



## In films about gender, advertising, and immigration, the visible hand of women's labor

Eva Díaz

I once went to a collector's apartment where it was all hands. I once went to a private museum where it was all houses. Both world-class art collections, each assembled around these highly specific themes. In the realm of such narrow, idiosyncratic focus, I began to think differently about the careers of artists I thought I knew well. Certainly Louise Bourgeois *does* have a vast body of work about homes and domesticity, and to see her approaches to the theme beside Vito Acconci's put a new light on the home as site of both childhood fantasy and adult sexuality.

But, back to hands. Artworks with women's hands pictured in them—hands that are filmed close-up, touching photographs and manipulating objects—were, at first, only a passing observation. I noticed this when considering work by women artists who are developing new forms of photographic portraiture and

autobiography that situate women's bodies in (and out of) history, and in (and among) props that connote race, place, and consumption in ambiguous ways.

Ellie Ga, Sara Cwynar, and Rachele Mozman Solano all employ techniques of filming women's hands as they move photographs, and do so in remarkably similar ways. They each capture the hands, tightly framed in overhead views, giving the appearance that these are the viewer's hands seen from above. Why this mode of depicting women at work?

In some cases, they are the artist's hands moving things, physically inserting themselves into their works—a corrective to the absence of the female artist's hand in the history of art. The depicted hands are agents of change, connecting images to one another by physically positioning them in particular orders. That kind of labor is self-driven and creative, unlike

how women, pictured historically, tend to be occupied with domestic tasks.

Like Elizaveta Svilova playing herself at the editing bench in Dziga Vertov's 1929 film *The Man with the Movie Camera*, a rare instance where the creative labor of editing is depicted, Ga, in her three-part film *Gyres* (2019), maneuvers a sequence of photographic transparencies on a light box to accompany her narratives about ocean currents. In her voice-over, she often returns to the astonishing amount of human-made trash in the seas, the act of beachcombing, messages in bottles, and African migrants landing on Greek islands. The photographs the viewer sees are snapshots Ga has taken on her travels; periodically she sweeps them all into a slush pile that fills the bottom section of the light box. "In *Gyres*, images reappear over the course of the forty-minute narrative," Ga noted last year. "Each time they are retrieved from the screen—which



Previous page:  
Still from Sara Cwynar,  
*Rose Gold*, 2017  
Courtesy the artist and Foxy  
Production, New York

