



# WASTELAND

*July 2021 ~ Issue #16 ~ Ritual / Domesticity*



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Ritual / Domesticity

Featuring

*Tailpiece* (Margaret Tait, 1976)

*Soft Fiction* (Chick Strand, 1979)

*Clotheslines* (Roberta Cantow, 1981)

Written by Jessica Moore



***TAILPIECE***

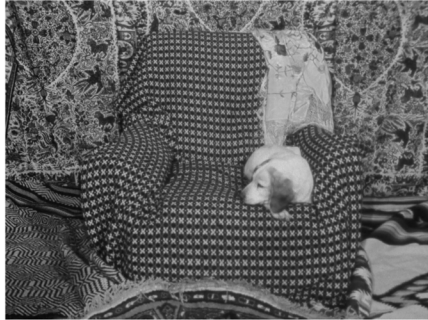
As a coda to the longer, colourised *Place of Work*, Margaret Tait's *Tailpiece* sees her long-time home and eventually work studio in Orkney emptied of its furniture. Tait's sentient camera lingers on dust-coated fireplaces and overgrown shrubs; on the efflorescence of floorboards and cracks in the walls. Artistic bliss is wrapped up in architecture, it is purveyed by the saccharine voiceover that flits between children speaking, poetry, and music.

Beyond its haptic visuals and highly mobile camerawork, *Tailpiece* addresses Tait's reluctance to disentangle her artistry from its domestic roots.

Tait's attentiveness towards domestic-artistic settings recalls Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a feminist treatise that condemns the historic prevention of women's creativity and implores the need for women-claimed creative spaces.


Tait's video art emerges from an individual take on the profoundly philosophical; suffusing audio with domiciliary images reimagines, for Tait, inexpressible, somatic personal memories.

Accepting the passage of time, embracing it even, *Tailpiece* captures Tait's departure from a place so heavily imbued with retrospective feeling. *Tailpiece* etches life into its surface; it continues on in the vacant rooms; it is a bid farewell.



# Soft Fiction



A black and white photograph of a room. In the background, a person is visible near a window. To the right, there are several potted plants. The overall scene is softly lit and slightly out of focus, creating a contemplative atmosphere.

Affronted by formal unconventionality, and unable to attach our viewing experience to one stable figure, our solitude as quiet spectators is guided by narration.

*Breathe in...Breathe out...*

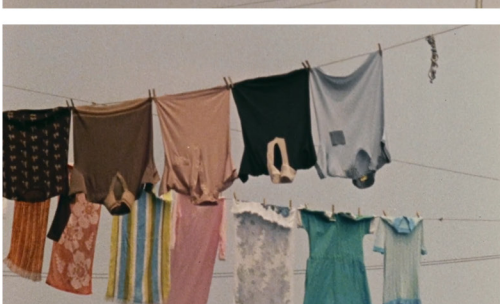
These words sharpen our senses. Organised by feelings rather than objects, light and shadow blur impossibly into half-recognisable shapes and intuitions. We drift to the pulse of their motion; Strand holds us in the palm of her hand.

The title may well refer to the contents of Strand's feature, a series of tightly shot close-ups of interviewed women, divulging fictions and histories. One section sees a woman reading aloud a letter detailing a bizarre sexual encounter, another sees a nude woman frying eggs overlaid with a voiceover that recounts sexual abuse, another interviewee recollects their substance addiction.

