice-versa." (349). Rachel Hall heeds this call in her essay "Patty and Me" where she "performs memories" that arise at the intersection of the Patty Hearst visual archive and her experiences growing up. This essay similarly finds the "logic" of needlepoint instructions as framing device for memories evoked in relation to *The Gleaners*. This script calls upon the mystery method of creative research which is informed by post-structural language theories where in the author-researcher-performer investigates a subject and their relationship to it, in the process uncovering traces of their own story through the inter-textual production it constitutes. Michael Bowman implies the mystery is "performed memories" (349) and it is a type of memory building as one moves through a subject. Through the constructed nature of the mystery the constructed nature of the self is affected. The researcher discovers and produces knowledge, investigating inter-subjects as they arise through the various discourses, personal, popular, and professional, that constitute them. The product illustrates what she discovers and she understands and relish's the fact that the mystery is always incomplete and partial.

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of the diamond. A long piece of muslin falls from the flies to the floor, softening the upstage center corner of the playing space. The end of the muslin is wrapped around a large wheel that looks like a spool, anchoring the muslin in place. There are eight small piles of dirt placed around the stage, one at the foot of the muslin, the rest scattered. House up slowly as the performer enters carrying a cassette player. She plugs it in and pushes play. We hear the sound of an old answering machine tape:³

Bill this is Oscar . . . Bill . . . just checking.

A series of beeps that sound like Morse Code. Followed by a new voice:

This is 3964172. At the sound of the tone leave your name and number and a small message and we'll get back to ya. Thanks.

More beeps followed by pauses and white noise with the sound of the tape clicking on and off intermittently. A child's voice sings:

Zip a dee do dah Zip a dee ay my oh my what a wonderful place.

Dial tone. More beeps. Followed by the first voice heard:

Bill this is Oscar I thought maybe you might be home by now but beings you ain't why I'm going on to bed. Talk to you later. OK.

Sound of the phone being hung up. More beeps. An extended dial tone followed by more beeps and high-pitched sounds of interference. The child's voice speaks:

³ This recording begins a string of recordings that occur throughout the piece. This practice has several aims. First low-fidelity and low-tech of the handheld tape recorders that play the recordings emphasize the hand-made-ness of the piece and its subject matter. Secondly, it indicates an in sampling on several levels that are intimated in this piece: sampling sounds by taking a portion of one recording and using it as an instrument or voice in another, as a way to think about gleaning as in collecting incomplete parts, or samples, and as a way to think about sewing and/or stitching as in picking out samples of fabric or picking out samples of yarn that are then put together. Samplers are artifacts made through needlepoint and are a means of disseminating information. One could think of them as the art of information sharing. Samplers record information. They commemorate events such as weddings or baptisms. They document the alphabet. They verify births. They show family trees. They tell you how much you or someone you know has grown and how long it took them to do so. They embroider, cross-stitch, or needlepoint the stitches of your life, rites of passage, history, and they also record stitches as stitches. Before printing, samplers were the way both designs for future pieces and information were passed along. This was often seen as women's work and taught to girls in school. An interest in sampling corresponds to the dissemination of information and the idea of gleaning. This particular tape was gleaned from a box found in the author's grandfather's home following his death. The label on it read "Save for Brianne."

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Oh sorry. I forgot. Ummmmm. Oh this is Brianne just calling you back cuz you wanted me to and so I'm fine today and I just wanted to have a little conversation with you so you can call me back at any time. I am calling at 8:17 pm umm October 12th 1989. Please return the call as soon as you can. Thanks.



Figure 1⁴

While the previous tape plays the performer pulls a string from a pile of dirt and ties it as a clothesline across the space. This pile of dirt also contains clothespins, which she attaches to the string-cum-clothesline. Throughout this first scene, she assembles a dress form pulling a stool, a mannequin bust, a shirt, skirt, apron, and headscarf from under the seating units to create the form.⁵ She also pulls an

⁴ All images courtesy of Christopher Krejci.

