

The Knits, 10 min; Digital Video, 2017. (Canada)

<http://lisabirke.com>

lisabirke@hotmail.com

[@Lisa Birke](#)

TRAILER: <https://vimeo.com/219946673>

LOGLINE: A sweater, lovingly and arduously knit by a mother, incrementally unravels as her daughter treks her way across Canada by foot.

SYNOPSIS:

“The Knits” straddles a liminal filmic space between performance-for-video and contemporary fairy tale. A mother lovingly and arduously knits a sweater. Simultaneously this same sweater unravels as her daughter makes her way across Canada by foot. Along the way, the work tugs at the interwoven loops of art versus craft, gendered materiality, and the nostalgic artifacts of technologies.

In knitting, one literally gives one’s time—chronicled in interwoven loops of yarn—to keep someone warm. Hand-knitted sweaters bring us closer to our mothers and grandmothers as we physically carry a document of their love and labour next to our skin, almost like a protective second skin. This project is a loving homage to Barbara Birke (the artist’s mother) and her chronic affliction of “the Knits”.

The artist wishes to acknowledge the generous support of the Ontario Arts Council Media Artists Creation Grant.

SCREENINGS/EXHIBITIONS:

Exhibitions:

Sept 15th – Nov 4th 2017: *Cambridge Galleries (Idea Exchange)*, Cambridge, Canada

Mar 15th — Mar 22nd 2018: *Internationale Kurzfilmwoche Regensburg*, Regensburg, Germany

Apr 6th – May 2018: *Schleifmühlgasse 12-14*, Vienna, Austria

Screenings:

Feb—Dec 2018: *TIME is Love.11 Screening Program* (International touring video art program), curated by Kisito Assangni

Apr 6th 2018: *Florida Film Festival*, Maitland, Florida, USA

Mar 12th 2018: *Toronto Short Film Festival*, Toronto, Canada

Jan 27th 2018: *Tally Shorts Film Festival*, Tallahassee, USA

Jan 20th & 25th 2018: *Slamdance*, Park City, USA

Dec 1st – 3rd 2017: *Mirror Mountain Film Festival*, Ottawa, Canada

Nov 17th 2017: *Heimspiel Filmfest (Internationale Kurzfilm-Highlights)*, Regensburg, Germany

Oct 5th and 12th 2017: *Vancouver International Film Festival*, Vancouver, Canada

Aug 23rd – Sep 2nd 2017: *International Kansk Video Festival* (Russia/Siberia)

ARTIST'S BIO

Lisa Birke is an award winning Canadian video artist who situates between the traditions of fine art, experimental film and performance art. Her short films have been screened at numerous film/video festivals and installed in galleries and museums internationally including the *Slamdance Film Festival*, *Vancouver International Film Festival*, *AVIFF Cannes Art Film Festival*, *Athens International Film & Video Festival*, *Arizona International Film Festival*, *International Short Film Week Regensburg*, *Torrance Art Museum*, *Manif d'/Art* (Quebec City Biennale 2017), along with many others. Birke is assistant professor of Digital and Extended Media at the University of Saskatchewan.

Funding support generously supplied by the *Ontario Arts Council Media Artists Creation Grant*.

EXTRA PROJECT NOTES:

I grew up in a house where every nook and cranny is filled with wool. My mother once asked, in her German English, for a “prescription for the knits”. What she meant was a “subscription to *The Knits*” (a knitting magazine). My family now jokes that my mother suffers from an incurable case of the knits. The film is a loving homage to my mother but also examines the complexities of mother/daughter relationships: the feeling that one is both always connected but also feels the desire to break free from the bonds that tie us.