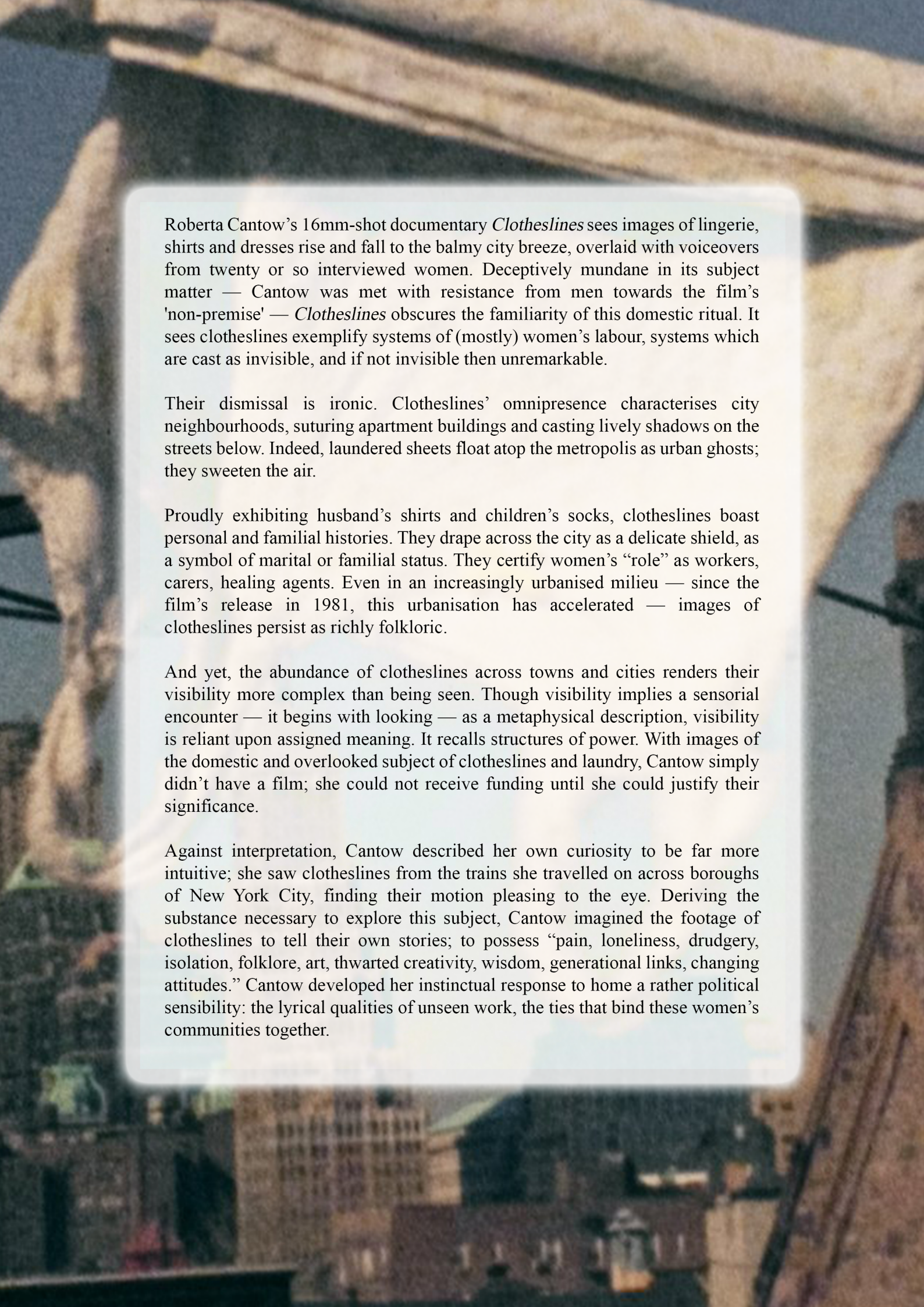
Strand's unidentified authors and assigned speakers segue into each other. Striking a balance between shared and individual identity, they play with their own fluidity. Like water, stories of control and survival trickle through one's consciousness as a continual flow—they cool and replenish.

The titular softness—softness entailing the sensuality of its images, that which is pitted against the admission of intimate, confidential matters—coheres our empathy with edification. Perhaps we are seldom so ostensibly aligned in-between truth and fiction.

Indeed, precisely owed to their candid vocalisation, the anecdotes, real or false (it doesn't matter which), confer their own value and artistry. Carefully we pore over these womens' words, we ascertain their healing faculty.



# *Clotheslines*



Roberta Cantow's 16mm-shot documentary *Clotheslines* sees images of lingerie, shirts and dresses rise and fall to the balmy city breeze, overlaid with voiceovers from twenty or so interviewed women. Deceptively mundane in its subject matter — Cantow was met with resistance from men towards the film's 'non-premise' — *Clotheslines* obscures the familiarity of this domestic ritual. It sees clotheslines exemplify systems of (mostly) women's labour, systems which are cast as invisible, and if not invisible then unremarkable.

