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# The Sensory Threshold: *Femmage* as Politics of the Surface

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**Abstract**

This article investigates the sensory and material role of the surface, approaching it through the conceptual and formal lens of Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro's concept of *femmage* (1977-78). Drawing on concepts of indexicality, haptic visuality, and feminist visual theory, the study explores how the surface operates not only as a boundary between image and viewer but as an agentive site of meaning. Tracing *femmage* from 1970s feminist collage practices to contemporary post-digital assemblages, the study offers close readings of works by Su Friedrich, Susan Stein, Anne Bean, and Sara Cwynar. It argues that strategies of fragmentation, layering, and close-up construct surfaces that do not merely show, but perform.

**Keywords**

*Femmage*, feminist visual theory, haptic, surface, collage, close-up

## 1 Introduction

What if the surface of the image were not a limit, but a threshold? In both film and photography, the surface has traditionally been treated as a transparent interface – a neutral support upon which the image rests, serving as a conduit between representation and perception. However, contemporary theoretical approaches have begun to challenge this assumption, reconfiguring the surface as a liminal zone where the viewer's body, the visual medium, and the event of perception actively co-produce meaning. This reconceptualization draws on a wide range of interdisciplinary currents: theories of indexicality, which bind the photographic image to the material trace; to haptic visuality, which foregrounds the tactile and embodied dimensions of looking; to feminist visual theory, which interrogate the politics of representation and the ethics of proximity. Within these frameworks, the surface is not simply seen but *felt*, not merely observed but *touched* – visually, emotionally, and sensorily. Hence, this paper proposes Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro's concept of *femmage* – a feminist practice of layering, collecting,

and reassembling fragments – as a conceptual and methodological lens through which to analyze the surface in its most agentive and sensorial dimensions. In doing so, it traces the evolution of *femmage* across multiple historical and technological moments: from its roots in feminist collage and experimental film, through performative photographic practices, and into its reconfiguration within post-digital, post-feminist media cultures. Moving from the analog intimacy of Su Friedrich and Susan Stein to the performative photography of Anne Bean, and finally to Sara Cwynar's digital assemblages, the essay argues that *femmage* operates as a feminist epistemology of the fragment, one that foregrounds the affective and material agency of the image. Ultimately, it seeks to dislodge the surface from its subordinate position within visual discourse and restore its material expressiveness, epistemological complexity, and sensory charge.

## 2 Toward an Aesthetics of Surface

The concept of surface in visual media, particularly in film and photography, functions as an intermediary, embodying a dual role as both an object and a perceivable interface that engages the viewer. This surface, much like the skin on a human body, serves as a tangible boundary that both conceals and reveals. Jacques Aumont explores this duality through an in-depth examination of the photographic medium, emphasizing how photography captures a precise moment in time through the action of light on photosensitive substances. This process, rooted in the physical transformation of the surface, creates a direct, material trace of the event – a record that is not simply an imitation but a physical and temporal impression. Aumont explains that this trace is fixed as an image to be preserved for a variety of social uses, from the realistic representation of reality to original practices such as Man Ray's *rayogramme*. The photographic apparatus, Aumont notes:

> is always based on the fact, known to the viewer, that the photograph has captured a moment in time in order to give it back to me. This restitution is conventional. It is coded. It is also variable, especially in so far as the photo records a duration of greater or lesser extent, that is to say, of an instant (Aumont 1997: 122-123).

We can think of Niépce and Daguerre's development of *writing with light*, or *photo-graphein*, that recorded the visible world in highly detailed reproductions, while Talbot's *photogenic drawings* used objects directly on photosensitive surfaces, creating silhouettes and traces without lenses. These examples reflect how the photograph acts both as a reproduction of visible appearances and as a physical record – a trace of light and time. According to the scholar, photography's materiality as a surface transformed by light underscores its unique indexical relationship with reality. This relation is neither abstract nor arbitrary; rather, it arises from a tangible connection to a specific moment and place, infusing the photographic surface with a layered materiality that speaks to the viewer as a presence. The photograph is thus seen as an index of a past event, embalming the past "like a fly in amber" (Aumont 1997: 122), as Peter Wollen describes it, and continuing to point toward a moment that "once was and is no longer" (Aumont 1997: 122) echoing Christian Metz's observation. This indexicality, grounded in the physical interaction of light and surface, positions the photograph as a medium that inherently transmits the temporal dimension of its origin, where time itself is embedded within the image.

