"She Is Shrouded": Some Exploratory Notes on Scaffolding as an Urban Practice between (Architectural) Construction and (Activist) Intervention*

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Abstract

This paper examines the urban phenomenon of scaffolding at the intersection of screen studies, architecture, and textile studies, with the aim of revealing hidden layers of power dynamics and gendered labor. First, it analyzes scaffolding as an architectural site of operation that combines techniques of supporting and protecting, framing and screening. Second, it focuses on scaffolding as an activist space of "in-between-ness" that allows for challenging the patriarchal politics of vision. A case in point is *Women at Work – Under Construction* (1999), a performance and video work by Maja Bajević, who uses scaffolding as a powerful tool to reverse the tension between outside and inside, public and domestic, visibility and invisibility.

Keywords: Scaffolding; Media Archaeology; Screen Studies; Textile Studies; Activism; Feminism; In-Between-Ness

Abstract

L'articolo esamina il fenomeno urbano dell'impalcatura all'intersezione tra screen studies, architettura e textile studies, con l'obiettivo di rivelare le dinamiche di potere e lavoro genderizzato che vi sono celate. Nella prima parte, analizza l'impalcatura come luogo operativo architettonico che combina tecniche di sostegno e protezione, messa in quadro e "messa in schermo". In seguito, si concentra sull'impalcatura come spazio interstiziale in cui l'attivismo si infiltra, sfidando le politiche patriarcali dello sguardo.

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Lo studio di caso analizzato è *Women at Work – Under Construction* (1999), performance e opera video di Maja Bajević, che usa l'impalcatura in quanto potente strumento che permette di invertire le tensioni tra esterno e interno, pubblico e domestico, visibililtà e invisibilità.

Parole chiave: Impalcatura; Archeologia dei media; Screen Studies; Textile Studies; Attivismo; Femminismo; Spazio interstiziale

1. Heard on the Street

In the wake of the pandemic, I moved from Europe to New York City, where the streets were characterized not only by makeshift outdoor dining structures but also by a very large number of scaffolding and so-called sidewalk sheds, typically painted hunter green. While scaffolding is a structure that climbs and encloses the building, sheds cover the entire sidewalk like temporary arcades.[1] In the summer of 2023, city data showed there were "9,000 permitted construction sheds, spanning nearly 400 miles of the city's streets, that [were] up for an average of 500 days" (Honan 2023). This mileage corresponds to approximately 643 kilometers. Among its iconic buildings in scaffolding, there was—and still is—the Fuller Building, better known as the Flatiron Building, one of the city's first skyscrapers completed in 1902 and whose nickname derives from its triangular floorplan, recalling the shape of a cast-iron clothes iron (Fig. 1). One day, while I was looking up at the imposing yet elegant appearance of this wrapped building, I overheard a conversation between two American men; from what I could guess, it was a local showing his visiting friend around. Awestruck, the friend said in almost a whisper: "She is shrouded." This phrase, stolen on the street, has become the working title of my new research project, which attempts to give scholarly shape to an old obsession of mine: photographing buildings covered in scaffolding wherever I travel (and live).

Overhearing this conservation on 23rd Street between Fifth Avenue and Broadway made me think about a double shift in my research. First, I was struck by the use of the female pronoun in reference to the Flatiron Building. Since then, I have been thinking of "it" as a lady. As a non-native speaker, I was familiar with the English use of "she" for ships and cities but not for buildings.

1 In NYC, sidewalk sheds are installed not only for façade renovation but also for repair work on the inside, such as the replacement of windows. The installation of these scaffolding systems is a requirement by the Scaffold Law, dating back to 1885, that "holds owners and contractors fully accountable for injuries on construction sites, regardless of intent or negligence" (CREA United 2015). In 2013, the city imposed the color "Hunter Green 1390" for sidewalk sheds and construction fences so that they would blend in better with the trees on the street. This law has recently been amended to include more colors, such as white, metallic gray, or "any color that matches the building" (Brown 2025).

Figure 1. Shrouded Flatiron Building, New York City, USA, 2024.
From author's personal collection.

In fact, it is rather uncommon—but as with ships and cities, it evokes the image of a protective, maternal figure, or expresses, more generally, an emotional bond. Among New Yorkers, the Flatiron is indeed a beloved building. Crucially, this gender twist is also reflected in my research which is moving from a "genderless media-archaeological ideal" (Flaig 2018, 108) to a more pronounced

feminist perspective of "embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist [art] projects" (Haraway 1988, 581), with a strong focus on domestic practices, including the making—and ironing—of cloths and clothes. This coincides with the second change of direction in my research, from media studies to textile studies, which is embedded in the conceptual shift from "screen" to "shroud." It is the notion of being "shrouded" that impresses me most, as it sounds so solemn, so out-of-the-ordinary, albeit a bit ominous. As if the Flatiron Building, wrapped in a shroud, were ready for her burial. It immediately calls to mind Penelope's shroud, destined for her father-in-law Laertes, father of Odysseus, which she wove during the day and unwove during the night, as a double process of writing and unwriting. Or, even more so, the Holy Shroud of Turin, famously mentioned by André Bazin for "combin[ing] the features alike of relic and photograph" (1960, 8). As I discuss below, the notion of shroud is uncannily fitting for what I call "fake façades," construction screens with the imprint of the architectural façades they cover—a practice imposed in some countries by regulations of cultural heritage for the renovation of historic buildings and other landmarks.[2]

Yet scaffolding can also offer a space for artistic/activist intervention. In this article, I propose to follow the path not so much of Greek ill-fated heroines like Penelope and Arachne, but rather of contemporary media artists who use scaffolding in a creative and activist way. I will discuss the video work of Sarajevo-born Maja Bajević as an exemplary case, but there is still much more to explore. While my interest lies mostly in textile as a feminist practice, as a form of resistance in the patriarchal politics of vision, I want to stress from the very beginning that my double shift—from gender-neutral research to critical feminism, on the one hand, and from media/screen studies to textile/texture studies, on the other—is not meant to be an exclusion of perspectives, in the sense that one would replace the other or that media studies is sentenced to death. Rather, it should be seen as a diptych, whose panels need to be combined to get the full picture. This is also why a large part of this article deals with scaffolding as a general (urban) phenomenon, with special attention to the "hi-res" project by American photographer Peter Steinhauer on Hong Kong scaffolds, and only toward the end will I address the notion of "in-between-ness" as a feminist strategy to intervene in the tension between the inside (domestic sphere) and the outside (public sphere).

