

Hidden Hands

By

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Abstract

The large-scale installation, *Hidden Hands*, is constructed of thousands of fabric loops in various colors that cover the exhibition walls. Next to this growth of fabric is a domestic workspace, along with pins, needles, torn garments, and other objects requiring attention and care. A massive quilt lying on the floor next to this transformed corner of the gallery connects the two spaces. *Hidden Hands* also incorporates sounds, smell, light, and fans to evoke feelings of chaotic domesticity and daily tasks requiring attention.

Domestic work has predominantly been done by women for hundreds of years. Between tending to the children, preparing meals, and keeping the home, the occupation of “housewife” has long been one of the most varied and strenuous. *Hidden Hands* highlights the significance and importance of domestic toil and care; it is an acknowledgement of the hours of unrecognized labor, and a tribute to the countless tasks completed by women.

Hidden Hands

...cooking quilting
sewing knitting tatting
cleaning washing scrubbing mopping
sweeping roasting bathing raising stewing
baking picking rinsing caring changing
feeding tending pressing
rolling kneading
mending...



Fig. 1. *Hidden Hands* Full Installation View

The phone rings, dishes clink, a screen door opens and closes, a sewing machine whirs and a vacuum hums. The air is moving around, lifting the loops of fabric and settling into the whistle of a boiling kettle. The workspace, with the chair astray, fans whirring, and tasks half completed projects a feeling of human presence, as though the worker has just left and at any moment will return to resume her work. Although the space does not feel overheated, the presence of not one, but two fans on at high speed gives insight into the psyche of the worker. The viewer imagines someone hard at work, frantically trying to finish this impossible task. The piles of un-torn, un-ironed yardage coupled with the vastness of the work that has already been

done alludes to the massive efforts of women throughout time to feed, clothe, raise, and care for their families. The piles of work to be done refer to the tasks, though ever-changing, that are still divided by gender and relegated to women.

Domestic work has been done predominantly by women for hundreds of years. Between tending to the children, preparing meals, and keeping the home, the occupation of “housewife” has long been one of the most varied and strenuous. However, the position is often overlooked due to its private nature and the expectations of society. *Hidden Hands* highlights the significance and importance of domestic care; it is an acknowledgement of the hours of unrecognized labor, and a tribute to the countless tasks completed by women. It is my desire to celebrate domestic workers and recognize their endless hours of labor and care. My time creating this installation has been an experience simultaneously challenging and wonderful. Each strip of fabric and eyelet of lace represents a moment of my labor: tearing the cloth, starching and ironing the strip, pinning the loop, and sewing the rows. These moments strung together make up an hour, a day, a year; *Hidden Hands* celebrates these tasks, acknowledging both the tedium and beauty involved in each one.



Fig. 2. Work Party in my Studio, prior to exhibition

Creating this work required a massive amount of love, support, and aid from my community. I often held work parties, reminiscent of quilting bees or spinning groups. During these parties, I had people tearing piles of fabric strips, while other people would starch and iron those strips (Fig. 2). This style of using a community of people to make a repetitive task more enjoyable is something women have done-and continue to do- in various groups around the world. By incorporating this form of shared labor, I inserted myself into the traditional history of women's work. Without this community, I would not have been able to complete my installation, just as women throughout history would not have been able to spin enough fiber to make garments for the winter if they had not worked together.

Drawing inspiration from both my own life and the lives of others has created a wide range of relevance for the exhibit *Hidden Hands*. This work is highly personal, but also speaks to

people of many varied backgrounds and generations. By using historically feminine materials and techniques to discuss the roles of women in culture, I join a rich tradition of feminist artists working to voice female concerns: artists such as Shirin Neshat, Vadis Turner, and Annette Messenger have created a context for my current research. Intense bibliographic research of women's work has afforded me rich insight into women's histories and memoirs throughout time. Memoirs I have read highlighted certain expectations for women in different eras and geographical spaces, and critical essays challenged stereotypes and assumptions that we hold today about women's experiences. Specifically, Alice Kessler-Harris' *Women Have Always Worked* provided an historical overview of the changing society expectations for the duties of women from the late 1800s to the present¹. Kessler-Harris highlights differing societal groups that placed gender expectations throughout time. Groups as widespread as women's magazines, cleaning supply companies, men's labor unions, the national government, and psychologists clamored to have their expectations of feminine duties heard.