Aumont's perspective emphasizes that, before it serves as a reproduction of reality, the photograph operates as a medium of *light-events*, a surface that has captured and fixed a specific point in time. This quality enables the viewer to 'see time' within the photograph, reading the traces and marks as temporal artifacts that evoke the moment of their creation. Viewers encounter not just a static image but a surface that carries the weight of its own history, allowing for an emotional resonance where moments from the past are re-experienced in the present. This transmission of time, embedded in the very surface of the photograph, is always implicit, allowing viewers to engage with images as preserved instances that still hold onto the instant of their making. Aumont's concept extends to the idea that photographic apparatuses are all engaged in capturing and restoring specific moments, each holding a temporal trace that grants the image a sense of immediacy and presence. This temporality also informs the viewer's perception, as photography transmits a tangible sense of duration: from the instantaneous clarity of a brief exposure to the extended blur of a longer one, where the image retains an imprint of time's passing. The surface of the photograph thus acts as a dynamic, transformative medium, capable of preserving moments

that carry distinct temporalities, or what Henri Cartier-Bresson termed the "meeting of an instant and geometry" (Aumont 1997: 123). In this way, photography operates not only as a record of appearances but as a channel for the temporal power of images – moments in time that are both fixed and vividly present within the layers of the surface. In framing photography as such, Aumont underscores the powerful agency of the surface itself. Rather than passively reflecting an external reality, the surface actively participates in the creation and preservation of an experience, allowing viewers to encounter the past as a visceral, sensory trace. This understanding of the photographic surface, which can be extended to other surfaces as well, reinforces the notion of it as an operating medium in the aesthetic experience, a consideration that walks in the footsteps of Vivian Sobchack, who posits the screen to have its own agency, capable of interacting with viewers on a sensory level, inviting a form of *intersubjective communication* that mirrors bodily sensation (Sobchack 2004). In this respect, I argue that the medium operates as an agentive surface: the medium's *material efficacy* is instrumental in producing a response in the viewer, as the medium's visible qualities become extensions of intentionality. This intentionality translates into agency, where the surface of the screen or film becomes a metaphorical skin that acts upon the viewer, affecting perception and encouraging a haptic, bodily engagement with the image. Furthermore, the emphasis on surface as both medium and boundary reflects a shared functionality between body and image, establishing an analogy between physical skin and the filmic surface. Indeed, the idea here is to delve into this analogy by exploring the physical-material consistency of the surface. To that end I propose to reflect on a composite medium that allows us to visualize this functionality: *femmage*. Thus, in engaging with *femmage* as an analytical lens, we situate the medium itself as a feminine space, one that actively constructs and deconstructs meaning through tactile, layered narratives. This feminist perspective reinforces the idea that the medium becomes a repository of personal and political histories, a surface that invites engagement, reflection, and reinterpretation.

## 3 Reading through *Femmage*

The concept of *femmage*, as introduced by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, emerges as a distinctly feminist approach within collage practices,

one that emphasizes the collection, preservation, and reassembling of materials drawn from daily life. Schapiro and Meyer define *femmage* as an artistic form that derives from women's folk practices, particularly those shaped by domestic responsibilities and the everyday realities of nurturing and caregiving. Through these practices, *femmage* transforms materials – scraps, photographs, handwritten notes – into potent symbols of lived experience, granting visibility to narratives that are often marginalized. This approach to collage resonates deeply within a feminist framework, as it validates domestic labor and historically overlooked forms of female creativity, reasserting them as central to artistic discourse. *Femmage* is not just an aesthetic choice; it is a political statement, reclaiming what has been neglected or discarded as valuable elements within the artistic process. Schapiro and Meyer articulate this perspective clearly in their manifesto published in *Heresies* in 1977, establishing criteria that determine whether a work can be classified as *femmage*. In particular, an object can be considered *femmage* if it meets at least half of the criteria on the following list:

> 1. It is a work by a woman. 2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients. 3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work. 4. The theme has a woman-life context. 5. The work has elements of covert imagery. 6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates. 7. It celebrates a private or public event. 8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work. 9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work. 10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on other material. 11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence. 12. Abstract forms create a pattern. 13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter. 14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life (Schapiro, Meyer 1977-78: 69).