2 In Italy, for example, this is regulated by the Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio (Legislative Decree 42/2004), which is aimed at cultural integrity.

2. From Screen(ing) to Scaffold(ing)

My fascination with scaffolding stems from my research on screens, more specifically from my etymological quest for the multiple origins of the term "screen." I later discovered this had also driven Erkki Huhtamo's screenology (2004). With my background in Romance Philology, I was thrilled to learn how rich the history of the word was—an exploration that began in the early 2000s when I was co-teaching Media Archaeology with Thomas Elsaesser at the University of Amsterdam (Strauven 2020). In one of his lectures, Elsaesser quoted from a 1900 edition of Webster's Dictionary where "screen"—both as noun and as verb—was defined in relation to the coal industry (and not yet in relation to the emerging moving pictures); it was the screen as sieve or filter, separating the coarser from the finer parts, the waste from the non-waste, in which Elsaesser was interested for a new take on the history of screens.[3] Other meanings provided by Webster's at the turn of the last century included: separation, shelter, protection, partition, concealment. In all these meanings, the screen was "something movable" (Webster 1900, 992). In his typical thought-provoking way, Elsaesser would point out that the cinema screen was an exception or an anomalous/ambiguous screen because it was making visible instead of hiding, projecting instead of separating, suggesting the transparency of a window instead of the opacity of a filter. Conversely, the TV screen clearly operates as a filter, that is, a sieve of electrons, and the computer screen is a grid, composed by vertical and horizontal lines of pixels.

While the etymological origins of the screen are intricate and uncertain, with the Latin root being either *cerno* (to separate) or *corium* (skin) and somehow going in circles from the Old French *escran* to the Middle High German *schrank* to the Middle Dutch *sce(e)rm* back to the Old German *skirm* (Strauven 2021, 155–72), the etymology of scaffolding seems at first more straightforward. Dating back to the mid-fourteenth century, the English *scaffold* derives—via an Old North French variant (*eschafaut*) of Old French—from the Vulgar Latin *catafalicum*, which is composed of the Greek *kata* (in the Medieval Latin sense of "beside, alongside") and the Etruscan *fala* (meaning "scaffolding, wooden siege tower") (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The Modern French *échafaud* is a reinforced form of the Old French *chafaud*, documented since 1160 in the sense of "framework supporting a platform" (Dauzat et al. 1989, 251, my translation). Thus, in its original meaning, the term belonged to the semantic field of construction and supporting structures. In the late fourteenth century, the English *scaffold* began to be used in reference to the theater as "raised platform on a stage in a play." By the mid-fifteenth century, it had acquired a more ominous meaning of platform for beheadings—and later, by 1550, also for

3 According to our first syllabus, the lecture was titled "Archaeology of the Screen: Apparatus – TV – Monitor" (Elsaesser and Strauven 2002).

hangings (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).[4] The Dutch *schavot* followed the same etymology and became to stand for corporal and capital punishment. As with the shroud, we enter the Kingdom of the Dead.

My new book project is about scaffolding as an urban phenomenon, referring to the temporary support structures in the field of building construction and renovation. The temporary aspect of these constructions without declared authorship is at the core of the recent book ~~*Contemporary Architecture*~~ by KOSMOS Architects: "Entering into a short-term relationship with the context, this type of construction manifests itself as an event, an intervention" (2025, 37). From construction to intervention, from permanence to transience, from architecture to activism: these are some of shifts in this urban practice that interest me. There will be intersections with so-called technical architecture, civil and mechanical engineering, and urbanism for a discussion of the materials used—from the tubes and bridges (grid) to the various types of debris netting (screen)—as well as policymaking related to cultural heritage, urban design, advertising, public safety, and so forth. At the same time, I am aware that the technique of scaffolding has found applications, metaphorical or otherwise, in fields as diverse as educational psychology and biomedical engineering. Although my focus remains on literal scaffolding, these other applications warrant brief attention here, as their underlying theories reveal how scaffolding has come to signify broader systems of support.

The scaffolding metaphor in teaching and learning finds its origin in Russian psychology, more particularly in Lev Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), a notion introduced in early 1930s. According to Vygotsky, the ZPD bridges the gap between current and potential ability; that is, "between *the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration of more capable peers*" (1978, 86). In other words, within the ZPD, children learn new skills thanks to the temporary support provided by adults or more knowledgeable peers. It has been suggested that Vygotsky's learning model closely resembles the scaffolding technique used in ancient Roman engineering to construct arches, which could not stand on their own until "the final stone [was] put in"

4 Here it is interesting to note that Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (1958) was translated as *Lift to the Scaffold* in the UK and as *Elevator to the Gallows* in the US. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith opted for the British title rather than the American one, because he felt the former was more accurate: "in France criminals are (or were) executed by guillotine, not hanged on gallows" (2013, ix). Mark de Valk, on the other hand, proposes to think of the cinema screen as "a modern-day 'public scaffold'" in line with Michel Foucault's notion of the scaffold, "where the body is ritually laid bare to the force of the sovereign" (De Valk 2016, 3). The scaffold as "punitive spectacle" is at the center of Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975; translated in 1977 as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*); the second chapter, originally titled "L'éclat des supplices" (literally meaning "the radiance of the tortures"), has been successfully translated in English as "The Spectacle of the Scaffold" (Foucault 1995, 32–69).

(Shvarts and Bakker 2019, 15).[5] In cognitive studies, without going into detail, the scaffolded mind hypothesis has led to new ways of understanding human action, neuroplasticity and cognitive aging, as well as mental disorders (Goh and Park 2009; Sterelny 2010; Varga 2025), while in the biomedical engineering discipline of tissue engineering, scaffold refers to an extracellular matrix, a three-dimensional structure (or texture), that serves as a temporary support for cells to grow and generate new tissue-like structures (Hashemi and Soleimani 2011; Sultana 2018).