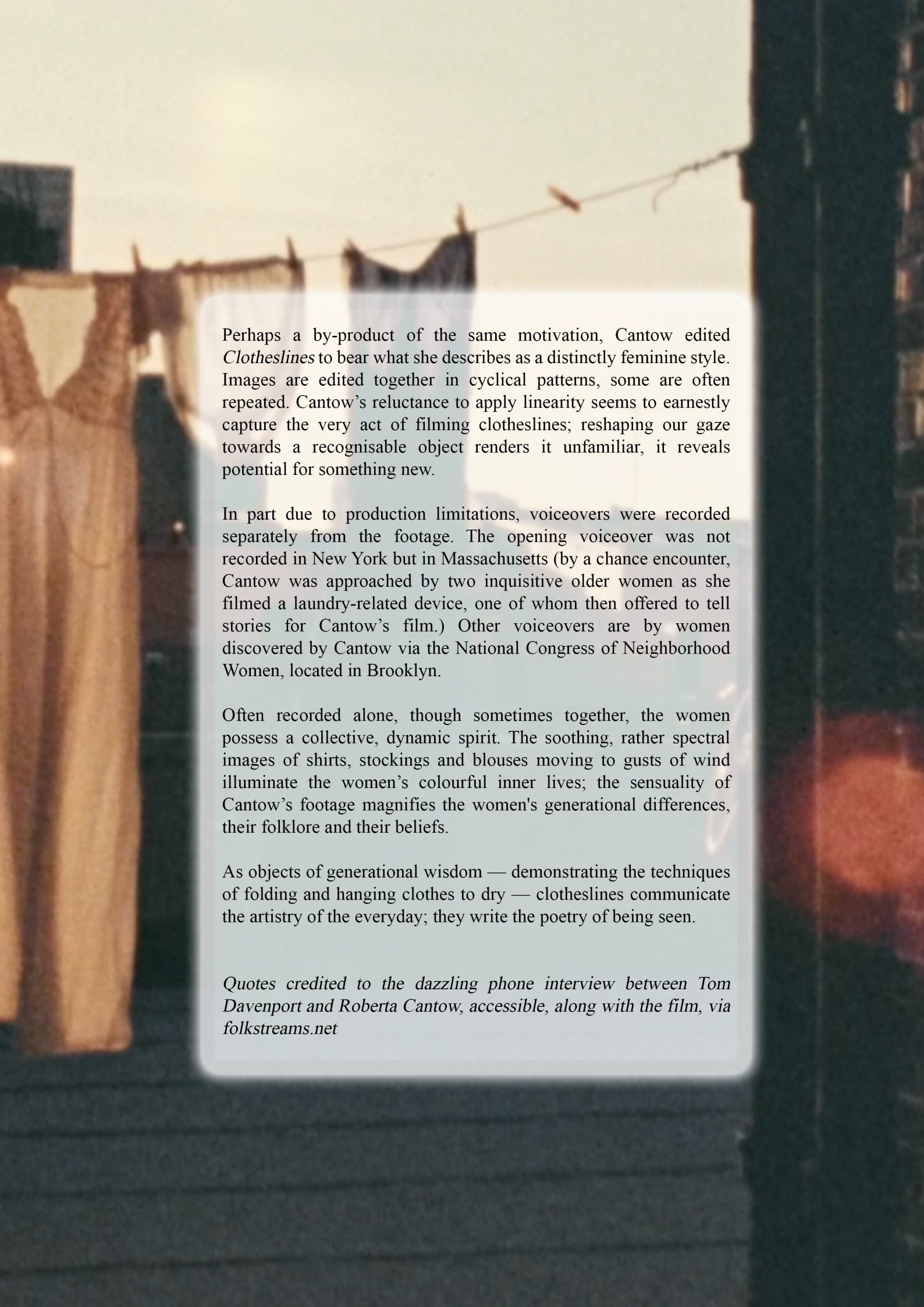
Their dismissal is ironic. Clotheslines' omnipresence characterises city neighbourhoods, suturing apartment buildings and casting lively shadows on the streets below. Indeed, laundered sheets float atop the metropolis as urban ghosts; they sweeten the air.

Proudly exhibiting husband's shirts and children's socks, clotheslines boast personal and familial histories. They drape across the city as a delicate shield, as a symbol of marital or familial status. They certify women's "role" as workers, carers, healing agents. Even in an increasingly urbanised milieu — since the film's release in 1981, this urbanisation has accelerated — images of clotheslines persist as richly folkloric.

And yet, the abundance of clotheslines across towns and cities renders their visibility more complex than being seen. Though visibility implies a sensorial encounter — it begins with looking — as a metaphysical description, visibility is reliant upon assigned meaning. It recalls structures of power. With images of the domestic and overlooked subject of clotheslines and laundry, Cantow simply didn't have a film; she could not receive funding until she could justify their significance.

Against interpretation, Cantow described her own curiosity to be far more intuitive; she saw clotheslines from the trains she travelled on across boroughs of New York City, finding their motion pleasing to the eye. Deriving the substance necessary to explore this subject, Cantow imagined the footage of clotheslines to tell their own stories; to possess "pain, loneliness, drudgery, isolation, folklore, art, thwarted creativity, wisdom, generational links, changing attitudes." Cantow developed her instinctual response to home a rather political sensibility: the lyrical qualities of unseen work, the ties that bind these women's communities together.





Perhaps a by-product of the same motivation, Cantow edited *Clotheslines* to bear what she describes as a distinctly feminine style. Images are edited together in cyclical patterns, some are often repeated. Cantow's reluctance to apply linearity seems to earnestly capture the very act of filming clotheslines; reshaping our gaze towards a recognisable object renders it unfamiliar, it reveals potential for something new.

In part due to production limitations, voiceovers were recorded separately from the footage. The opening voiceover was not recorded in New York but in Massachusetts (by a chance encounter, Cantow was approached by two inquisitive older women as she filmed a laundry-related device, one of whom then offered to tell stories for Cantow's film.) Other voiceovers are by women discovered by Cantow via the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, located in Brooklyn.

Often recorded alone, though sometimes together, the women possess a collective, dynamic spirit. The soothing, rather spectral images of shirts, stockings and blouses moving to gusts of wind illuminate the women's colourful inner lives; the sensuality of Cantow's footage magnifies the women's generational differences, their folklore and their beliefs.

As objects of generational wisdom — demonstrating the techniques of folding and hanging clothes to dry — clotheslines communicate the artistry of the everyday; they write the poetry of being seen.

*Quotes credited to the dazzling phone interview between Tom Davenport and Roberta Cantow, accessible, along with the film, via [folkstreams.net](http://folkstreams.net)*

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