I am strongly attracted to the idea of women's work and gender roles due to my interactions and discussions with multigenerational female family members. My extended family is composed mostly of women; I am one of three daughters, my mother is one of five daughters, and my grandmother was one of three daughters, my great-grandmother had a twin sister. Within this long line of women, nearly all were housewives and homemakers. My maternal great grandmother was a seamstress and made all the garments for her daughters and granddaughters, as well as making the meals, and keeping the house.

¹ Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1981. Print.

Each generation of my family expressed that there were different pressures and expectations with every change in society. When my great-grandmother came to the United States in the early 1900s, she worked as a seamstress. She worked out of the home, and only for family and friends, as it was not acceptable for married women to truly have a paid job at that time. My grandmother took a job as a secretary in the late 1940s as she felt that she was not as skilled at domestic work as her mother. Thus my mother and her sisters were more or less raised by their grandmother. My mother went to school and got her M.S. in botany, but when my eldest sister was born, she chose to stop working outside of the home in order to be a “full-time mom”. She stayed home while my father worked at the university. She made the meals, did the cleaning, and drove all the kids to school and my father to work. This familial history of care and sacrifice deserves to be lauded. My experience of contemporary society is both vastly different from my relatives’ experiences and strikingly similar. Although society no longer dictates that I stay home, clean house, and raise children, it also does not truly recognize that doing so is legitimate work.

Hidden Hands is a step to change this oversight. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer is walking into both a physical workspace as well as a psychological dream space. *Hidden Hands* is installed in a way that creates a juxtaposition between the finished work and the workspace. The viewer is initially drawn to the brightly colored wall panels (Fig. 3), only to be led to the workspace (Fig. 4) by the flow of the piece. The viewer thus experiences the installation as a piece that is continuously being worked on: a piece that, like the Sisyphean nature of domestic tasks, is never done.



Fig. 3. *Hidden Hands* Panel Detail



Fig. 4. *Hidden Hands* Detail Installation View (workspace)

The installation is set up to project a flow of work that is continuously being created. The explosion of colorful fabric on the walls immediately catches the eye. The viewer is propelled along by the movement of color and the occasional surprise of a hidden domestic object or image. As the viewer moves along the panels, the loops sway slightly, causing a dizzying effect. By following the panels in a left to right manner, the viewer ends up in the midst of a pile of



Fig. 5. *Hidden Hands* Detail (quilt with panel)

loops and thread in the workspace. This domestic space is filled with strips of fabric to be sewn, wrinkled yardage to be pressed, and buttons to be strung, along with pins, needles, torn garments, and other objects requiring attention and care. The workspace transitions into the wall panels by way of piles of loops waiting to be hung, and the crumpled 25-foot quilt that stretches to the far wall. The quilt activates the floor, leading the eye from the workspace back to the panels of loops covering the gallery walls (Fig. 5). Upon stepping back to view the whole installation, the viewer notices a 38-foot strand of buttons that stretches from the ceiling, drapes over the workspace and ends along the wall behind the domestic space, framing the entire area.



Fig. 6. *Hidden Hands* Detail (quilt with workspace)

The flood and spotlights brightly and evenly light the wall panels and quilt, but the workspace is lit mostly by a small table lamp (Fig. 6). This is to create a close interior space that does not feel theatrical or prop-like. The space is set up as an actual workspace; an area where someone could spend hours working each day on the endless tasks that arise. The lamp also projects a feeling of warmth and home, transforming the space further.

Sound is an additional aspect of *Hidden Hands*. Behind the panels, a cacophony of domestic sounds blends with the whirr of the fans that cool the workspace. Kettles whistle, phones ring, dishes clink, a vacuum hums, an alarm clock sounds, a coffee percolator glugs, a sewing machine whirrs, scissors snip through fabric, a door slams, and the listener is aurally privy to a day in the life of a housewife. The sounds are blended in a way that allows a slow crescendo from a soft suburban morning to the chaos of cleaning house and preparing dinner.