From developing new skills under guidance to using 3D medical fabrics for tissue engineering, where does scaffolding as a feminist practice fit in? Is it about being the more (or rather differently) knowledgeable other? Or is it about changing the patriarchal structure of our scaffolded society? As already mentioned, I am interested in scaffolding as a literal (and material) practice in the field of construction, whereby a supporting structure is erected around a building and a debris net is put in front of its façade. The net functions as a protective layer, a filter, a separation between inside and outside. It is a double-face surface that can be viewed from both sides. If we think of textile in its original meaning of weaving, scaffolds provide a grid similar to the loom with its warp and weft. It is a huge frame with a public screen, a surface for display. And it is precisely in this space that feminist/activist artists can intervene to criticize (or reverse) the gendered division between the public sphere with its male protagonism and the domestic sphere with its hidden female labor. Before entering such a discussion about scaffolding as "in-between-ness," which should be understood not only spatially (inside/outside) but also temporally (transience/permanence), let us first take a closer look at the architectural definition of scaffolding and various types of construction screens, including abovementioned fake façades.

3. Architectural Scaffolds as Grids

With regard to the architectural apparatus, I suggest departing from the Italian word for scaffolding *impalcatura*, as it leads back—ultimately, through its definitional and disciplinary layers—to one of the main architectural thinkers of the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti. Treccani's online dictionary distinguishes three semantic fields for the term: construction, arboriculture, and zoology. The first definition, that which belongs to the field of construction, is rather extensive. It first describes the function of scaffolding to support both

5 Other education scholars, on the other hand, have pointed out the difference with scaffolding in the building profession: "Contrary to the notion of scaffolding in the field of construction, where the same structures can be used in constructing similar buildings, scaffolding in education and other related fields, with its link to sociocultural theory, is not a rigid structure but a fluid support finely tuned to the child's progress, with the purpose of helping the child become self-regulated" (Gönülal and Loewen 2018, 2).

workers and materials as well as to "provide access to all points of work"; then, it nicely points out the grid structure, made up of "vertical elements" that are connected about every two or three meters with "horizontal beams" on which "smaller beams" are rested, the technical terms for each of these elements being given; and, lastly, it provides information on how these elements are fixed together, that is, with "rope ties" in the case of wooden scaffolds and with "scaffolding joints" (*giunti snodati*) for today's most common scaffolds which are made of steel (Treccani, n.d., my translation).[6]

While Treccani's definition continues with other uses of the term as support system, this first part is already telling. It clearly points to a Western take on the history of scaffolding, given the long-standing use of bamboo in East Asia, which is still widely adopted in Hong Kong.[7] Moreover, the application of scaffolding joints is a direct reference to the so-called tube-joint (*tubo-giunto*) patented in the mid-1930s by Italian businessman Ferdinando Innocenti, a system that became successful during fascism and is still in use today (Giannetti 2017, 2022). Most remarkably, Treccani makes no mention of the debris netting or construction screen. The Italian term *impalcatura* refers to the supporting structure, the unclothed framing, the grid without screen. Treccani also provides another commonly used term for scaffolding: *ponteggio*, derived from *ponte*, meaning bridge, thus evoking the bridge-like effect of the NYC sidewalk sheds. The term *impalcatura*, on the other hand, contains the term *palco*, meaning platform, plank floor, or stage.

The notion of scaffolding as support for workers and materials rather than for the building itself *seems* to go back to Alberti's treatise *De re aedificatoria* ("On Architecture," 1452). According to Zanichelli's *Il nuovo etimologico*, the term *impalcatura* appeared in the sixteenth-century Italian translation of *De re aedificatoria* by Cosimo Bartoli in the meaning of "temporary worksite structure made of poles or tubes and wooden platforms, to support workers and materials" (Cortelazzo and Zolli 1999, 730; my translation). However, there are other passages in Alberti describing scaffolding as a supporting structure under a vaulted

6 The original reads as follows: "s.f. [der. di *impalcare*] – 1. a. "Nelle costruzioni, struttura provvisoria (detta anche *ponteggio*) destinata a sostenere gli operai e i materiali occorrenti per l'esecuzione di un'opera, nonché a dare accesso a tutti i punti di lavoro; è generalmente costituita da elementi verticali (*antenne*, *candele*), collegati ogni due o tre metri circa con travi orizzontali (*traversoni* o *correnti*) sulle quali vengono poggiate travi più piccole (*travicelli* o *traversi*) a sostegno di un tavolato continuo, praticabile. Nel tipo in legno le giunture erano fissate con legature in corda; l'attuale tipo metallico è costituito da tubi di acciaio riuniti fra loro con giunti snodati, o da telai prefabbricati accoppiabili con innesti" (Treccani, n.d.).

7 Plans to phase out bamboo for metal scaffolding in Hong Kong began in the spring of 2025, well before the scaffolding fire at the Wang Fuk Court apartment complex in late November 2025. However, the real culprit of this terrible fire was not the bamboo but the screen; after a summer typhoon, at least part of the netting was "replaced with cheaper material that did not meet fire-safety standards" (Stevenson et al. 2025).

roof under construction, to be removed once the vault is "compleated [*sic*] and settled," similar to the arches built in Roman times (Alberti 1755, 151). In fact, Alberti's architectural theory was heavily inspired by Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius's *De Architectura* ("On Architecture," circa 30–20 BCE), where an early description of "construction machinery" can be found (Marconi 2021, 62).

For now, I propose to focus on the Western notion of the architectural scaffold as a grid, as a structure made up by vertical elements connected by horizontal beams, as aptly described by the Treccani dictionary. The notion of grid evokes a passage in Alberti's other famous treatise, *De pictura* ("On Painting", 1435), where he introduces the metaphor of the "open window" (*aperta finestra*) as well as the technique of the intersection or "veil" (*velum* in Latin, *velo* in Italian), which is described as follows: "I take a Veil made of the finest Threads, but not close woven; the Colour matters not; This I divide into what Number of Squares I think proper by some bigger Threads parallel to each other, stretching it upon a Frame, which I place between my Eye and the Object, that the visual Pyramid may pass to it through the Veil" (Alberti 1755, 254). Whereas Anne Friedberg, in her study on windows, insists on the significance of the veil's frame with its inset quadrants, which she defines as "a device to 'map' the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional plane" (2006, 38), my interest lies in the threads, their variable thickness, and their intersecting lines forming the grid pattern of the weave. Alberti's veil is a piece of cloth!

Indeed, according to Bernhard Siegert, Alberti's scientific approach was "firmly rooted in the textile paradigm," a framing which reflects the aesthetic and material logics of the early fifteenth century when tapestries were commonly considered "to have higher value than pictures" (Siegert 2015, 99). Alberti also resorted to textile for definitions of Euclidean geometry, but what matters most here is that his woven veil is part of an imaging theory; it is a grid that—as Siegert puts it— "effectively merges representation and operation" (98). While Alberti's window "serves as metaphor for the mathematical construction of paintings, the veil is a medium for their technical construction" (98). Siegert's discussion of the grid as a cultural technique moves from imaging theory to cartography and topography, to urban planning and cell-based architecture (such as Le Corbusier's groundbreaking modular design)—a discussion in which the control of space is central.