Knitting, and textile work is undervalued in our society. It is often considered “women’s work”. My mother works very hard at her craft but is not able to make a living off the production, literally making only pennies an hour. Film, on the other hand, is considered a more masculine craft and holds a more substantive commercial value. “The Knits” plays with cinematic 16:9 framing, showing my mom’s hands knitting the sweater—like a metronome keeping time—full frame, epic, and subverting these gendered divides and materials. The 4:3 framing, on the other hand, shows me wearing the oversized, lumbering (and rather phallic sweater) unravelling. I wanted to flip the symbolism inherent in the technology (film and television) and therein show the timelessness of familial relations. Television is often considered the older or more nostalgic medium (despite film having the longer history) and thus there is a feeling that the mother is watching the life of her child through a nostalgic or mythologizing lens. At the end of the film the framing flips and I move into the cinematic framing and my mother is transported into the letterbox—showing the switch in power dynamics that often happens as parents age.

The film also confronts the huge distances that we traverse to keep families together in Canada. I have spent some years living on the other side of the country and this film symbolizes this vast geographic separation. In depicting this landscape, the film inevitably is also a nod to mother earth and the beauty (and my love) of Canada.

I work alone and all scenes (apart from those on Vancouver Island filmed with my Mom) were filmed on a solo drive across Canada. Location scouting was done on the drive to Vancouver

Island from Kitchener, and the filming was done on the drive back home, covering a total distance of 9,000km. The travel footage was filmed over the course of 10 days. I would get up at the break of dawn at each camping site, film, and then continue driving. A few locations were also selected “on the fly” when I drove by interesting scenery. I filmed early in the morning, both for the great light and the lack of an audience at this time of day. At the Columbia Icefields, I had to get up very early to beat all of the tourists that visit this site everyday. An interesting side note, the year I filmed was the bad fire season just south of the border. The strange light and haze in the scenes is due to the drifting smoke. These smoky conditions stretched well over 3,000 km. Other challenges in the filming were not being able to see where I was walking (due to having my face covered) and trying to stay “in frame”. Filming alone without a set of eyes, presents a unique set of challenges—I have become fairly adept at gaging my placement in the frame, having worked alone for several years now.

The wool used to knit the sweater was produced in the cottage industry on Vancouver Island. The wool came from sheep on a farm just outside of Campbell River. It was hand dyed by my mother and Michelle Pace at Ba-aa-ad Ass Textiles to match my skin tone. My mom had to knit the sweater a couple of times. The wool didn’t hold up and it constantly tore when I was filming. I had to “cheat” some of the scenes to make it ‘look like’ the wool was unraveling—when in fact I was holding a ball of wool under the sweater in my hand that I was unspooling as I went. Other times, the wool unravelled as planned. The worst scenes to film were those amidst mosquitos and those in the extreme cold. We had just had an ice storm in Kitchener and if you look carefully when I make my way past the modernist apartment building you will notice that the background is covered in a layer of ice.

The film also exists as a three-channel video installation with a living room and television set-up in a gallery space in front of a projection onto the gallery wall. The 4:3 scenes are playing on the tv and the 16:9 footage is projected onto the wall. A third channel of video (not shown in the single channel work) is playing on a digital photo frame. This video shows a time lapse of a tree losing and then re-growing its leaves in a year-long cycle.

The footage for this film sat a long time before it found its final form and the film was created over the course of almost two years (due to a couple of commissions that disrupted production). There was also a fourth channel of video that didn’t make it into the final cut—except for the sound that was used in the final soundtrack. This footage showed the mechanical production of the wool by carding and spinning machines as it became more of a distraction from the more personal themes. The split screen format happened very much by accident I was attempting to synch the three channels of video for the three-channel installation and liked the look of the inset and the fact that one could observe the making and the destruction of the sweater at the same time.

The film hopes to draw attention to the under-appreciated labour of hand-made textiles elevating this craft into the realm of film and art. I hope that the audience will also be able to relate to the more personal themes of motherhood and familial relationships expressed in the work. Perhaps it will inspire the viewer to give a nod of appreciation to the mothers,

grandmothers, aunties and/or other (male or female) knitters in their lives that have gifted them a labour of love to keep them warm