Their work depicts *femmage* through a taxonomy that includes the use of salvaged materials, a diaristic or autobiographical point of view, and themes that resonate with women's lives. By positioning these elements as core to *femmage*, Schapiro and Meyer frame the collage process as inherently subversive, capable of challenging traditional structures of meaning that have historically marginalized female-centered narratives. However, in the context of this article, *femmage* also serves as a compelling metaphor for the agency of the medium itself, emphasizing the surface as an active, textured site of expression. The concept of collage inherently involves layering, fragmentation, and reassemblage – qualities

that resonate with the physicality and functionality of film and photographic media, where surface plays a central role. Just as *femmage* layers fragments to construct new wholes, activating the material qualities of surfaces, the medium similarly functions as an agent that assembles and reinterprets imagery in ways that extend beyond representation alone. Furthermore, *femmage* as a method of layering and repurposing resonates with the ways in which feminist filmmakers and photographers challenge conventional representations of women. For example, the inclusion of covert imagery – hidden symbols, motifs, or codes specific to women's lived experiences – aligns with the medium's potential to communicate in nuanced, textured ways. Through these layered compositions, *femmage* asserts a form of visual agency, where the reassembled fragments speak not only to individual experience but to collective memory. Moreover, situating *femmage* within the broader genealogy of feminist experimental practices becomes crucial, not only to position it historically but also to clarify the methodological grounds of this study. Feminist artists have long mobilized formal experimentation – collage, appropriation, reuse, and layering – as strategies of resistance and re-signification (Blaetz 2007; Barnett 2008; Hatfield 2006; Walsh, Throp 2015). The cases analyzed here – Su Friedrich, Susan Stein, Anne Bean, and later Sara Cwynar – were selected precisely because they foreground the surface as both material residue and political agent, articulating the epistemological potential of *femmage* across different technological thresholds. But within this genealogy, it is also necessary to mention Barbara Hammer's work, which provides a particularly illuminating coeval practice resonating strongly with this logic. Her films of the late 1970s and 1980s mobilize optical printing, superimposition, and multiple exposures as haptic strategies, producing a layered materiality that transforms vision into touch. Hammer developed a *theory of touch* in which montage and stratification generate sensorial surfaces charged with intimacy (Powers 2022). If Friedrich and Stein weave diaristic inscriptions and fragmented domestic textures, Hammer radicalizes this principle by making the apparatus itself tactile, embedding the politics of touch in the very process of stratification. This brief reference to Hammer, alongside Friedrich and Stein, underscores how *femmage* describes not an isolated technique but a shared feminist orientation toward surfaces: fragments, scratches, and overlays that both preserve memory and perform material agency. At the same time, the constellation of practices that femmage brings into focus – reuse, recycling, collage, and the surface

as a space of sensorial activation – has also been widely theorized in relation to found footage (Baron 2014; Bertozzi 2012). While these trajectories cannot be examined in detail here, acknowledging them serves to situate the present argument within a consolidated field of scholarship. What this essay aims to offer is a feminist re-specification of that field: through the lens of *femmage*, such formal strategies are reframed not merely as aesthetic devices but as political operations of the surface, where memory, tactility, and ideology converge.

The feminist experiments outlined above – grounded in layering, tactility, and fragmentation – gain further clarity when contrasted with the dominant modernist grammar of the grid. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, the grid, with its structured, orthogonal frameworks, organizes and contains the space of an artwork, functioning as a symbol of order and closure within modernism (Krauss 1979: 51–64). This use of the grid reflects a singular, self-referential transformation of space, one that resists fragmentation or multiplicity. Hence, its repetitive, fixed nature gives it a sense of permanence and authority, aligning it with a desire for coherence and singular interpretation. In contrast, *femmage* embodies a more fluid and open-ended approach; where the grid creates a rigid framework that resists narrative complexity, *femmage* uses its structure to preserve fragments of history, memory, and identity, all while developing a new visual language for feminist discourse. The structure of *femmage* resists closure, allowing for a narrative that is evolving and multidimensional, much like the flexible and dynamic surface of a screen or film, where images emerge, interact, and transform in relation to one another. Indeed, Schapiro and Meyer's approach to *femmage*, which contrasts with the static nature of the modernist grid, views collage as intrinsically fluid, combining forward- and backward-looking perspectives. This dual focus enables women to reinterpret and reclaim fragments of the past while envisioning a visual language for the future, aligning with a feminist ethos that honors fragmented histories as a means of challenging dominant narratives and social norms. Such tension not only situates femmage against modernist paradigms, but also prepares the ground for understanding why femmage remains a productive lens for contemporary practices, as will be seen in Sara Cwynar's work.