⁵ The image of the dress form is used to cover a great deal of territory in this piece, and because it persists throughout the entirety of the performance, interacted with in varying ways, it takes on different meanings. While not defining the nexus of meanings it exists in, it is worth noting that it constitutes what Foucault refers to as “a profusion of entangled events” (155). Likewise, it does not reveal “a forgotten identity, eager to be reborn, but a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis” (161). Just as the dress form is actually a bricolage of various elements, the interpretations derived from it also exist in ways that are connected, yet separate.

apron from under the seating units that she puts on herself. When the answering machine tape ends the performer switches the tape and pushes play on a hand-held cassette player to be hung around the dress form's neck once fully assembled. The following text is heard throughout the scene from two alternating hand-held tape recorders that the performer operates. The recorders are far enough apart that the performer cannot touch them both at the same time and must move to reach and operate them.)

Tape #1:

The word is passé. What does it mean to glean? It is not known. It is forgotten.⁶

Tape #2:

And she went, and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers.⁷
Piecemeal they this acre first, then that; Glean on, and gather up the whole estate.⁸

(pause)

What is left? What did you leave me with?! Well you have to tell me.
I love to be responsible for the whole thing.⁹

Tape #1:

To gather slowly and laboriously, bit by bit.
To gather (grain or the like) after the reapers or regular gatherers.
To learn, discover, or find out, usually a little by little or slowly.
To collect or gather anything little by little or slowly.
To gather what is left by reapers.
Glanner, make a collection.
To collect in scattered or fragmentary parcels, as the grain left by a reaper, or grapes left after the gathering.
To collect with patient and minute labor; to pick out; to obtain.¹⁰

⁶ This contrasting of what is known and what is forgotten is a useful for thinking about genealogies of history and performance as well as official and unofficial histories. Matthew Goulsh addresses composer Morton Feldman's ideas on forgetting in "Structural Strategies for Organizing Time." Feldman argues we should not ask what we are forgetting to do, but ask instead what we continue to do. In the face of the lack of memory, rather than trying to unearth a mystery, he asks what persists. By considering what persists, we begin to understand how to undo it and look at it as productive of a history. In forgetting there is a remembering and ideas only become ideas when we value and redo them; not just repeating, but re-doing.

⁷ *The King James Bible*. Ruth 2:3.

⁸ Donne, John.

⁹ We can never be responsible for the whole thing, but only our fragmentary views and the threads we choose to follow. While the goal of the historiographer is to include differing histories with respect and attention, there is always a partiality through that which they do not attend to, those directions they do not follow, and those voices their voice leaves out.

Tape #2:

Those hungry people who live on the leftovers the rest of us have discarded, and those, like herself, who create art of the images and materials they collect.¹¹ It's a way to meet her, meet him. It's exaggerated, but, really, I give enough of myself, so they come to the people that I make them meet. And I don't think that we forget them. Because the people are so unique, so generous. He lost a job, he lost a wife, he lost the kids. I put a lot of energy to make them look good, express clearly things, including the pain, the hassle, the difficulty to live, to eat. Keep the flow. Very little is planned. I don't have a list. I have to find them. It doesn't break my energy. They raise beautiful questions; they speak to me; they tell me personal things; they want to be involved.

One hand is always gleaning. On the other hand it is very macrophoto. You know what is macro? You can approach things very near. Hands are the tools. In a way it was like touching his hand of the film over the years. And when he told me that, I cried.

Tape #1:

I am strict. I am structural. Following my intuition. Following my connection. You go to the right thing, to the right place, to the right image. People live off our leftovers. People feed themselves with what we throw. And I say "we" because it's you, it's me – it's everybody. A woman working with her intuition and trying to be intelligent. Seeing. Discovering. Trying to be clever. Doing cinécriture.¹²

¹⁰ Definitions from *Dictionary.com*.

¹¹ Leftovers have contested beginnings: they are both discarded and collected. Regarding contested beginnings Foucault writes: "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (142). He goes on further in a footnote, to connect this to dialectics by noting, "If the same is found in the realm and movement of dialectics, the disparate presents itself as an 'event' in the world of chance" (142-3). Thus, at the beginning is the disparate event of gleaning, which involves both discarding and collection.