If Siegert's grid is about "ruling spaces," about locating things and turning even humans into retrievable objects, and about "address[ing] and symbolically manipulat[ing] things that have been transformed into data" (98), it is important to highlight how such a media structure is not neutral. Grids can be exploited to create gender-based divisions or to determine who has power over whom, as exemplified by the urban planning of early modern colonial governmentality (Siegert 2015, 102–111). Scaffolds may also be compared to doors as cultural techniques, as they operate as architectural media and emphasize

the "primordial difference of architecture—that between inside and outside" (Siegert 2015, 193). This tension between inside and outside is again not neutral, as it can be used for strategies of inclusion and exclusion.

Unlike the sidewalk sheds in NYC, which form a passageway to ensure a steady flow of pedestrians beneath the ongoing construction work, the European style scaffolding usually covers the entire façade, from street level to the top floor, completely separating pedestrians from the building.[8] This creates a distance, or separation, between building and street, between inside and outside, which is occupied by the supporting system of the scaffolds—an in-between space that is missing, for example, in the installations of environmental artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude.[9] It is indeed important to distinguish between enveloping a building and scaffolding a building. We should think of scaffolding as an operation that combines techniques of supporting and protecting, framing and screening.

Given the frame structure onto which a screen is stretched, I see a connection not only with Alberti's veil but also with the basic—that is, material—apparatus of cinema. With cinema's return to 3D in the early 2010s, after the release of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), Elsaesser suggested there was an internal logic at stake which consisted in cinema's "tendency to self-abolish its apparatic scaffolding and peculiar geometry of representation," referring to the impulse to eliminate the frame as delineation of our field of vision (2013, 229). In those years, digitally shot movies were still transferred to film for projection, so the frame was the material boundary of the image space both on the filmstrip (photographic image) and on the film screen (projected image).[10] We could think of the analog filmstrip as a scaffolding holding individually framed images together; the film frame being a material and temporal unit, a measurement of a projection speed (24fps), which is at the basis of quantification studies of shot lengths, such as Yuri Tsivian's Cinemetrics (2005) and Barbara Flueckiger's Timeline of Historical Film Colors (2012).

The scaffolding of cinema's apparatus is therefore not to be taken just metaphorically but also very literally. Furthermore, scaffolds are used to build film

8 Although NYC's sheds keep the shops accessible, the main complaints come from retailers, because the scaffolding obstructs the view of their shop windows and the use of cross braces makes it difficult to pass through from the street side. New scaffolding manufacturers like Urban Umbrella and Shed Innovations are attempting to overcome these problems (Baird-Remba 2023).

9 An exception to the rule was their installation in Central Park in New York City, *The Gates* (2005), which consisted of 7,503 saffron-hued fabrics on simple frames, weaving along 23 miles of the park. These "gates" were scaffolds with loose screens that covered nothing but air and fluttered in the wind (Christo and Jeanne-Claude n.d.).

10 Technically speaking, much of the visual effects and digital processing performed by so-called render farms consists of rendering single frames, so the frame as a material unit still exists in (full) digital cinema.

sets and support platforms for film production. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, tubular metal scaffolding was being introduced to replace wooden frameworks in British film studios and later also in Hollywood. It was cost-effective because of its durability and reusability, but also, importantly, because it was fireproof. Moreover, its modular principle made it particularly flexible, as it could be "used to quickly and easily construct a lighting rig or camera crane to match the specific needs of an individual production, sequence or shot" and "easily disassembled when not in use, freeing up space on often cramped studio floors" (Farmer 2021). Scaffolding in film studios is efficient not only for carrying technical equipment but also for attaching décor pieces, which calls to mind the use of painted flats in early cinema (Lant 1995), the "Strada Novissima" façades built by Cinecittá's set designers for the 1980 Venice Biennale (Celant 1980), or even the legend of the Potemkin villages, allegedly created to impress Catherine the Great (Manovich 1998).

4. Screen – Shroud – Canvas – Cocoon

In material terms, there is a continuity between early cinema's painted flats used as backdrops and film screens mounted on supporting frames. Such a structure, which usually remains hidden from sight, is exposed by Orson Welles in an emblematic scene shot in Mexico City for his unfinished epic film, *Don Quixote* (1957–1969). The scene takes place in a movie palace, where Don Quixote rushes to the aid of a woman in danger on screen and begins to fight the projection with his sword, shredding the screen and revealing the wooden structure supporting it. The double function of framing and supporting is also thematized in a 1906 film by Georges Méliès that plays with the popular theme of living posters: *Les Affiches en goguette* (*The Hilarious Posters*). Here the scaffolding holds a multi-frame billboard with painted figures that is turned quite literally into a three-dimensional cabinet with living curiosities—ranging from a cook and a liquor seller to several coquettes, who are put on display and meanwhile play pranks from above on a passerby and a group of policemen on the street. Then, the film moves back from live action to painted figures on a fully restored billboard, which eventually falls on top of the policemen and tears open.

A torn screen, revealing the supporting framework of scaffolding, is something that catches my attention on the street. Over the years, I have photographed many scaffoldings with ripped nets or construction screens with openings, that show the gap between building and street, between façade and passerby (Fig. 2). By making this in-between-ness visible, they bring us to the original meaning of the term "screen" as something that physically stands in the middle. Rather than a surface, the screen is an interface, a boundary between two objects or realms; it is something that separates or creates barriers, like the fire screen (which is, supposedly, the original meaning of the term).

Figure 2. Scaffolding with a torn screen, Montecatini Terme, Italy, 2019. From author's personal collection.

The construction screen, which covers the skeletal structure of the scaffolds, is meant to protect passersby from dust or falling rocks. It also functions as a screen of concealment, as it hides the façade under construction or renovation from our view—similar to other screens, such as the hand-held lady's fan and the folding screen or room divider, both of which are examples of the screen as a material layer for image display. This finally leads to the definition of the screen as a surface; that is, a flat, often rectangular area for intercepting shadows of objects (as used in the field of mathematics) and light images (which began with the tradition of the magic lantern and then the cinema). This is what Elsaesser considered the anomalous/ambiguous screen of cinema, the screen as projection screen, which in the early days of the motion pictures was referred to by the two other English terms: "curtain" and "sheet" (Paul 2005; Strauven 2021, 175–78).