An illustrative example of this dynamic can be seen in the work of Su Friedrich, an experimental filmmaker whose approach to visual collage echoes the principles of *femmage*. In films such as *Scar Tissue* (1979)[1]

(**Fig. 1**) and *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) (**Fig. 2**), Friedrich combines found footage with textual overlays, integrating fragments of imagery and language to construct narratives that are deeply intimate yet resist straightforward interpretation. In *Scar Tissue*, Friedrich's use of black-and-white archival footage of street scenes from the 1940s underscores a sense of temporal fragmentation. Each scene presents partial views of bodies – feet, hands, waists – without ever revealing the whole, emphasizing the way fragments invite the viewer to piece together meaning. This approach aligns closely with *femmage*, in which each recycled scrap or image serves as a marker of memory and experience. Likewise, Friedrich's film *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) uses a collage of images and handwritten text scratched onto the film's surface, evoking a sense of childhood nostalgia and memory. Each shot presents a rectangle within the frame, layered with imagery of children and scenes from everyday life. The scratched text, which looks almost like chalk, introduces an additional tactile layer that draws the viewer into the artist's personal memories; the writing tells a series of short stories, and all these elements together compose and read like "a series of still images, not a film" (Garfield 2021: 132). The visual disjunction and layering within these frames resonate with *femmage*'s ethos, capturing the fragmented and often nonlinear aspects of memory. By focusing on partial views and the juxtaposition of different mediums, Friedrich's work bridges the visual and the haptic, aligning with the feminist pursuit of a collage that reclaims and reconstructs personal histories.

**Fig. 1** – *Scar Tissue*, Dir. Su Friedrich, USA, 1979.


**Fig. 2** – *Gently Down the Stream*, Dir. Su Friedrich, USA, 1981.

Susan Stein's film *She Said* (1982) offers another interpretation of the principles of *femmage*, using fragmented narratives and interspersed images to explore themes of women's labor and identity. *She Said* opens with a close-up of a door fragment, capturing the tactile quality of wood and frosted glass, as well as the contours of space that are both personal and mundane. This close-up perspective, much like the silhouetted images in *femmage*, draws viewers into a layered understanding of the subject, inviting them to consider the tactile and material aspects of women's spaces. As the camera moves into the house, accompanied by a narrator recounting a woman's experience working in a metal factory, Stein's work interweaves audio and visual fragments that capture both the physical and emotional dimensions of women's labor. In line with *femmage*, Stein's use of fragmented storytelling allows the viewer to read between the lines, engaging with layered textures that give voice to women's lived experiences. The black leader that divides sections of the narrative adds to this sense of fragmentation, serving as a visual interruption that calls attention to the process of assembly and reassembly. By integrating slogans such as "learning femaleness [and] free to buy" (Garfield 2021: 133) into the narrative, Stein critiques the cultural roles imposed on women, echoing femmage's use of intimate and familiar themes to convey subversive meaning. Thus, *femmage* as both a technique and a conceptual framework reaffirms the role of the medium as an active participant in storytelling. The work of Friedrich and Stein uses this agency to transform fragmented visuals into cohesive narratives that still retain a sense of openness, inviting viewers to engage with the surface and its layered meanings. This approach foregrounds the materiality of the screen or image as a surface, encouraging an interaction that is not only visual but also tactile and experiential, aligning seamlessly with the broader consideration of surface as a site of sensory and perceptual interaction.

Shifting to a different medium, we can observe another declination of collage, intended in this case as a multiplication of surfaces that can create one single narrative. Indeed, in Anne Bean's work, the surface is fragmented across multiple photographic layers, each functioning like a filmic frame. Bean's approach can be seen as a form of horizontal layering, where individual photographs sequence together to convey a continuous flow of storytelling. Her works, particularly *Heat* (1974-1977) and *Shouting 'Mortality' as I Drown* (1978)[2], emphasize the idea that the surface of the photographic medium possesses its own agency, capable of unfolding

a narrative through sequential visual fragments. In this configuration, the medium itself becomes the carrier of meaning, constructing a story that emerges directly from the materiality of the photographic surface. Also, Bean's reflections on performance as an art form challenge the static nature of the photographic image, seeking to capture not only the visual aspect but also the ephemeral and transient qualities of her work. In this way, her art opens up a discourse on exhibition and preservation issues in relation to performance art. *Heat*, consists of nine gelatin silver prints mounted on wood, glass, and painted cardboard. This piece represents an artistic investigation into the concept of performance and the challenge of documenting it. Her aim is to render the photographic image fluid rather than static, allowing it to become performative and subject to decay, akin to all forms of matter, rather than artificially fixed in permanence. It presents a series of close-up images where bodily details – skin, hands, faces – are magnified to the point of abstraction, compelling viewers to engage with the texture and materiality of the surface as they would with film frames. This horizontal organization does not rely on traditional storytelling but instead invites viewers to piece together the visual fragments into a coherent experience. Each photograph holds its own distinct narrative weight while simultaneously contributing to a larger, unified composition. Through this process, the viewer encounters a form of visual storytelling that is directly embedded in the medium's surface, creating a narrative that is less about linear progression and more about sensory experience. Each image is not isolated; rather, it is inextricably linked to those that precede and follow. This compositional technique allows Bean to move beyond a single, fixed perspective, presenting instead a dynamic surface that evolves through the viewer's interaction with the sequence of images. In *Shouting 'Mortality' as I Drown*, Bean further explores this effect by introducing a tactile quality to the images, capturing the physicality of the skin and textures that confront the viewer with a palpable sense of vulnerability and intimacy. This work appears to explore themes of mortality, once again underscoring Bean's interest in making the photographic image a dynamic entity, subject to the passage of time. The layering here functions as a continuous narrative structure, drawing attention to the way each surface builds upon the last, creating a haptic resonance that allows the story to emerge. This form of communication is particularly effective in reinforcing the idea of the medium as an agentive storyteller. The photographs do not present images but engage in a performative act, speaking through their arrangement and material