Fig. 7. *Hidden Hands* Detail fabrics

A final sensory aspect of the installation is the soft, musty odor of hundreds of pieces of fabric. Some of the fabric is quite old, taken from garments that my great grandmother sewed in the early 1900s; some of the fabric is from the 1950s through the 1970s, from my mother's childhood; and some of the fabric is from my own collection and purchases (Fig. 7). The smell is gentle, and is only apparent with careful exploration; there is a touch of starch, some fabric softener, a hint of mothballs, and that

slightly burned dust smell of a hot iron. Under all of that is the indescribable odor of age; the reassuring smell of old linens tucked away for company, or grandpa's suit that is brought out for special occasions. The smell evokes memories of domestic spaces and family.

Hidden Hands, though large in scale, is but a small tribute to the massive efforts of women throughout time. The tasks that women have done are diverse and ever-changing with the expectations of the times; wherever she was needed, a woman would step in to make sure her home, community, city, and country had her support. This incredible dedication is what *Hidden Hands* celebrates. This work is recognition of those hours of beauty and tedium: a thank you to women of all eras and backgrounds for their work.



Fig. 8. *Hidden Hands* Detail loops

Annotated Bibliography

Collins, Gail. *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*. New York: Little, Brown and, 2009. Print.

This book specifically touches on the larger political changes in the United States due to women entering the work force. The expectations were that if a woman worked outside of the home, she only did so if she could stay on top of her domestic “duties” as well. Yet, despite this expectation, the nation did not put that much value on full time mothering. One woman commented on how working outside of the home made it nearly impossible to keep her house in order: “Never did I get everything done. Always there were piles of paper to be sorted, Lost socks to be found, dirty dishes to put in the dishwasher, and clean dishes to take out. Life was messy!”

DeVault, Marjorie L. *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991. Print.

This book focused on the definition of work in the modern United States. Over time, feminists have called to attention the enormous amount of unpaid work that women have been expected to do, without the social or economic rewards that accrue to paid labor. This labor is simultaneously revered and devalued; promoted as central to womanhood, yet somehow so demeaning that men have been unwilling to take it on. There is also a discussion of the founding of the quasi-science Home Economics, and how it was used to push women back into the home.

Gerson, Kathleen. *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation Is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.

The Unfinished Revolution was comprised of the findings of multiple interviews, including many different kinds of distribution of labor and tasks within family situations. The main focus was on how unwilling the men in the families were unwilling to take on the domestic tasks, even in circumstances where their wives made two or three times as much money as they did at a job.

Kaplan Daniels, Arlene. "Invisible Work." *Social Problems* 34.5 (1987): 403+. *JSTOR*. University of California Press. Web.

Daniels focused on the invisibility of certain kinds of work, and the reasons caring work is so prevalent in this unrecognition. Partially the reasons rest on the understanding of “work” in the modern, industrialized society as some task we do for which we are financially recompensed. The other main reasons for work invisibility include tasks done in private homes, and the predominant gender that completes those tasks.

Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1981. Print.

This book is an overview of the expectations of women, especially mothers, throughout history in the United States. Specifically, the duties to raise healthy, patriotic, and spiritual children while supporting and stretching the wages of the husband were discussed. The nation often used motherhood in propaganda during war eras to encourage patriotism and good feelings toward home.

Luxton, Meg. "Two Hands For The Clock; Changing Patterns in the Gendered Division Of Labor." *Studies in Political Economy* 12 (1983): n. pag. Web. <<http://jps.library.utoronto.ca>>.

Luxton strongly focuses on the uneven redistribution of work and household tasks that has occurred since women began entering the public workforce. She focuses on the way tasks are divided, and the fact that the worst and most repetitive tasks (cleaning bathrooms and kitchens, laundry, changing diapers) are still being done by the wives whereas the husbands are doing the more enjoyable tasks such as playing with the children, and watering the garden

Meyerowitz, Joanne J. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994. Print.

This collection of essays touches on many different ways women have fought society's expectations, and discusses how difficult some of those expectations were to break. One essay in particular discusses how women's traditional roles were linked to national security during the cold war. If a woman wanted to be independent and working during the cold war, she was at high risk of being labeled a Communist.

Fig. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6: Photographs by Aaron Paden
Fig. 2, 7, 8: Photographs by Allison Wegren