If we can think of scaffolding as a form of cinema (in the sense of basic apparatus), I suggest adding at least two other terms: "shroud" and "canvas." Here I want to briefly come back to the Holy Shroud of Turin, known

in French as Saint-Suaire and in Italian as Sacra Sindone.[11] Without going into the controversies surrounding the "technical" origins of the shroud's faint image—from chemical painting to medieval photography to UV radiation—I am interested in the image as imprint, or better as material surface through which a picture appears or manifests itself. As for the scaffolded buildings, I connect the notion of imprint to the phenomenon of fake façades printed on the temporary construction screens. Sometimes—either by design or from long exposure to the sun—these ersatz façades seem to fade away, as if they were becoming an ephemeral trace, a photographic impression left on the shroud.

I photographed many fake façade screens in Italy, where there seem to be strict rules imposed by the Soprintendenza dei Beni Culturali (Superintendence of Cultural Heritage) not only about the (photographic) imprints of the architectural façades that are hidden but also about the percentage of the total scaffolding that can be deployed for commercial purposes, which is set at max. 30%.[12] Many shrouds come with a reserved blank area to be occupied by billboards, which can easily be changed according to the speed of marketing campaigns, while the building remains under renovation. As fashion is a big player in these advertising campaigns, the nets function as surfaces on which the bodies of mostly female fashion models are displayed, reviving—after fifty years—Laura Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (1975) and at the same time hiding the male workers behind the screen, which leads to an interesting renewal and reversal of the gendered tension between visibility and invisibility (Fig. 3). The putting-on-display effect is even stronger at night, when the screens are illuminated, literally turning the billboard into a spectacle, as the advertising areas are not only framed but also provided by spotlights (Fig. 4). My personal favorites are a subgroup of the fake façades where the reserved areas for ad placement are still empty. Like movie screens, these white rectangles seem to be waiting for projection (Fig. 5).

11 It is interesting to note that the Italian translation of David Cronenberg's latest film, *The Shrouds* (2024), avoided the term *sindone* and instead opted for the more metaphorical *segreti sepolti* (meaning "buried secrets"). Cronenberg's film features a sci-fi shroud technology that is connected to coffins and tombstones. As the director disclosed at the 62nd New York Film Festival, the idea for the film started "with the box" and the inability to separate oneself from the deceased loved one (Cronenberg 2024).

12 This was regulated by the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali per il Turismo (MIBACT) (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities for Tourism) in December 2020.

Figure 3. Fake façade with fashion advertisement, Rome, Italy, 2003.
From author's personal collection.

Figure 4. Fake façade with illuminated advertising panels at night, Rome, Italy, 2003. From author's personal collection.

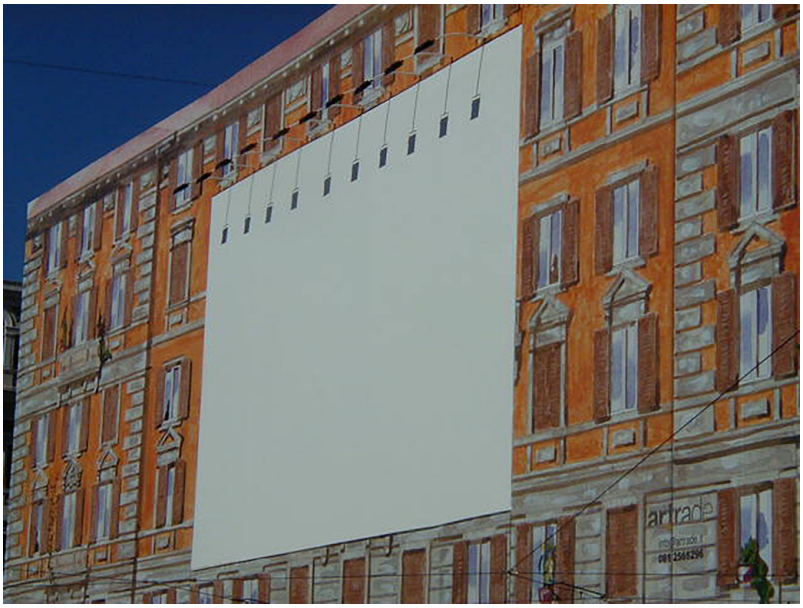

Figure 5. Fake façade with a white screen, Rome, Italy, 2003. From author's personal collection.

Urban façades can also be transformed into spectacular media screens by means of LED-lit windows or various forms of video mapping. Although equally catching my eye and triggering my photographic impulse, these urban screens would constitute a separate chapter. They belong to another genealogy, as they turn the architectural façade directly, immediately, into a projection screen, that is, without the in-between-ness of a (textile-based) screen. For this reason, the term "canvas" may be a more appropriate term to use in relation to screens on scaffolds, as it emphasizes their materiality. Today's scaffolding screens are primarily made of high-density poly material, such as polyethylene (HDPE) or polypropylene (PP). They are usually knitted rather than woven. Whereas the early film screen was made of calico, tightly woven cotton, the construction screen is a mesh. It is a screen with a distinct raster effect, comparable to the surface of video that Laura Marks described as "a loosely woven fabric" in relation to Alois Riegl's notion of "haptic representation" (Marks 2000, 168). This raster effect is reinforced when a video image is shown on a TV monitor, to which I will come back when discussing Bajević's video work.

The textile/texture-based notion of haptics stands in stark contrast to the optics of high-resolution photography as employed by Peter Steinhauer in his book on Hong Kong scaffolding, titled *Cocoons* (2018). In her foreword to Steinhauer's book, Linda Benedict Jones narrates her experience of viewing his photographs for the first time at a curatorial review session in Paris and how she was "perplexed and enchanted […] by the canvas sprawled before [her]." And she adds: "The word canvas seems incorrect in a discussion of photographs but it conjures up the sensation I had at that first viewing. The images that Steinhauer selected to present that day were splashes of primary colors more akin to abstract paintings than to documentary photographs. Perhaps that's why they moved me in a way that photographs rarely do" (Jones 2018, xii).