presence. As viewers move from one photograph to the next, the experience becomes one of piecing together fragments of memory, sensation, and meaning, with each frame acting as both a visual and material link in the unfolding narrative. The use of close-ups and enlarged textures within these sequences enhances the materiality of the surface, making it more than a visual boundary – it becomes a site of interaction. By presenting images that focus on fragmented, intimate details, Bean compels viewers to confront the *skin* of the medium itself, transforming the surface into a space where visual and tactile perceptions converge.

## 3.1 Tactile Theories of the Surface

As argued, the surface functions as a metaphorical threshold that enables the image to engage in a kind of sensory storytelling. In this perspective, it may be useful to bring in the discussion some ideas concerning 'haptic visuality', where the image's surface invites a sensory, bodily engagement. As Laura Marks suggests, haptic images foster a form of interaction that acknowledges a porosity of the film, recognizing the medium as sensitive and responsive, which "may be thought of as impressionable and conductive, like skin" (Marks 2000: xii). Marks describes haptic visuality as a mode of viewing that rematerializes the act of seeing by transforming the gaze into a tactile organ. This tactile engagement allows the viewer to metaphorically touch the textures and surfaces of the images. From her perspective, haptic visuality invites the viewer to sense texture and materiality, fostering a closeness that disrupts the conventional distance between viewer and image. This tactile engagement is particularly evident in non-narrative and experimental films, where the emphasis on surface and materiality replaces the narrative-driven structure of classical cinema. She also draws attention to how perception is inherently social and intertwined with cultural memory, opening up possibilities for feminist reimagining of vision, challenging its historical associations with detachment, objectification, and control. She emphasizes that feminist critiques of vision often center on its distancing effect, which separates the observer from the observed, and links vision to power and domination. These critiques are rooted in psychoanalytic and Foucauldian theories, which interrogate the uses of vision in systems of control. However, Marks moves beyond these frameworks to propose haptic visuality as a model that does not anchor itself solely in

psychic registers or cultural dynamics but instead engages the sensorium – the full sensory and bodily experience of the viewer. The scholar suggests that though "the use of haptic images may be a feminist strategy, there is nothing essentially feminine about it" (Marks 2000: 188). Rather, these images operate at the level of the entire body, dissolving the divide between psyche and sensation. Moreover, haptic visuality might often be associated with a feminine mode of perception, as suggested by Luce Irigaray's claim that "woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking" (Marks 2000: 170). However, instead of confining tactility to a specifically feminine framework, it is more productive to approach haptic visuality as a visual strategy. This perspective, according to Marks, allows for the exploration of alternative visual traditions, including but not limited to women's and feminist practices, without reducing it to an inherently feminine quality. Also, the feminine use of haptic images engages indirectly with broader gendered critiques of visuality. As Marks states it "might seem to represent the 'over- closeness to the image' that Mary Ann Doane (1987) and others have attributed to female spectatorship, while optical visuality implies the ability to stand coolly back that characterizes 'regular' spectatorship" (Marks 2000: 188; see Doane 1987). Thus, haptic visuality, in its rejection of this distanced stance, aligns itself with this critique, reconfiguring proximity not as a limitation but as an opportunity for deeper sensory and affective engagement. In this light, haptic visuality not only challenges dominant models of spectatorship but also reclaims closeness as a mode of knowing and experiencing that resists hierarchical binaries of subject/object, near/far, and male/female. Marks' approach thus serves as a feminist reimagining of how we inhabit and interact with images, where the tactile and the intimate are elevated as central to the cinematic experience.