¹² The term "cinécriture" is a neologism of Agnès Varda's used to describe her style of expression. She defines it as: "The cutting, the movement, the points-of-view, the rhythm of filmmaking and editing have been felt and considered in the way a writer chooses the depth of meaning and sentences, the type of words, number of adverbs, paragraphs, asides, chapters which advance the story or break its flow" (BAM/PFA). This word can be connected with *écriture féminine*, "an ethical writing style (which women in particular can access) that is able, through a phonetic inscription of the feminine body, its pulsions and flows, to open up and embrace the difference of the other" (O'Grady 6). *Écriture féminine's* use of the body as both a metaphor and a site of writing offers a way of understanding the body, and by extension history, in constant flux. It is a way of writing history differently and of writing different histories.

It is well-done if it is well-written.

Choosing your attitude toward people, toward actors.
Then choosing the editing, the music.
Choosing contemporary music.
Choosing the tune of the mixing. Choosing the publicity material,
the press book, the poster.
It's a hand-made work.
That I really believe.
But what choice do they have?

Tape #2:

I mean I enjoy the shape of things, and the shape of things
including yourself, the wrinkles, the lines, the veins,
this is the beauty, the same thing you look at on a tree
and you see how you know an old tree has these
incredible shapes. And you say 'Ah, what
a wonderful olive tree'. Why couldn't you say,
'What a wonderful hand'? Do
you understand that?¹³

(DANCE #1: The performer executes the first of what will become a series of dances. All have the same choreography but each is positioned differently on the floor with a different orientation to the audience. These dances are a combination of movements borrowed from Tatsumi Hijikata's butoh piece Girls Picking Herbs and Jules Breton's painting The Recall of the Gleaners. Each dance ends when the performer moves to a pile of dirt, grabs a bit of thread and needle from this pile, and slowly and carefully pulls it out to reveal a potato strung to the end of the thread. During the dance the following is heard from a recording run through the sound system. As indicated in the script only the sound during the dances, the quote near the end as the performer rearranges the piles of dirt, and the sound for the final video comes through the sound system - the rest is from tape recorders onstage.)

Recorded: "Never forget the material you are working with, and try always to use it for doing what it can do best: if you feel yourself hampered by the material in which you are working, instead of being helped by it, you have so far not learned your business any more than a would-be poet has, who complains of the hardship of writing in measure and rhyme. The special limitations of the material should be a pleasure to you, not a hindrance: a designer, therefore, should always thoroughly

¹³ Agnès Varda in an interview by Andrea Meyer.

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understand the process of the special manufacture he is dealing with, or the result will be a mere *tour de force*.



Figure 2

On the other hand, it is the pleasure of understanding the capabilities of the special material, and using them for suggesting (not imitating) natural beauty and incident, that gives the *raison d'être* for decorative art.”¹⁴

(The performer completes the dance, pulls the threaded potato to the dress form and begins to stitch the thread to the dress form.)

¹⁴ William Morris, architect, artist, writer, textile and furniture designer and a major force in the Arts and Crafts Movement in England in the nineteenth century speaking specifically about textiles, though the ideas are also applicable to the entire process and philosophy Morris subscribed to throughout his working life. The ideas may be relevant as well to the making of genealogies of history and performance and the joys, frustrations, and care that come along with such an endeavor. Found in Naylor, page 104.

CANVAS

(Speaking to the audience and loosely stitching the potato to the dress form so that the potato still touches the ground. This action continues throughout the section until there is no thread left at which point the performer moves throughout the space directly addressing the audience.)¹⁵ Number One. Canvas. Needlepoint canvas is usually made of cotton. The cotton makes it easy to wash and handle. It is open-weave and comes in a variety of mesh sizes (or degrees of “openness”).

The size of canvas you choose will also depend upon the thread you plan to use. The thread should glide smoothly through the mesh. If the mesh is too small it will shred the thread. If the mesh is too large the thread will not cover the canvas and the canvas will show through. Not a good look!