Steinhauer is an American photographer who lived for more than a decade in Southeast Asia, first in Vietnam and Singapore, and then in Hong Kong, where his project of photographing "wrapped buildings" took fully shape from 2007 to 2015—an idea that was triggered in March 1994 when he first visited the city. After initially mistaking a large building "encased in bamboo scaffolding and being covered in some sort of yellow material" for an installation by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, he realized the city was full of them (Steinhauer 2018, vi).

In a certain sense, Steinhauer follows the path of nineteenth-century Scottish photographer John Thomson, who traveled to Southeast Asia in the early 1860s and settled in Hong Kong in 1868 where he started photographing life on the street. Among Thomson's photographs are a couple of images of bamboo scaffolding—just the skeleton without a screen—of a "European style building under renovation" in Shantou, Guangdong (Jones 2018, xiii). In contrast to these early black-and-white prints, Steinhauer's photography is entirely about the bright monochromatism of the canvases: "primary colors at their

finest—vibrant greens, blues, yellows—like a new box of Crayola crayons" (Jones 2018, xiv). This was in fact a turning point in Steinhauer's own career, as he had worked for many years only in black and white. But in Hong Kong, he understood the need to capture the colorfulness of the canvases and to act quickly, whenever a new scaffolding was being erected, because the air pollution would soon make the fabrics look "dingy" (Jones 2018, xiv). Steinhauer clearly attached great importance to a clean image of the scaffolding screens, rendered by means of high-resolution (or "rich") photography. Another important decision that adds to the aesthetic grandeur of his "cocoons" was to photograph the buildings from high vantage points, climbing up steep streets or accessing rooftops or balconies across the construction site.

This high perspective (and high art) approach contrasts sharply with my habit of photographing wrapped buildings from below, from street level. I took my first scaffold pictures during a short stay in Rome, in 2003, with a cheap digital point-and-shoot camera. The low-res images function here not only as historical traces but also as anti-hierarchical "poor images" (Steyerl 2008). They are, so to speak, my feminist/activist response to the rich and perfect images of Steinhauer's hi-res photographic project. It just so happens that, like Steinhauer, I also moved to Hong Kong in 2007. My scaffolding collection contains several pictures taken in Southeast and East Asia, from the Royal Palace of Bangkok (Thailand) and the Forbidden City of Beijing (China) to the IMAX Dome of the Hong Kong Space Museum (Fig. 6). The scaffolding screens in my pictures are often dull or faded, or at least not as vibrant as in Steinhauer's work. I am not specifically in search of the "purity" of the monochrome screen, although over the years I have taken some "artistic" photos of buildings wrapped in bright white canvases that act as reinforcing backgrounds for statues or fountains, as if they were part of a scenography. Especially in empty Italian squares, this totally unexpected/involuntary staging can evoke the atmosphere of Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical paintings (Fig. 7).

I am just as interested in the ugly examples, the dirty screens, the tacky fake façades, the advertisement plague ruining the potential aesthetic dimension of scaffolding. Regarding the metaphor of the cocoon, which deceptively suggests a feeling of coziness or comfort, Steinhauer relates it to his personal experience of living for seven months in a wrapped building. "Cocooned" in green material, Steinhauer describes it as follows: "It felt like we were *actually* living inside of a cocoon, as everything in our apartment took on a dark shade of green. We would see men working outside our windows, clinging to the bamboo scaffolding, expert hands tying two huge bamboo poles together within minutes […]. I imagined it happening to a caterpillar when it goes through its transformation; that is, an army of small men working their magic to reveal a more beautiful version of itself" (2018, vii).

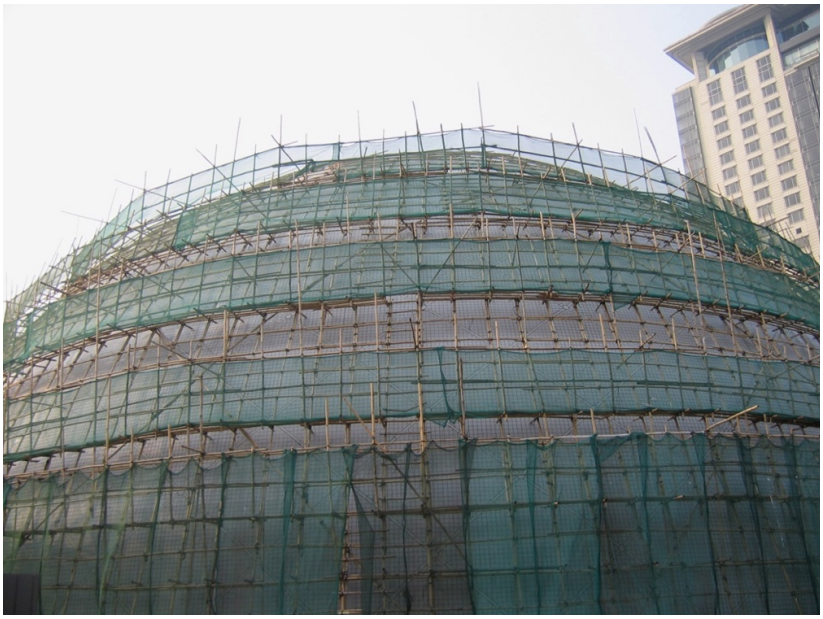

Figure 6. IMAX Dome of the Hong Kong Space Museum, Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong, 2007. From author's personal collection.

Figure 7. Scenographic effect of scaffolding on an empty square, Torino, Italy, 2022. From author's personal collection.

My personal experience of living in a scaffolded building is very different: it feels like being in a huge (and dusty) cage. The image of the cocoon romanticizes the claustrophobic and depressive conditions of living in a wrapped building, especially when the temporary scaffolding is everlasting. The notion of wrapping itself may even be too fancy, as it suggests that these buildings are "gigantic gift-wrapped packages" for residents, which of course they are not (Jones 2018, xiv). What should be emphasized instead is the monstrosity of the cocoon, supposedly resulting from the (imagined) work of an enormous insect larva. The scaffolding framework can also be seen as a giant insect clinging to the building with its metal tube legs, which emphasizes the feeling of captivity from within.