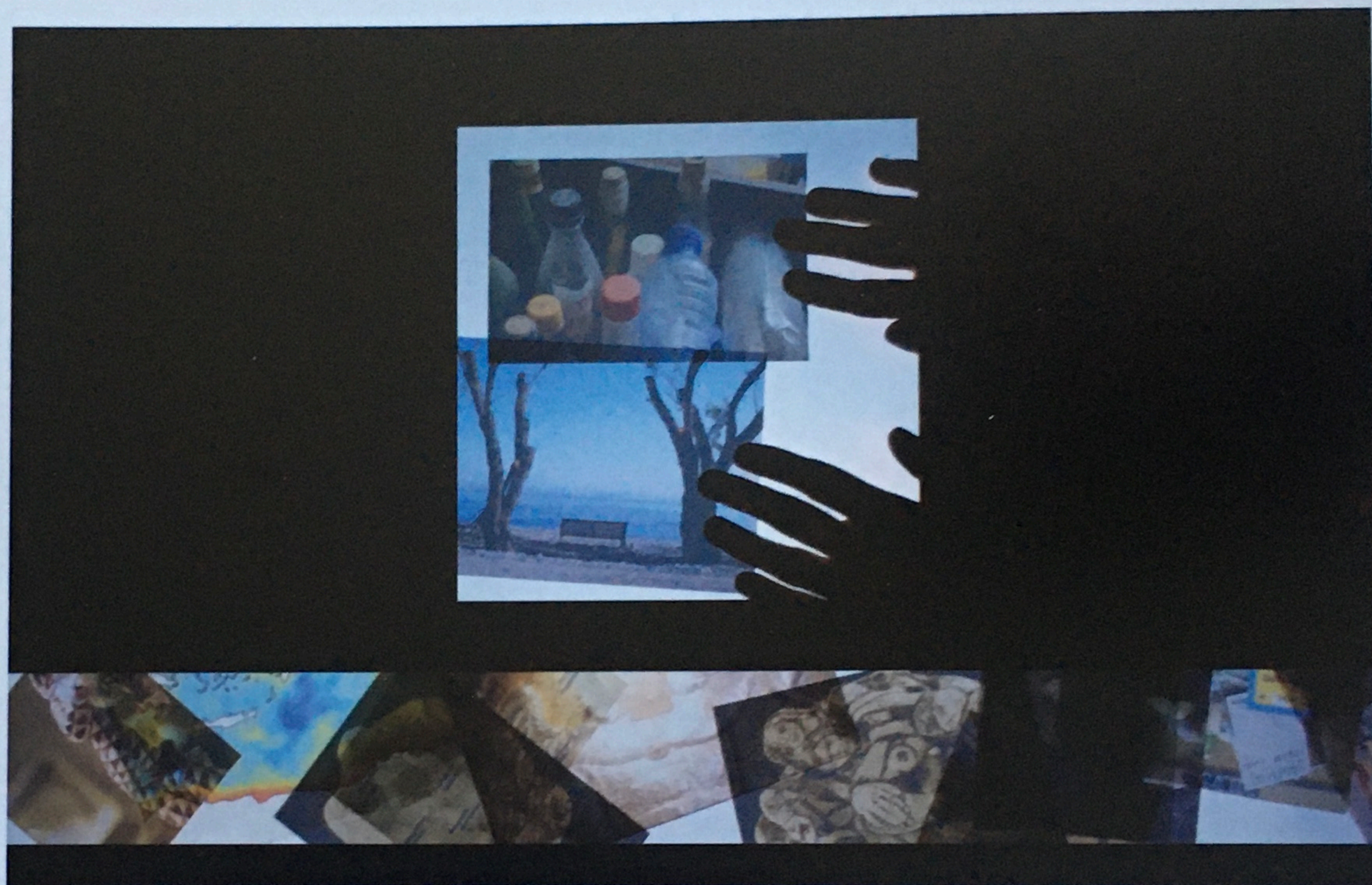
This page, left:  
Still from Rachelle Mozman  
Solano, *Loneliness  
Lonely*, 2015  
Courtesy the artist

I call the beach—they come back with a slightly different significance.”

For Cwynar, the act of hands touching photographs has a fetishistic quality. She often builds up layers by photographing objects aerially using a series of stands. In her films, such as *Rose Gold* (2017), this aspect of looking down on a tableau in which hands are moving things likewise creates an ambiguous zone where objects and images of objects are confused. Viewers become consumers, just as advertising images become surrogates for experience. “What design or advertising does is try to erase the real fact of living: the everyday materiality of us being in bodies,” Cwynar says. As her hands stroke or hold images of objects—a rococo-inspired porcelain figurine, an ugly vase, a 1970s watch advertisement—her agency as an archivist of the image culture of capitalism is revealed.

In the opening of Mozman’s film *Loneliness Lonely* (2015), a woman’s hand places fabric swatches, family snapshots, and photographs of stately homes and female soldiers holding weapons (in what looks to be Latin America) on a table, overlapping the photographs and cloth fragments, or placing them in a grid. Hands stitch the photographs together with thread, as though joining subjects from disparate times or places, or they sift through snapshots of a Tea Party rally, an empty cafeteria, a suburban strip mall.

Mozman also employs actors to restage scenes of teen-parent tension from films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Heathers* (1989), but through a lens of immigrant experience. Photographs become objects of desire and envy. A teenage immigrant talking to her dispassionate father in their cluttered home strokes the image of a stylish living room in a glossy decor magazine as though it’s



Still from Ellie Ga, *Gyre 2  
(Tama)*, 2019  
Courtesy the artist  
and Bureau, New York

## The women’s hands attempt to edit contradictions about violence and small-town experience that can’t be reconciled.

the antidote to her stilted assimilation into U.S. life. The women’s hands attempt to edit contradictions that can’t be reconciled: about violence in third-world countries and the banality of U.S. small-town experience, about anti-immigrant sentiments and the militarization of civic life in the United States.

The act of joining multiple pictures to form new meaning exemplifies what Sergei Eisenstein wrote about as the possibility of montage, what he called the “collision” that may trigger a provisional synthesis of social contradictions for viewers. Photography, itself an appropriative medium, is an archive that needs an editor as much as it needs a builder. Editing as a form of creation.

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