This convergence of haptic visuality and feminist reconfigurations of vision offers a productive framework through which to further interpret Bean's compositional strategies. Her surface-based narratives do not merely appeal to sight but solicit a full-bodied, sensorial response. In this sense, Bean's use of close-ups – so heavily textured, fragmented, and corporeal – serves not only to disrupt conventional modes of spectatorship but also to animate the surface, allowing it to function as a mnemonic and affective interface. These surfaces, charged with material presence, do not passively transmit memory – they perform it. Building on this, we can draw on Béla Balázs's reflections on the close-up. In his *Theory of the Film* Balázs was captivated by cinema's capacity to *animate*

*objects* and even anthropomorphize them, he believed that close-ups imparted a physiognomic quality to still objects, highlighting their ability to reveal unseen aspects of reality and, in a way, bring the invisible to light. He considered close-ups as more than just a technique; rather, they can reveal "the hidden life of little things" (Balázs 1972: 54) offering an intimate view that uncovers the underlying forces or *mainsprings* of existence, even in seemingly mundane objects. In this view, the close-up becomes a form of visual revelation, *putting a face* on phenomena that are otherwise unseen or ignored. By invoking Balázs's notion, we can see Bean's use of close-ups as a way of animating and intensifying the surface, making it an interface rich with affect. This technique gives an almost human quality to the textures and surfaces captured in her images, drawing viewers into an intimate encounter with details that might otherwise go unnoticed. The surface, in this context, assumes a *fetish-like* quality, as Balázs might describe, because it conveys a sense of presence and agency. Through the use of close-ups and textured surfaces, Bean's images seem to evoke what Balázs described as the hidden life of inanimate objects. In her works, the camera's focus on fragmented and intimate details – such as fire or water– brings out a kind of nonorganic vitality within the surface itself. These close-ups intensify the material presence of objects and textures, imbuing them with that corporeal quality that hints at an inner force or energy. Although these elements are still and inanimate, the concentrated framing challenges the viewer to perceive them as if they were imbued with an unseen liveliness, revealing layers of significance otherwise overlooked in ordinary perception. Balázs noted that the close-up could function as a "revelation of what is really happening under the surface of appearances" (Balázs 1972: 56), and Bean's photographic approach seems to echo this idea. Her images, dense with texture and visual detail, bring forth a kind of latent life, pushing the viewer to recognize an affective, almost bodily, presence in surfaces that might otherwise seem inert. This technique compels the audience to engage with these surfaces as active, expressive agents, charged with a vitality that isn't truly organic but that nevertheless feels animate in its intensity. Through this nonorganic life, Bean's images invite the viewer to see beyond the superficial, to engage with the textures, folds, and materiality of the image in a way that transcends mere observation and enters into a more embodied form of interaction. Deleuze's concept of *visagéité* (faciality) further illuminates this dynamic by framing the close-up as a mode that allows the image to 'return the gaze.' He describes *faciality*

as the image's capacity to embody and reflect affect, creating an intense sensory interaction that transforms the viewing experience into a reciprocal encounter. He writes:

> It is this combination of a reflecting, immobile unity and of intensive expressive movements which constitutes the affect… Each time we discover these two poles in something… we can say that this thing has been treated as a face [visage]: it has been 'envisaged' or rather 'faceified' [visagéifiée] and in turn it stares at us (1986: 87-88).

In Deleuze's framework, an image that is *faceified* does not merely display an object; it *stares back*, engaging the viewer in an interaction that goes beyond passive observation. Marks extends this concept by emphasizing the affective dimension of the close-up, suggesting that the image, in its intensified and static form, holds an almost sacred quality that captivates the viewer, drawing them into an embodied relationship. In this respect, she elaborates on Patricia Pisters' observations, suggesting that facial images evoke dimensions beyond the visual, opening into temporal and spiritual layers that imbue the image with a depth that resists simple analysis. This affect-laden quality, according to Pisters, transforms the image into something profoundly resonant, where time, memory, and sensation converge. Thus, Marks underscores how the close-up can become more than a technique; it is a form of sensory storytelling that envelops the viewer in an affective exchange, challenging them to perceive the image as an "auratic object" (Marks 2000: 94) with its own expressive power. In Bean's work, the close-ups and attention to texture serve as a vehicle for *faceifying* the image, rendering it not just a representation, but an agent of affect that responds to the viewer. Here, the surface operates as both a sensory and narrative threshold, where the image takes on a quasi-human ability to convey and contain emotion. Bean's photography becomes a tactile narrative form, one that bridges the gap between still image and moving picture, encouraging viewers to experience the image as a body with its own agency. Furthermore, the use of enlargement in visual media holds a particular relevance for feminist theories of perception, as it transforms seemingly marginal details into focal points, thereby granting them a heightened sense of presence and agency. Mary Ann Doane explores this idea in her work on cinematic close-ups, where she suggests that the enlargement of specific details within an image disrupts conventional modes of viewing. Doane argues that close-ups serve as a means

of magnifying elements that would otherwise elude perception. This strategy of focusing on minute details is not merely a technical choice but a deliberate narrative device that elevates the surface to a space of perceptual and emotional intensity. As Doane states:

> While on the one hand, the close-up works to magnify, to exaggerate the scale of the image, its giganticism, it also, by necessity, deals with the detail, the miniature. Its logic is that of the microscope – to expand vision by moving ever closer and revealing worlds within worlds. In the close-up, miniaturization and magnification complement one another. The miniature is absorbed within, indeed becomes, the gigantic, the larger-than-life of the cinema, exemplifying the dialectic of distance and proximity (2021: 201).