The scaffolding mesh, on the other hand, would belong to the genealogy of "protective screens" (Casetti 2023), as it combines the function of an umbrella—protecting against things falling out of the sky—with that of a filter—stopping large debris but not fine dust, while allowing light and air to pass through. But are scaffolding screens really protecting people? In big cities like New York, scaffolding blurs the boundaries between the inside and the outside, as the sheds provide makeshift shelters for the homeless. Again, as with the concept of the cocoon, we must be careful not to romanticize (or patronize) this idea of shelter, as it raises issues of hygiene and safety, social tension and police intervention. Yet these "alternative shelters" (Aneja 2020) should also be studied as "counter-infrastructures to formal social welfare systems" (Kriger 2025), which is especially relevant in NYC where the "Right to Shelter"—a longstanding legal mandate requiring the city to provide a bed for every person who might need one—has functionally ended in December 2023 (Hogan 2023). This brings into focus the ethical, social, and human agenda of scaffolding, which is linked to the tension between inside and outside, private and public, domesticity and professional practices. This is the space of in-between-ness where feminist/activist artists can operate.

5. In-Between-Ness: Maja Bajević as Case Study

The video performances of Maja Bajević have been defined by Janis Jefferies as a form of "social laboratory" (2007, 165). I came across Bajević's video *Women at Work – Under Construction* (1999) twenty years after I took my first scaffold photos in Rome. I saw this single-channel video (total running time: 11' 48") at the art gallery Kaufmann Repetto in NYC as part of a textile exhibition titled *re-materialized: the stuff that matters* (January 13–February 18, 2023). Bajević's video, which was playing on a loop on an old TV monitor, literally hypnotized me: here scaffolding was turned into a public performance, into a collaborative artwork, using a construction screen as a canvas for embroidery. It involved women refugees from Sarajevo who were invited to take a seat on

the scaffolding and embroider their own colorful compositions within smaller frames of the huge scaffolding frame.

The video is part of the tryptic *Women at Work*, which makes visible "invisible" domestic activities through public performances (documented by single-channel videos). *Under Construction* was followed by *The Observers*, focused on the activity of needlework against the setting of a French castle in conjunction with the reenactment of a Frans Hals painting, *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* (ca. 1664). The third and last installment, *Washing up*, takes place in the public hammam Çemberlitaş in Istanbul and consists of washing cloths inscribed with optimistic Tito slogans in dirty water, for five days, two hours a day. The cyclical dimension of these domestic activities is key: it is about repetition, about healing through repetition, and about resistance against oblivion and anonymity.

The scaffolding performance also lasted five days, continuing partially during the nighttime, and involved five women refugees: Fazila Efendić, Zlatija Efendić, Amira Tihić, Hatidža Verlasević, and Munira Mandzić. Fazila and Zlatija were reinvited for the second and the third installment. These women were not only named but also paid for their contribution to the art performances, becoming participatory agents of Bajević's "politics of domesticity" (Pejić 2007, 70). This powerfully counters the collective invisibility of refugees produced in ex-Yugoslavia. As pointed out by Bojana Pejić: "During the Bosnian war, the anonymity of women refugees, regardless of their ethnic group, was steadily reinforced by the mass media, foreign television stations in particular. The refugees were televised as an unidentified mass, as a crowd or a suffering *Volk*" (2007, 75). As a non-Muslim, Bajević invited these five Muslim women to mourn in public over their lost husband, brother or son, wearing white headscarves, "following the practices of Muslim culture in which white is the color of mourning" (Pejić 2007, 75).

The building under renovation is the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, located in the center of Sarajevo. It houses institutional art with a capital A, while the women on the scaffolding embroider folkloristic figures and motifs (Fig. 8). This tension between the heritage (inside) and the craft (outside) is intentional. It is meant to bring about a productive dialogue and the beginning of a new history, as the artist writes in her book tellingly titled … *and other stories*: "I wanted to make a synthesis of two histories; one that symbolises the interior of the National Gallery, and a new one—the reality of my country marked by war and refugees. Aside from this, I made a connection between the needlework (outside) as part of national folklore and the art collections (heritage) contained in the National Gallery... a new history began to speak in traditional tongue" (Bajević 2002, 5).

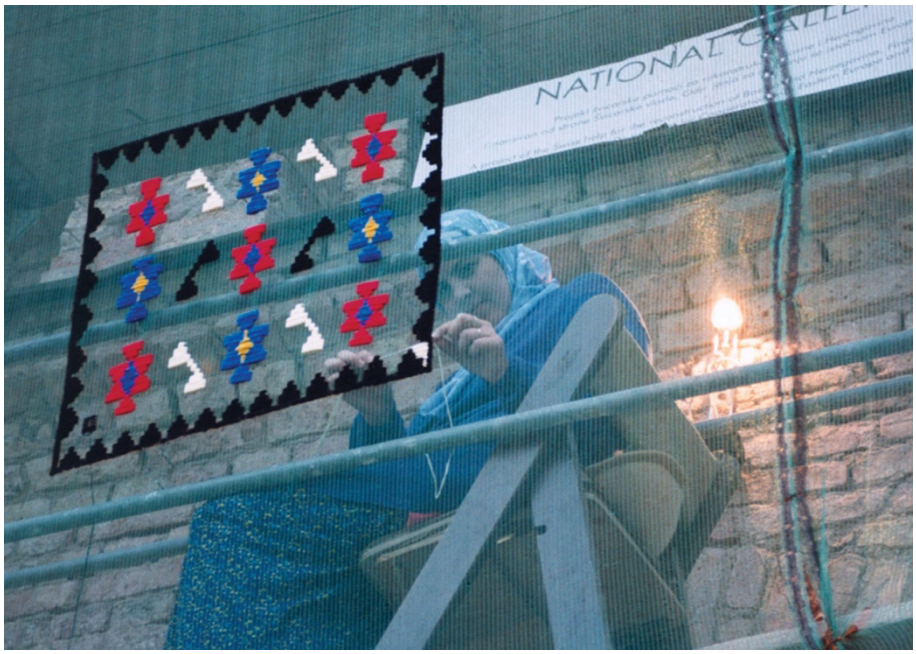

Figure 8. Maja Bajević, *Women at Work – Under Construction*, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1999. Five-day performance on the scaffolding of the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Photo documentation: Haris Memija and Dejan Vekić.