So when choosing a mesh size you need to consider not only the design you want to stitch, but also the thread you plan to use.¹⁶

(Performer pushes play on Tape #1):

Tape #1

This needlepoint rendering of Jean François Millet’s 1857 oil painting, *The Gleaners*, once hung in the Fairfax home of Peggy Joanne Caviness Waychoff Gaffney. It was a gift for her second husband, Vincent. The story goes that, during his childhood, Vincent’s parents had a black and white print of the image displayed in their home.¹⁷ When his parents passed and

¹⁵ In *Land and Environmental Art* Jeffrey Kastner draws attention to the changes to performance art made by women artists. From Dada to Aktionism, male practitioners took a behavioral approach that was often narcissistic, “anarchic, pointedly non-productive and ultimately pessimistic in its origins” (15), Women artists reintroduced the banal and everyday as raw artistic material. Kastner writes: “Because women’s work had always been regarded as existing apart from the kinds of momentous activities—wars, conquest, exploration—that conventional readings of history placed at the forefront of social evolution, it provided a powerful basis for a subversive new practice that would be at home outside the structures of power. When women artists began to query, contextualize and purposefully incorporate the potential and limitations of traditional female roles into their practice—rather than repudiate them as a kind of nostalgic, prosaic, theatrical clutter as Modernism would have had it—they began to change the very essence of art practice” (15-16).

¹⁶ All instructional needlepoint text in this piece is adapted from the “How To” section of the website *Needlepoint-For-Fun*.

¹⁷ The needlepoint, the black and white print, nor the image of *The Gleaners* is ever seen in this performance, though they are always present. Carol Mavor’s “braid of invisibility,” created by intertwining of select works of Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, and Irigaray, is a strategy used to make subjects (in)visible. This (in)visibility, “far from making her disappear, renders her flesh a palpable-palpating specter. Though you may not see her, she will touch you” (195). There is

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the family farm was sold, Vincent was given the print as it had always been known to be very special to him. We might ask ourselves, why? Why was this image so important to him? What did it signify to him?¹⁸

(Performer speaks to the audience) The first thing you need to do is bind the edges with masking tape. OR Instead of masking tape you can hem the edges with your sewing machine. This will avoid any frustration further down the track with the masking tape pulling off. It especially likes to do this in hot and humid weather!

Before you start your needlepoint stitches, lay your canvas onto some thick paper (or cardboard is best) and draw around the edge of the canvas. We will use this drawing later when we come to “block” your canvas once it has been stitched.

(DANCE #2: During the dance the following is heard recorded through the sound system.)

Recorded:

(Under the text music from The Gleaners and I plays)

My hands keep telling me that the end is near.
Potato gleaning.
Piles of potato roots dirt.

always a trace left when reversing the inside and outside, and this trace, or remainder, is the invisible; “body, which is ‘not there,’ yet it is ‘not, not there’” (198). In this performance, the image touches and is felt, but is never seen. It is created in the mind of the audience rather than shown to them. In this way it also exceeds pinning down.

¹⁸ As discussed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the museum effect occurs when daily life becomes is experienced as representation. We begin to see the mundanity of our life as a performance, a document, as a book, as something special and worth attending to beyond the common-sense, day-to-day reality of our activity. Museums transform the way we look at artifacts by making them appear special due to the museum context and then by allowing us to experience our lives analytical from the outside as if they were museums. Our lives begin to seem exotic and, conversely but at the same time, things that we once thought exotic begin to seem more familiar. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “Bleeding into the ubiquity of the common-sense world, the museum effect brings distinctions between the exotic and the familiar closer to home. Calibrations of difference become finer. . . . One becomes increasingly exotic to oneself, as one imagines how others might view that which we consider normal. . . .” (410). One might also think about this in the terms outlined by Allan Kaprow in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, where he discusses the distinctions between everyday or non-art objects and art like objects. The needlepoint and the black and white print are artifacts found in the home that become exotic art objects through focused attention.

Two to four inches in range. Bigger is thrown out.
Become green and dangerous to eat.
Hey we found a big one here.
Tossing them into buckets.

Monday potatoes
Tuesday potatoes
Wednesday potatoes again
Thursday potatoes
Friday potatoes
Saturday potatoes again
Sunday potatoes au gratin.
Lundi de patate,
Mardi de patate,
Mecredi de patate aussi.
Jeudi de patate,
Vendredi de patate,
Samedi de patate aussi.
Dimanche de patate au gratin.

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.¹⁹

(The performer completes the dance and slowly pulls the threaded potato back to the dress form and begins to stitch the thread to the dress form as the next section starts.)

FRAME

(Performer speaks to the audience and stitches.)