This reflection reveals a dual process in the close-up: one that brings the viewer into an intimate proximity with the subject while simultaneously creating a sense of the monumental. By magnifying and miniaturizing simultaneously, the close-up introduces a dialectic of distance and proximity. The act of enlargement functions not only as a visual enhancement but also as a means of activating the surface; it configures itself as an intentional act of viewing that collapses distance, allowing the medium to speak with a tactile immediacy that resonates with both personal and collective memory, embodying the agency of the surface as a site of intimate, active storytelling.

A similar sensitivity to the surface as a site of becoming had already been articulated by Jean Epstein in his reflections on *photogénie*:

> even more beautiful than a laugh is the face preparing for it. I must interrupt. I love the mouth which is about to speak and holds back, the gesture which hesitates between right and left, the recoil before the leap, and the moment before landing, the becoming, the hesitation, the taut spring, the prelude and even more than all these, the piano being tuned before the ouverture (1977: 9).

What fascinates Epstein is not the act itself, but the suspended moment before, when the image is imbued with possibility. Furthermore, the interplay of proximity and tactility – materialized through the close-up – finds resonance in theoretical models that recast the screen not as a passive frame but as an active, relational surface. In this sense, Giuliana Bruno's concept of the screen as a membrane offers a compelling reimagining

of its role in cinematic and visual media. Unlike traditional models that frame the screen as a static window or mirror, the scholar positions it as a "connective tissue" (Bruno 2014: 5) – a site of relationality that mediates between subjects and objects, inside and outside. This tactile understanding of the screen shifts its function from a purely optical plane to a porous surface that fosters new forms of sensory and emotional engagement. For Bruno, the screen's relational qualities reflect the broader dynamics of contemporary media, where materiality is no longer fixed but emerges through interaction. In a similar vein, Ilaria A. De Pascalis and Lorenzo Marmo stress the notion of materiality as a relational space – a dynamic interplay of tangible and intangible elements. For them, the screen is not just a display device but a sensory interface that activates perceptual and affective engagement. By focusing on aspects such as grain, resolution, and definition, they frame the screen as a layered and tactile site, reinforcing its role in embodied spectatorship (De Pascalis, Marmo 2019).

This conceptualization of the screen as a connective membrane finds resonance with broader theoretical movements, including affect theory and new materialism, which emphasize the surface as a site of interaction and becoming. As highlighted by Coleman and Oakley-Brown, surfaces act as planes where spaces, times, materialities, and affects intersect, producing dynamic configurations (Coleman, Oakley-Brown 2017: 5–27). Bruno extends this relational understanding by framing surfaces not as static entities but as living environments, capable of mediating sensory and affective experiences. In short "the surface becomes a form of habitation, a living organism that engages in a phenomenological mediation between subjects and objects" (Ravesi 2021: 65 [my translation]). By framing the screen as a living surface, Bruno expands our understanding of its role in mediating the spectator's sensory and affective responses. Furthermore, Bruno engages with Deleuze's concepts, such as 'any-space-whatever' and the 'fold,' to propose a dynamic and processual understanding of surfaces (Bruno 2014: 14-15). The 'any-space-whatever' emphasizes the open and atmospheric potential of surfaces, framing them as spaces that resist fixed boundaries and instead invite movement, transition, and connection. While the 'fold' enables a rethinking of the surface as a dimensional and relational entity, where textures and depths interact. Through this lens, surfaces become sites of simultaneous interiority and exteriority, a space of possibility, where relationality and interaction generate meaning.