This new dialectics between inside and outside somehow reverses the traditionally opposed gendered spaces: the public/visible *menspace* vs. the domestic/invisible *womenspace*. Although it resembles the reversal of visibility and invisibility discussed above in relation to fashion advertising on scaffolding screens, here the female body is not just put on display but actively performs labor. Yet this labor is domestic and, implicitly, meaningless. Bajević's video also documents some male activity on the scaffolding. They are construction workers, whose labor is—from the patriarchal perspective—much more meaningful. As Pejić puts is: "*Under Construction* is an artistic event wherein different aspects of women's social invisibility are layered. Here, women's chosen work is accomplished in public and, in addition, such a 'superfluous' and apparently purposeless activity as decorating the façade is contrasted with purposeful male physical labor, namely, the male workers' role of restoring the 'essence' of the building, soon to serve again its meaningful, public function as the national museum for visual arts" (2007, 74).

As already pointed out, Bajević's "politics of domesticity" is not only about gender. Her tryptic as a whole is about transforming *nonspaces*—a façade, a castle, a bathhouse—into ritual places where mourning can be done with dignity, where loss of identity is restored, and where memory can become an active

practice. Jefferies proposes the notion of "in-between peripherality" (borrowed from Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek) to describe Bajević's work as being both "peripheral" and "in-between"—that is, in between her own national culture and the primacy of major Western cultures by which "Eastern Europe" was influenced. Bajević somehow places this in-between-ness at the center of her work, both literally and metaphorically. Jefferies writes: "Her performances, her life writing and use of textile materials bring into play the tensions of what is possible and feasible to express in her configurations of 'everyday' life, both on the periphery and at the centre of contemporary art and its relationship to politics. It is a tangle of symbolic geographies and interwoven histories" (2007, 166).

There are moments where Bajević's video takes us to the other side of the construction screen, to the literal in-between space, the gap between street and building, between outside and inside, but also between two woven structures, that of the net and that of the bricks. It is in this narrow space that creativity is happening. At the same time, these moments reverse the circuit of CCTV: here, the women are not being surveilled but are surveilling themselves, they are looking—via a pixel/raster screen—down on the passersby. Yet their screen is also the material surface for a new image, which is colorful, embroidered, and framed. The transparency of the debris netting nicely accentuates the grid structure of the scaffolds, which is thematized—in a *mise en abyme*—by the individual embroidery frames. Moreover, the debris netting creates a pixelated effect on the face of the women when taken in close-up or medium close-up from the other side, that is, the outside. This raster effect is reinforced on the TV monitor of the video installation, the video image being an instable image that derives from a signal, occurring in the relay between source and screen. It is a strong instance of "video haptics" (Marks 1998). The video image emphasizes process over perfection, sensoriality over representation; it offers a counter-narrative of intimacy and fragmentation against the colonial/capitalist practices of visual clarity; the layers of the grid obscuring our vision but also creating the sensation of both closeness and distance.

In Bajević's video there is a multiple framing at stake: the framing of the scaffolding, the framing of the embroidery patterns, and the framing of the women refugees. In terms of (technical) image production, the technique of embroidery is displaced on a construction screen, which is becoming a shroud for the building, but maybe also for women themselves, because—even if they are transformed from invisible housewives to visible agents in the public, from refugees to paid performers—they remain veiled/screened, located at the other side of the circuit. When working at night, their handmade images are lit from behind, resembling shadow figures of early cinema and the shadow puppet theater. The night shots of *Women at Work – Under Construction* turn into spectacle both the cutout figures and the women at work, the scaffolding (*impalcatura*)

becoming their stage (*palco*).[13] Is Bajević intentionally playing with voyeurism here? Or is the Sarajevo-born artist inviting us to connect her feminist installation with the color-lit brothels at night and the conditions of sex workers, creating awareness for another group of marginalized women?

6. Coda

Other feminist/activist projects involving scaffolding are to be further explored and discussed along the same lines of in-between-ness or reversal of hierarchies in the public sphere. For instance, there is the work of German-Italian artist Monica Bonvicini who makes large-scale installations with galvanized steel pipes to occupy the inside of the museum space as a critique of the male-dominated world of (outside) architecture. Most famous is the scaffolding with swings in black leather, *Never Again* (2005), which explores the links between sexuality and power. More subtle is the collective performance staged by Sardinian artist Maria Lai in her birthplace Ulassai, titled *Legarsi alla Montagna* (*Tying Oneself to the Mountain*, 1981), which consisted in knotting together torn pieces of fabric into a very long thread to attach an old village to the surrounding mountains. By uniting architecture and nature as well as oral history and video art into an enormous scaffolding structure, Lai's project focused on a communal experience of inclusion. Another "displacement" of scaffolding art is the gigantic work of needlework, *Re-Enchanting the World* (2022), by Polish-Romani artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Revisiting the famous calendar cycle of frescoes from Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Mirga-Tas's "re-enchanting" installation aims at "disenchanting" stereotypical narratives about the Roma by means of huge textile panels attached to the wall from ceiling to ground.

Bajević's *Women at Work – Under Construction* finds its most direct resonance in the cross-stitched pink slogans of the feminist art project SOLANGE / AS LONG AS. This collective drapes white nets over buildings in scaffolding, cross-stitched with phrases such as "As long as you rely on patriarchy, I will be a feminist" and "As long as diversity is not the state of the heart, I will be a feminist," in order to promote a more inclusive society. Between February 2018 and June 2025, they have installed thirty-three nets (with thirty-three different AS LONG AS slogans) in various European countries, first in Austria, homeland of the founding artist Katharina Cibulka, and then across the continent. So far, they also put up two scaffolding installations outside Europe: one in Washington DC at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (2022–23) and one in Morocco at the Rabat Biennale (2019–20). The SOLANGE collective

13 After the public performance, the embroidery frames were literally cut out and ended up inside the National Gallery, on makeshift scaffoldings, for a solo exhibition curated by Maja Bobar and Asja Mandić and titled *Maja Bajević, Home Again* (2006).

insists that feminism is not a "women's issue," but an issue that affects the whole of society for the purpose of a more human and humane community. As they declare on their website: "It is a subject that […] concerns every person, no matter what gender. Ultimately, we all profit from gender equity and the deconstruction of rigid and outdated gender norms" (Solange The Project, n.d.).

To rephrase one of Cibulka's earliest nets, No. 4, installed at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 2018, "As long as [media archaeology] is a boys' club, I will be a feminist" (Fig. 9). And as long as the patriarchal politics of vision and the gendered separation between the domestic sphere (inside) and the public sphere (outside) are in force, my scaffolding project will be feminist.

Figure 9. Katharina Cibulka, *SOLANGE #4*, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Schillerplatz, Austria, 2018. Photo: Bernd Hofbauer.

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