Number Two. Frame. Should I Use a Needlepoint Frame? The short answer is yes. A frame will keep your work clean, it will keep your needlepoint taut and make it easier to work, and it will also prevent it from distorting. Although you can work the project on your lap, it is easier to work with a frame. (Unless you are working a small piece, in which case just go for it!). The cheapest and easiest frames to use are needlepoint stretcher bars, but there are also scroll frames, lap frames and frame stands. You may be wondering what needlepoint frames are. Essentially, they are wooden frames to which your canvas is attached while you stitch. Not only do needlepoint frames keep your canvas taut, and your stitches more even, but attaching your canvas to a frame

¹⁹ Merwin, W.S. "Separation."

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will also help it to stay clean. If the needlepoint is on a frame you handle it less.

(Performer pushes play on Tape #1 and continues to stitch.)



Figure 3

Tape #1:

The original painting was first presented in 1857 and received what Bradley Fratello describes as, “a hostile, conservative response.” This painting, depicting three women gleaning, or gathering the leftovers from the harvest, was one of the first paintings in France to depict the rural poor. Up until this point gleaning had been represented in painting only in representations of the Story of Ruth from the Old Testament. Ruth, in these paintings, is seen as virtuous and modest; as an example of the way to be godly or to reach God. Millet’s painting was much different in that it came across as a statement on rural poverty. It was attacked on two fronts. First, it was an unwelcome reminder to the art-buying society of the existence of the rural poor. Secondly, the figures were considered to be grotesque, thus not belonging in the realm of art. Regardless of its initial ill-reception and low price fetching at the auction block, *The Gleaners*, along with Millet’s *The Angelus*, according to Fratello, “subsequently became global emblems of rural work and rustic piety, but their iconic status was anything but

foreseeable when they left the artist's studio."²⁰

(Performer finishes stitching, moves from the dress form, and speaks to audience)

When you use a frame, you are essentially "hands free," especially if you attach the frame to a stand. This means you can keep one hand at the back of the canvas to feed the needle through and the other hand at the front of the canvas to guide from this direction. There is less joint movement involved and therefore less risk of an overuse injury. Just something to keep in mind if you plan to stitch a lot or for long periods of time.

(DANCE #3: During the dance the following is heard recorded from the sound system)

Recorded:

(Under the text music from 'The Gleaners and I' plays)

Monday potatoes
Tuesday potatoes
Wednesday potatoes again
Thursday potatoes
Friday potatoes
Saturday potatoes again
Sunday potatoes au gratin.
Lundi de patate,
Mardi de patate,
Mecredi de patate aussi.
Jeudi de patate,
Vendredi de patate,
Samedi de patate aussi.
Dimanche de patate au gratin.

(The performer completes the dance and slowly pulls the threaded potato back to the dress form and begins to stitch the thread to the dress form as the next section starts.)

NEEDLES

(Performer speaks to audience)

²⁰ Fratello's essay represents an "official history." If this piece is considered to be a mystery, this text represents professional discourse, or language that assumes an expertise regarding the official topic of the piece. This knowledge comes from education and training.

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Number Three. Needles. When learning how to needlepoint, you will need a tapestry needle. A tapestry needle has a blunt end and a large eye so it is easy (sort of) to thread the yarn through. You might want to buy a small package of assorted sizes as they are not expensive and you will need different sizes for different projects.



Figure 4

(Performer pushes play on Tape #2 and continues to stitch.)

Tape #2:

This needlepoint rendering was given to me as a gift by my grandmother, Peggy Joanne Caviness Waychoff Gaffney. As her eldest granddaughter, and arguably her favorite, I always took a special interest in the piece.

In fact, I always took a special interest in most things she had because she smelled good, and hugged me, and still went to work every day in an office. I had all kinds of ideas of where it came from. In fact, I thought it had always been in her home and that it was something passed down from my grandfather's family (Ray Orland Waychoff *not* Vincent). I also thought, as a child, that the depiction was of Czech women, not French women. Czech women like my Great Babi and her sisters who wore housedresses and aprons, and grew and harvested their own food, and made their own medicines, and wore their long hair braided and tucked up into scarves. Women who had sturdy hands and bent backs and, like me,

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large noses and skin not rosy, but not olive either.
Bohemians they liked to call themselves and they would
have all kinds of jokes about Bohemians being gullible
or unintelligent, but you could tell by these jokes that
they were none of these things. Though I say
I remember the piece always being in her home,
I think I only really remember it after the death
of my grandfather, after which, for years,
everything I saw referenced him.