Finally, building on this reconceptualization of the screen as a living, relational surface, we can observe how contemporary visual practices not only inherit but rearticulate this logic in response to shifting technological, cultural, and material conditions. While the works of Friedrich, Stein, and Bean articulate a feminist visual language grounded in analog materiality, bodily fragmentation, and the performative agency of the surface, it is essential to recognize how these strategies have evolved within more recent visual and technological paradigms where the logic of *femmage* persists. In this light, turning to Sara Cwynar's *Soft Film* (2016) (**Fig. 3**) offers an opportunity to explore how the politics and poetics of surface, so central to historical practices of feminist collage, are rearticulated in a digital, post-feminist visual culture that continues to grapple with visibility and gender. As a time-based, layered composition of image, voice, and object, *Soft Film* draws together many of the visual strategies identified in the lineage of *femmage*: collection, fragmentation, the diaristic voice, and the material accumulation of surface. Yet, unlike Schapiro and Meyer's archival approach to the domestic sphere, Cwynar reframes these gestures through the lens of post-capitalist image circulation,

**Fig. 3** – Sara Cwynar, *Soft Film*, 2016.

exploring how intimacy and touch have been re-coded within the digital economy of desire and consumption. The video delves into the accumulation and dissemination of images in the digital age. Cwynar collects various objects and photographs, arranging and rearranging them in her studio space. The work reflects on how images and objects acquire and lose value over time, and how they contribute to our understanding of societal paradigms. In *Soft Film*, Cwynar uses a vintage velvet jewelry box – a soft, gendered object acquired through eBay – as a central theme, into carefully choreographed displays, often color-coded and staged within her studio space. The artist appears on screen manipulating these objects with deliberate, almost ritualistic care. These actions do not simply showcase a collection; the boxes, as well as other elements, become more than objects – they are surfaces of nostalgia, class aspiration, and coded femininity. Their texture evokes a mode of interaction that is distinctly haptic, inviting the viewer to feel through the visual field. This tactility, however, is never innocent. Cwynar overlays her manipulations with a voiceover that blends personal reflection, advertising slogans, quotations, and political commentary, producing a discursive collage that frames the velvet boxes as cultural residue: soft not only in texture, but also in their complicity with what the artist terms "soft misogyny" or more generally "soft sexism" (Cwynar, 2016). Here, the surface becomes a critical site: not only aesthetic and material, but ideological and affective. Cwynar's assemblages transform the surface into an archival space where personal and collective memories converge. The velvet boxes represent a visual language of beauty and value rooted in gendered expectations. Their surfaces are both seductive and exhausted, revealing the contradictory economy of late capitalist femininity. Through this layered configuration of voice, gesture, and image, *Soft Film* mobilizes the very tactics of *femmage* – collection, repetition, fragmentation – but retools them within a contemporary media ecology. Her manipulation of the boxes recalls the tactile engagement of sewing, gluing, or assembling in traditional *femmage*, yet it is performed within the field of the camera lens, where touch is mediated by mediation itself. Moreover, *Soft Film* invites a reading through the lens of haptic visuality: the visual strategies deployed – close-ups, repetitions, the rhythmic arrangement of objects – foreground the surface not as transparent but as sensuous, resistant, and political. The material and ideological thickness of these objects is exposed not only through touch, but through the layering of visual and narrative fragments. The voiceover further

complicates the surface by embedding theory into gesture, activating the image as a thinking object – one that invites critical intimacy. Cwynar's screen thus becomes a membrane in the Brunoian sense: a connective tissue where affect, critique, and materiality converge.

## 4 Conclusion

The final case returns us to the core claim of this essay: that surface operates not merely as an interface but as a sensory and epistemological threshold, one that registers and transmits affect, memory, and agency. Across the works of Friedrich, Stein, Bean, and Cwynar, we have traced a shared visual grammar – tactile close-ups, layered montage, fragmented textures – that proposes a feminist reconfiguration of the medium. Through practices grounded in the materiality of the image, these artists activate the surface as a site of narrative construction, political resistance, and intimate revelation. What emerges across these case studies is a notion of the surface that exceeds its optical function. While original *femmage* practices enacted tactility through physical means, contemporary post-digital aesthetics simulate surface interaction via visual and narrative layering. This continuity of haptic engagement across technological thresholds underscores a shared investment in the surface as a site of sensory inscription and feminist rearticulation. As both material and metaphor, the surface thus becomes a site where touch, memory, perception, and ideology intertwine. It is not only where meaning appears, but where it is made – through the textures of skin, the grain of the voice, the residue of objects, the trace of time. Feminist artists and theorists have consistently returned to this sensory threshold not only to critique the politics of vision, but to construct alternative modes of seeing, feeling, and knowing. Whether in the analog layering of Friedrich's scratched text, the performative sequencing of Bean's photographic panels, Stein's visual syntax, or the velvet-saturated capitalism of Cwynar's mise-en-scène, the surface performs. It is in this sensory threshold that the image becomes an event, and vision becomes a tactile, feminist politics.

## Note

1 Su Friedrich's *Scar Tissue* (1979) is available online: [14/10/2025] https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x22avky.
2 For these and other works by Anne Bean, see the website of the gallery representing the artist: [14/10/2025] https://www.englandgallery.com/artists/artists_group/?mainId=257&media=Photography.

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