(Performer moves from the dress form, having completed stitching, and speaks to audience)

The following is a general guide for needle size for each canvas mesh size:

Size 16 needle - 8-mesh canvas

Size 18 needle - 10-mesh canvas

Size 20 needle - 12 - 14-mesh canvas

Size 22 needle - 16 - 18-mesh canvas

For some reason the larger the number, the smaller the needle (don't ask us, we just work here!). If the needle fits through the hole without distorting the canvas mesh and you are not having to tug at it like a dog on a leash, then your needle size is probably OK. And that's all you really need to know.

(DANCE #4: During the dance the following is heard recorded from the sound system)

Recorded:

(Under the text music from 'The Gleaners and I' plays)

Monday potatoes

Tuesday potatoes

Wednesday potatoes again

Thursday potatoes

Friday potatoes

Saturday potatoes again

Sunday potatoes au gratin.

Lundi de patate,

Mardi de patate,

Mecredi de patate aussi.

Jeudi de patate,

Vendredi de patate,

Samedi de patate aussi.

Dimanche de patate au gratin.

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(The performer completes the dance and slowly pulls the threaded potato back to the dress form and begins to stitch the thread to the dress form as the next section starts.)

STITCHES

(Performer speaks to audience)

Number Four. Stitches. Now we are getting to the fun part - how to make a stitch. Learning how to needlepoint is easy so far, huh? All you really need to know is one stitch. All basic needlepoint stitches look alike on the “good” side of the canvas. There are three ways of doing what is essentially this one stitch, and they only look different on the “wrong” side of the canvas. First, some general advice on basic needlepoint stitches:

(Performer pushes play on Tape #2 and continues to stitch.)



Figure 5

Tape #2:

The needlepoint rendering was a gift purchased by Peggy Joanne Caviness Waychoff Gaffney for her husband, Vincent.

The print he had received from his parents' estate had been stolen, or kept hostage, by his second wife.

It had hurt him deeply as this was one of the few items he had to remember his family by.

His family that he always described as poor, rural people.

(Performer speaks to audience and continues stitching.)

We recommend that you start by stitching the smallest areas of color first. By this we mean the areas on your design that are the most detailed. Sometimes this is hard to define, as with a floral design for example, there may be lots of small design or color areas. Just try to do the smallest areas then work up to the larger areas of color with your basic needlepoint stitches. Most people stitch the canvas color by color (changing to a different color when they get bored!), starting with the smallest areas first. When you get to larger areas of color, you will get the best results if you use basketweave stitch. Start this stitch in the top right hand corner of the colored area.

(Performer pushes play on Tape #1 and continues stitching.)

Tape #1:

There is therefore a critique of language in the form of bricolage, and it has even been said that bricolage is critical language itself. Genette wrote: the analysis of bricolage could be applied almost word for word to criticism and especially to literary criticism. If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is a bricolage.²¹

(Performer goes to a pile of dirt and pulls another threaded potato. As she speaks she returns to the dress form and begins to stitch)

When you have patches of the same color that are close to each other e.g. within a half inch, you can carry the thread across to the adjacent area. Needlepoint purists might frown upon this, but I do it all the time and my designs look just fine. It really depends upon how fussy you want to be, and how neat you want the back of the canvas to look. If the color areas are farther than about one half inch apart, you will need to snip the yarn off (having secured it behind some stitches) and start again. Regardless of the needlepoint stitch you are using, start off by securing the thread

²¹ Cut together from Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, page 285.

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onto the canvas. Now, a needlepoint purist would tell you never to tie a knot. Thankfully, I am not a needlepoint purist and that is why you love me. Knot away I say.

(Performer pushes play on Tape #2 and continues to stitch.)

Tape #2:

“this is not a woman who will say ‘can you give me cream for my little hands because I never wear gloves. I go in the garden, I put my hands directly in the earth, I did that all my life. Now could I do something for my poor hands?’”²²

(Performer speaks to audience and continues to stitch.)

Cut off a length of thread, no longer than, say, 18 inches for learning purposes. Thread your needle (wetting the end of the yarn always helps the threads stick together so you can achieve this task). Make a knot at the end of the yarn. Starting on the “good” side of the canvas, a few holes along from where you will place your first stitch, take the needle down to the “wrong” side. The knot will be visible on the “good” side of the canvas. When you start stitching you will work toward this knot and your stitches will have covered the thread behind and held it in place so it doesn't pull out. When you reach the knot you can snip it off.

(Performer pushes play on Tape # 1, still stitching.)

Tape #1:

The act of transfer in this case, works through doubling, replication, and proliferation. This strategy of doubling and staying the same, of moving and remaining, of multiplying outward in the face of constricting social and religious policies tells a very specific story... This is a vital act of transfer. It has been going on forever. It is as much about forgetting as remembering. The images, so visually dense, transmit knowledge of ritualized movement and social practices – more than facts.²³

(Performer speaks to audience still stitching.)

When you need to change color, or move to a different area of the canvas, or you have used up the yarn and need to rethread the needle, you will need to snip off the thread you have been using. However, you can't just leave it dangling or the stitches will loosen. When you have stitched the last stitch, with the needle on the “wrong”

²² Agnès Varda in an interview by Andrea Meyer.

²³Cut together from Diana Taylor's “Chapter One: Acts of Transfer.”

side of the canvas, slide it through the back of 3-4 nearby stitches. This will take the thread behind these stitches and it will be secure. Cut the thread close to where the needle emerges so the canvas looks neat.

(Performer pushes play on Tape #2. As it is heard she picks up a needle that remains dangling from a potato she stitched to the dress form earlier in the piece and begins working stitching it further.)

Tape #2:

Glean what isn't attached. It's free. It's left. Grab it. Go low. Bend your back and work. Stretch verse bend. Hmmm. Glean the goods, the wheat, the book of Ruth. She followed her mother-in-law out of what? Obligation? Guilt? Pure love? I think they want us to believe that it is love....or maybe duty.

(Performer speaks to audience and continues to stitch.)

When reading all the stitch guide graphics that follow, you bring the needle up to the good side of the canvas on the odd numbers, and push the needle down to the wrong side of the canvas on all the even numbers.

(Performer pushes play on Tape #1, still stitching.)

Tape #1:

“His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with whatever is at hand; that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions.”²⁴

(Performer has completed stitching and speaks to the audience.)

Left Handed Stitchers. Although the instructions below are not only for right handed stitchers, left handed stitchers can get additional instructions here that might make life easier - and we are all about easy, remember!

(DANCE #5 – the last dance: There is no sound to accompany this dance. It is performed in silence. The performer stands at the pile of dirt holding the threaded needle of yet another potato in her hand.)

²⁴ Lévi-Straus, Claude.

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BLOCKING

(Performer speaks to audience, enthusiasm/energy has dissipated)

Number Five. Blocking. Once you have finished stitching your project, you can bet your last dollar that it will have distorted into a diamond shape. This happens regardless of how perfectly you have made your stitch tension, or even whether or not you used a frame.

You will need to know how to block needlepoint, which really means stretch it back into shape. When you block needlepoint you stretch it back into the shape it was in before you started stitching it. Oh, wouldn't it be nice if we could spray a bit of water on and stretch ourselves back into the shape we were in before we hit 40 (or 30? 20? anyone?).

We digress. *(Begins walking back to the dress form and eventually begins to stitch the threaded potato to the dress form)* You will need to do this in order to finish your masterpiece properly.

If you were using a frame (and we won't tell if you weren't), then remove the canvas. Remember, before you started stitching, you traced an outline of the design shape onto some heavy paper? Well, remove this from where you stashed it, and lay it flat onto board you can bang tacks or nails into.

You are now going to dampen your needlepoint by spraying it with clean water from a spray bottle. Notice we said *dampen* and not saturate! Lay the dampened needlepoint, good side down, onto the paper you have laid on the board. You now need to match the outline of the canvas to the outline you traced on the paper. This will involve some stretching. Start at a corner and hammer in tacks or nails all the way around, about 1 inch apart, stretching the canvas as you go to match it up with the drawn outline. Allow to dry. In other words leave it for several hours.

When dry your canvas should have retained its svelte original shape and be ready for needlepoint finishing. If it is still a little distorted, simply repeat the process. Some large projects especially can distort more and require two goes at stretching.

(The performer arranges each string attached to each potato, inspecting the potatoes and rubbing them with her hands, and then placing them precisely on the ground. She continues looking at the final potato, keeping her hand on it for some time, then crouches to the ground and begins pushing the dirt from the scattered piles together and toward the pile that has not yet been touched. She does this in somewhat of a tizzy using her hands, her feet, her legs and arms. Sometimes she scoops dirt into her



Figure 6

apron and deposits it in the growing pile. She finally gets all of the dirt into the remaining pile, so as to constitute one larger pile, and pulls the thread from it. During this, the following text is heard recorded through the sound system.)

“It was a peculiar symbiosis which, perhaps because of its relatively primitive character, makes more apparent than any later form of factory work that we are able to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented. That weavers in particular, together with scholars and writers with whom they had much in common, tended to suffer from melancholy and all the evils associated with it, is understandable given the nature of their work, which forced them to sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep their eye on the complex patterns they created. It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair into which those can be driven who, even after the end of the working day, are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold the wrong thread.”²⁵

(The performer moves behind the muslin and appears stage right of the dress form, wrapping her arms around it in an embrace, she begins to stitch this final potato up the sternum of the form. The video begins and lights fade to half. The video is projected in a small rectangle onto the muslin. It features women’s hands doing things: kneading dough, washing dishes, cross-stitching, unlocking a door,

²⁵ Sebald, W.G.

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unpacking a suitcase, brushing her hair, and displaying antiques. There is no sound. The final segment of this short video is from 'The Gleaners and I. It features Varda's hands as she plays a children's hand game trying to "capture" trucks passing in the distance with her hands. The subtitles and sound come in during this last segment. Music and the sounds of passing traffic are heard. The final subtitle reads: "I'd like to capture them. To retain things passing? No, just to play."²⁶ During the video, the following is spoken by the performer both to the audience, to herself, and to the dress form.)



Figure 7

Hands are a complex part of our anatomy. Few features of the human body are unique as the human hand. The hand must be fully articulated and mobile in order for its features, including the fingers, to be properly positioned.

²⁶ This final line spoken by Varda in this clip can be tied to Della Pollock's "Introduction" to *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. In this introduction Pollock attempts not to define the field of performance studies, but to, "mark a border space, a space of interaction and possibility that, in its peculiarly dialogic, ludic, and productive dimensions, might itself be considered performative" (1). In the clip, Varda suggests her aims in making this film are similar: not to capture and pin down, but to allow for the type of possibility outlined by Pollock through her own playfulness in this scene and the text she lays over it.



Figure 8

Remember, as a child, watching the hands of the women? Mother's hands turning the pages of a novel, painting her fingernails the mauve color she uses to this day, typing with her freshly coated nails on a typewriter or computer. Great-grandmother's hands.

Employing the proper levels of strength in order to support the wrist, fingers, and thumb so that they might execute precision in their motor skills. The elements of the hand must calibrate precise alignment and control to allow for both support and flexibility.

Kneading the dough for kolaches or knitting a pair of slippers was one of the most deftly, gracefully executed dances ever seen. Her smooth nails and the redness her skin sometimes took.

Made up of a nexus of structures including bone, joints, ligaments, tendons, muscles, nerves, and blood vessels, the human hand requires cooperation amongst these structures so that normal function is maintained. It is typically only when one of these structures is weakened or inflamed that the function of the hand is even noticed.

Why do these hands stand out most? It is *because*, by that time, her hands were older and more transparent. The veins more prominent and the arthritis setting in more

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significantly. Each year oozed life and told a history to hold and be held by. Perhaps she turned her hands like this. Perhaps. Caught red handed in their beautiful dexterity, despite the years.

Otherwise, this part of our anatomical structure, which most allows us tactile interaction with and is imprinted by our surrounding world, is taken for granted.

Articulating the labor of life in a measure and rhyme largely forgotten, preserving the pleasure through calibrating painful difference.

(The lights fade even more. As the video continues the last image of Varda's hand appears, the lights go down so that the last light seen is that of the video. There is a final sound in the darkness of a truck passing.)

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